

“Abiy Ahmed—PhD?”  
A Reply to Professor Alex de Waal

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On May 4, 2022, Professor Alex de Waal, the Director of the World Peace Foundation’s Program at Tufts University published in the foundation’s blog an article entitled “[Abiy Ahmed—Ph.D.?](#)” The Director tried to assess the “capacity to understand peacemaking, based on [an individual’s] academic writing”. Professor de Waal questioned the capacity of the [supervisor](#) of the Ph.D. thesis, the theoretical framework of the thesis, and eventually the integrity and independence of the degree-granting [institution](#). The [thesis](#) under discussion is entitled “Social Capital and its Role in Traditional Conflict Resolution: The Case of Inter-religious Conflict in Jimma Zone of the Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia”. The thesis was submitted by Abiy Ahmed Ali, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister, in 2016, in fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Peace and Security Studies at [Addis Ababa University](#).

The Director wrote a differently toned essay on an incomplete master’s degree thesis project at [Erasmus University](#) (Rotterdam). The draft thesis was written by the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, but to the best of my information the work was not completed and the degree was not granted, posthumously ([de Waal 2012](#), The theory and practice of Meles Zenawi, African Affairs, 112/446, 148–155). The May 4, 2022 article raises a number of issues that university administrators, funding agencies and educational psychologists would have deal with ([UNESCO 2020 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#), [Bloom 1956](#); Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook: The Cognitive Domain. David McKay, New York; [Meyer and Land 2005](#), Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning, High Education 49, 373–388).

In March 2022, I was part of a team that organized a [colloquium](#) on Ethiopia’s proposed national dialogue. There were 8 speakers. From the colloquium and the preparation I gathered that ethnoreligious conflicts in Ethiopia and elsewhere are complex issues, it is a branch of political science (see [Professor Brendan O’Leary; United Nations](#)) and require “macro” and “multidisciplinary” approaches. While reading Professor de Waal’s article I was curious about what the face of the World Peace Foundation Program at Tufts University would say about national dialogues, in ethnoreligious conflict settings, as resurgent ethnonationalism is also ravaging Europe, swinging votes in elections and threatening global peace. Regarding Ethiopia, how armed ethnonationalist groups can be brought on board, a missing thread in the 8 papers presented at the colloquium, is an

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important issue. In this respect, Professor de Waal concluded his essay with the following sentence:-

*“Ethiopians might be forgiven for thinking that peace talks and national dialogue in their country add up to no more being taken for a bumpy ride on the back of a motorbike around a small town, with the rider giving a blessing, waving and moving on.”*

Comparing Professor de Waal’s closing paragraph with the contributions made at the colloquium reveals that Ethiopian scholars and professionals, at home and in the diaspora, have indeed been ahead of him. I also observed a few anomalies in the first few paragraphs of Professor de Waal’s piece. First, the title and body of the text do not go together. He questioned the quality of the thesis and yet invited others to review it. The outlet is the school’s/foundation’s blog and lacks independence. The website’s link to Abiy Ahmed’s thesis is Tufts University and not the degree granting institution, Addis Ababa University. The document is badly scanned/ photocopied, the pdf is convertible but some of the pages are unreadable. The bibliography section is missing. In a 150-page long text, Professor de Waal starts quoting the thesis on page 128 and questions the literature review and theoretical framework of the thesis and, wrote a paragraph about data analysis and plagiarism but did not report faults. He neither questioned the power of the data analysis nor run the text through plagiarism software. He did not have issues with how the social capital variables were measured/instrumentalized and tested.

The scope of this rejoinder is limited to the substantive academic issues raised by Professor de Waal. The spirit of the rejoinder is promoting enhanced conversation among the American and Ethiopian learned communities, and nothing more. Professor de Waal argued that the heart of the thesis, the theoretical framework, is weak because the work has a sociological, an Islamic and Pentecostalist conception of peace, that the dissertation took just 26 months from start to finish (in a part-time study), and there was 14 months gap between the date of the proposal defense and the date of the submission of the thesis. Professor de Waal alluded that Addis Ababa University has bowed to political pressure.

