Speaking truth to African power

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In this article I reflect on the ethics of using scholarly work to critique dominant power. I use my own experience as an analyst of Ethiopian politics to highlight some of the intricacies characterizing the encounter between researchers and highly contested politics. Anthropologists tend to refer to these challenges in terms of a researcher’s positionality and recommend reflexivity on the part of scholars. While many scholars reflect on their role in the research process, I find that there is much that has been left unsaid about the formulation of social science based critique. I explore some of these unexplored issues in the relationship between a (foreign) scholar and dominant political power (here: the Ethiopian government) with reference to my authorship of a report on Ethiopia published by the International Crisis Group (ICG) (see Bliesemann de Guevara 2014).

Publishing the ICG Report

In September 2009 the ICG, an international watchdog that specializes in conflict analysis, published its first country report on Ethiopia. It was entitled “Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents” (ICG 2009). Within some 30 pages it summarized some of the key features of domestic Ethiopian politics, namely the dominant role of the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in political decision-making at all levels, the functioning of a particular type of top-down federalism, a stalled democratization process and a select number of violent conflicts in the country. The ICG launched the report with a press communiqué, warning that ethnic conflict might flare up in Ethiopia in the context of the 2010 federal and regional elections. This prognosis proved to be wrong. But anti-government protests and a violent government crackdown against protesters in the Oromiya and Amhara regions erupted around the end of 2005 and claimed some 600 to 1000 casualties by fall 2016 (HRW 2016), leading the Ethiopian government to declare a state of emergency.

The Ethiopian government was not pleased with the publication of the International Crisis Group report. The president of the House of Federation, one of Ethiopia’s two legislative chambers, denounced the report on Ethiopian Television. In a press conference then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who was asked to comment on the ICG report, responded: “Some people have too many billions of dollars to spend and they feel that dictating how developing countries manage their affairs is their God-given right”, and: “We have only contempt for the ICG.” Of course, such a reaction was to be expected. It was expected to the degree that those involved in producing this report – senior staff and analysts working for the ICG – had taken precautions to protect my identity both during my fieldwork and after the publication of the report. What led me to write this report for the ICG? I had been aware of the risk that such a report would displease Ethiopian authorities who attempted to identify me, its author. But in the context of the ongoing counter-insurgency in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State and political oppression in many parts of Ethiopia, I thought it was important to publicize what I saw as the “real politics” of Ethiopia. Furthermore, I had admired many of the authors who wrote past ICG reports on the Horn of Africa and was proud to be given the opportunity to join the exclusive club of analysts writing for the ICG.

Over time my experience with the ICG report and, more broadly, with conducting fieldwork on and publishing analysis of current Ethiopian politics, led me to consider the following questions. These questions all point to the ethics of personal scholarly engagement, but also to the conditions under which critique emerges.

What is the relationship between political power (in this case, the Ethiopian government) and scholars (in this case, researchers writing about Ethiopian politics)?

What are the recurrent “tactics and strategies” (de Certeau 1984) that both the government and its academic critics use in this process?

When do scholars decide – to use the famous phrase by Wildavsky (1979) – to “speak truth to power” and when do they decide to keep quiet and/or to censure themselves?

When does a text – a scholarly publication – become critique and what does it reveal about the interplay between author and audience, between what can be said when and where, and what cannot be said?

1 Reuters, 17 September 2009, “Ethiopia. We have only contempt for the ICG.”
In my interactions with the Ethiopian government and fellow Ethiopians who study and write about Ethiopian political life, society and culture, the issue of what can be said (or written) about contemporary Ethiopian politics and what is off limits was constantly present. Ethiopians are acutely aware that some of their publications offend the government, bearing the risk of losing access to Ethiopia as the government can withhold research permits or visas. There is a consensus among scholars working in and on Ethiopia that certain research questions pertaining to state-society relations which have the potential of revealing the government’s authoritarian policies including human rights violations, the targeting of opposition supporters, but also oppressive policies in rural areas more broadly, are best avoided. Nonetheless, Ethiopians continue to research and publish on some of these topics (Hagmann 2016). But they usually avoid the government’s anger by publishing in specialized academic outlets such as academic books or journals that have very limited circulation outside of specialized circles. The government thus draws an invisible line regarding not only what can be said or published, but also in which forum things can be said. Occasionally, as with the case of the ICG report described above, scholarly critique of the government reaches a broader audience.

Dynamics of Relationships between Scholar and Political Power

Critique, self-censure and the subtle norms that govern scholars’ depictions of Ethiopian politics under the EPRDF government – including the occasional violation of these norms – highlight two key dynamics of the relationship between author and dominant power.

First, the particular language used by scholars to describe dominant political power – a government, a ruling elite, a militia or other – as well as the particular forum or arena used for this – whether it is a peer-reviewed journal article, an informal conversation with colleagues, a public talk or an open editorial in a newspaper – are as much an expression of what we perceive as “facts” on the ground and a reflection of our own research findings, as they are the outcome of our personal calculations, namely the question of the degree to which we are ready to risk losing access to a particular place, people and country. To put it bluntly, we idolize the idea of the independent and truth-speaking intellectual who “speaks up”, who “accuses”, who dares to say uncomfortable “truths”, whose scholarship is marked by integrity. Yet what we see in reality is a much murkier picture. What I observed are very careful, some would say opportunistic tactics by Ethiopians – those who study Ethiopia, who often aim to safeguard access to the country by either toning down their critique or by “diversifying” their critique to match their intended audience.

Second, critique of a given political situation has to be understood primarily as a relationship between author and audience rather than as the property of a particular text. In other words: whether or not something we say or write, whether text is “critical” or not, is not primarily determined by “what we say”, but rather by “how we say it”, “who says it” and, more importantly, “to whom we say it”. This was clearly also the case with the ICG Ethiopia country report. The bulk of the report was nothing more than a sophisticated summary of academic and policy publications on Ethiopian politics after 1991. When writing the report, I worked hard to include as many academic references that had some kind of relevance for post-1991 Ethiopian politics as possible. The report was much more informed by this elaborate literature review than by my own fieldwork. Had the same analysis been published in an academic journal, it would not have created any stir, as few academics would have disagreed with my analysis. But the fact that the ICG, the predominant conflict analysis watchdog which is often seen to be close to the US government, published this analysis, meant all the difference to the Ethiopian government. Real critique thus only emerges in a field of tension that features an audience that is not identical with our academic peers. If we take this argument to its logical conclusion, then text by itself cannot effectuate critique, but critique emerges in the relationship with a particular audience or readership.

Academics tend to perceive themselves as more critical or independent in their choices and wording than politicians, diplomats or development actors. In reality, scholars harbor very similar considerations when deciding when, how and if to write about dominant politics. This raises important questions of research ethics and person-
al engagement that are often neglected in both scholarly debates and broader discussions about the role of social science research in policy and conflict analysis. These questions include: When is it opportune and when is there a moral imperative to openly criticize dominant political power? What are the long-term costs and benefits, both for the researcher and for the society in question, of either speaking up or keeping silent about violent, oppressive or unjust political processes? In which situations should researchers look out for themselves – protecting their physical security, their access to a particular field site or country as well as their long-term academic career – and when should we risk all of these things? Finally, how can we formulate critique without reproducing stereotypical, maybe colonial, situations in which Western experts critique African power?

References
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