Regarding the theoretical framework, what counts as theory is discipline specific. In his seminal work entitled “Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies” [Bruno Latour](#) 1999 provides the link between the mind (how we understand a phenomenon), society (politics, morality, ethics, institutions), and God (theology), and argues that theory is accepted when the mob thinks it is right at a given point in time. Neither philosophy of science (Heidegger, Popper, Kuhn) nor contemporary journal editors and reviewers question that new knowledge and innovative methodology (technology) change the way we think or our way of life, including the way we understand and practice peace and war. Whether peace comes from self (soul and God) or communal is a worn-out topic as a careful reading of Max Weber’s works reveals the religious basis (Protestant, Calvinist, Catholic) of his sociological thesis of government (see [Michell Dean 2010](#) Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society). Eurocentric understanding of Africa has been a dismal failure, obliging many contemporary African scholars to reconceptualize the knowledge generation process (see [Achele Mbembe](#) 2001 on the

post colony; [Samir Amin](#) 2010 reprint Eurocentrism; and obliging some universities to introduce courses that “decolonize” the mind of Africans; [Muchie, Gammeltoft and Lundval](#) eds. 2005 Putting Africa First). In short old problems can be reconceptualized/reimagined or “reinvented” and examined through new lenses.

In another book “Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory” [Bruno Latour](#) 2007 urges the reconceptualization of problems and methods of linking humans and nonhumans. In yet another work on established professions, entitled “Lords of the Dance: Professionals as Institutional Agents”, [Richard Scott](#) 2010 shows how institutional agents like Professor de Waal have “leading roles in the creation and tending of institutions.. attempt to create general cultural-cognitive frameworks; others to devise normative prescriptions to guide behavior, and still others to exercise coercive authority” (See also [Dezalay & Garth](#), 2016. ‘Lords of the dance’ as double agents: Elite actors in and around the legal field. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 3, 188–206).

Furthermore, social and organizational studies often borrow theories from other disciplines/fields and hence some theories are traveling and illuminate across the silos and turfs of specific disciplines and, are successful in explaining a phenomenon. In other research settings, one is tempted to try pluralism, apparently at the risk of losing depth, and fusing/blending of theories may also be successful so long as there are no epistemological and/or ontological inconsistencies ([Fauconnier & Turner](#), 2003, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending And The Mind's Hidden Complexities*). Each theory is also competing for paradigms. Indeed, the choice of a theory may also determine the methodology and vice versa. These method theories and the need for the assemblage of knowledge (from sociology, religion, psychology, law, political science, military science, economics, etc.) to understand ethnoreligious conflicts contextually, appear to have escaped the director of a center that purports to serve world peace.

Regarding the length of the period, universities in the top league permit the granting of a doctoral degree in two years (full time). This time frame is of course an exception, especially if the research starts on the date of registration and the program also requires the student to enroll in predoctoral courses. In universities like Wits senate rules have started to require that a Ph.D. student must publish in peer-reviewed/accredited journals (in addition to the thesis) before the degree is granted. The time for a full-time Ph.D. in the social sciences and business vary considerably. Extensions are granted subject to evidence of progress. The litmus test for the traditional European Doctorate/British Ph.D. is the quality and originality of the work and whether there is “enough coherent work” in the text to warrant the granting of the terminal degree.

Regarding the exit process, thesis examiners are carefully appointed and come from local and international universities. Registrars check whether due process has been followed. Examiners write detailed reports and tick various boxes in prescribed forms. Contribution to new knowledge (creation) is desirable but not required even in top-ranking universities. Commoditization of higher education, corporatization of universities, massification, liberalization, and degree imports have had implications for the quality of higher education

and research in Africa, and Ethiopia is not an exception. Professor de Waal would have done a good job had he reviewed dissertations in his field for example from diverse universities and identified the strengths/weaknesses in respect of their contribution to the theory and practice of peace in an African setting. He would have done a favor to himself and his funders by publishing it in a decent journal.

Finally, what one learns from Professor de Waal's article is little other than awakening Addis Ababa University to check whether its systems and processes have failed, and the push backs it must do in any actual or perceived political pressures. On the larger scale of peace and war, Ethiopians are unlikely to be deceived as the Professor de Waal asserted. In fact, they may not be interested in the esoteric thesis of the ruling group that increases the hubris, but in reintroducing sanity and providing the opportunity for immersing dialogues, to reverse the abysmal failure of their governments and more importantly, to stop the blood lettings.