

BOOK REVIEW

Uchenna Okeja. *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022. \$30. Paper. ISBN: 9780253059918.

Part of Review forum on “Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy”

I am grateful to Eniola Soyemi, Ronke Oke, Kevin Irakoze, Michael Eze, and Chielozona Eze for the discussion of my recent book, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy*. Their innovative reading of the book, generous praises and critical questions demonstrate the importance of engaging with political experience in the work we do as political theorists and political philosophers.

In her contribution, Soyemi posed a question about the relevance of concrete experience in our theorizing of politics. The issue, she notes, is not so much that I do not attempt in the book to spell out the concrete political and social-cultural structures required to make my idea of deliberative agency viable and sustainable. The crucial issue is the inevitability of questions concerning the future of the state, given that states embody the context in which deliberative agency manifests. Given the centrality of the state in non-ideal democracies where deliberative agency is supposed to provide an orientation to politics, Soyemi argues that it is imperative to consider the relationship of the state to bearers of this form of agency. The understanding of deliberative agency that informs the book provides an answer to this question. *Deliberative Agency* advances the claim “that the core of political life ought to be agency that asserts that individuals are cocreators of meaning and purpose.” My argument is that we should turn to this form of agency because it provides what is lacking in non-ideal political situations, namely, the absence of orientation. It is therefore a statement of the ideal of political life which aims to advance “a specific expression of what it means to be human.” Against this background, my response to Soyemi’s argument is that deliberative agency aims to reconstruct the foundations of political life in contexts where cognitive disorientation occludes meaning. Without rearticulating the possibility of meaning in such a context, it will be impossible to tell the nature of the state and institutions citizens should strive to build or preserve. As deliberative agents, individuals embody the capacity needed to practice the sort of politics that is truly liberatory and sustainable with or without the state in its current form.

The second question Soyemi raises relates to possible refinements that might sharpen the outcomes of my postulation of conceptual creativity as a means of responding adequately to the reality of political failure. I agree with Soyemi that

we should interrogate the “epistemic worth we place on conceptual ideals.” Since I already explained in detail the role of concepts in political theorizing, I would only reiterate here that it is insufficient to make the question of relevance the most crucial or only yardstick for determining the value of the theories we produce about political life. Of course, the political philosopher or theorist whose starting point is the acutely felt powerlessness of citizens cannot but theorize with an eye on possible success of theory in practice. But this cannot constitute the entire spectrum of what is important for theorists and theories. As a conceptual ideal, conceptual creativity stakes the claim that theorists interested in the question concerning political failure must aim to transcend, not balance, the uncritically assumed dichotomy between theory and praxis. One way of overcoming this dichotomy, in keeping with the ideas encapsulated in conceptual creativity, is to let the phenomena we study guide us in formulating theories.

Ronke Oke discusses the problems that emerge from two critical omissions in the book. One relates to the failure to engage with African women whose voices have shaped politics in the continent and globally. The other is the oversight of not including a discussion of a concrete political crisis through which political failure manifests. To respond to these observations, I would like to underscore that the point of departure for me in the constructive part of the book was how to expand and delineate appropriately the meaning of deliberation as a manifestation of African political culture. I imagined this focus to be the most viable means to construct, through deployment of an appropriate method—deliberative agency—an account of African political philosophy that is normatively grounded but also relevant to contemporary experience. Reading Oke’s critical observations in this light, the core issue she raises in highlighting these critical omissions seems to me to be the importance of context-sensitivity for normative theorizing. About the first omission, the issue is not so much that I should have discussed every existing work on African political thought. The issue is to understand the implication of transcending inadequate convention in theorizing—in this case, the normalization of excluding female voices. I completely agree with Oke on this point as it is one of the concerns that is critical in some of my current projects. The second omission highlighted is intentional as I wanted to offer an account of a modern African political philosophy from a universalist standpoint. The most viable path to this goal seems to require that one begins with a generalized conception of a political question or experience because it is a mere point of departure. Oke’s question about the emancipatory potential of deliberative agency, given the constraints that are inherent in the design of political systems is crucial. My argument is that deliberative agency is emancipatory because it is an action-guiding political philosophy. It is an agency-based political philosophy that addresses the challenge of political failure through conceptual creativity. This form of political philosophy accomplishes the task of emancipation because it provides the individual the required conceptual resources for interpretation of experience while demonstrating the necessity of living with an adequate orientation amidst political failure. To live well amidst political failure is to orient oneself to politics as contradiction and consider other individuals as co-creators of meaning and purpose. In this way, we transcend

agential paralysis and thus approximate to creating the conditions for emancipation.

This leads me to the discussion of Irakoze's invitation to consider the nature of political knowledge through clarification of the linkages between political failure and cognitive disorientation. One of the ways we should not think about the connection between the two categories is to postulate a causal link, implying, for instance, that the latter causes the former. Cognitive disorientation arises when there is destabilization of the core ordering concepts that enable us to make sense of our experience. Such destabilization can be caused by many things, such as colonial conceptual adjustment programs or even the imposition of a state religion. Against this background, the connection between cognitive disorientation and political failure has to do with adequate normative theorizing. The point is that once there is a correlation between the two categories, the possibility of context-relevant theorizing of political experience develops. This happens because the manifestation of political failure in instances where there is cognitive disorientation weakens the viability of available conceptual resources. Irakoze's second point is the need to specify the mode of the political orientation I recommend as the means to overcome political failure. By recommending that a turn to the interpersonal is an adequate response to the powerlessness that arises due to political failure, my aim is to shift imagination from a focus on the state to the individual. Although promising in many ways, the interpersonal dimension of political experience in non-ideal contexts is undertheorized. However, theorizing the interpersonal aspect of political experience should not be reduced to analysis of the protest mode of politics, which is usually attributed to civil societies and other nonstate actors. The mode of politics that will enable us to deal adequately with the powerlessness arising from political failure must be one that is informed by the question: what does it mean that an individual lives through and survives a terrible political fate? How does this form of life unfold and what does it demand of theory?

I now turn to Chielozona Eze's thoughts on creative agency as adaptation. Eze raises pertinent questions about the experience and fate of democracy in Africa to highlight ways in which agency and conceptual creativity ought to be aligned in the interest of ensuring that the horizon of meaning, which is necessary for political life, is guaranteed. I agree with Eze that rather than shuffle concepts, we should engage in the crucial task of considering the ethical implications of the theories we propose. But, to think in one way or another about ethics, we must first understand the nature of the experience we are living through and the viability of the concepts available to us. The conceptual focus of the book is an attempt to take this observation seriously. Like Oke, Eze points out the lack of engagement with Achille Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, which explains how the African state and its practices has created a world of meaning of its own. Although I consider the idea of necropolitics a formidable contribution to political thought from an African space, my goal in the book was to consider how we should think about the experience of political failure through the prism of deliberation, which is the manifestation of African political culture. The reason I focused on this was to move away from the imagination that thinking

about political experience in Africa must somehow entail thinking about the state. Although this may be true in some sense, it cannot replace theorizing in a manner that centralizes the experience of loss of agency by individuals that make up the political arena. In a nutshell, we can say that a focus on the state is good, but so too is centralization of the individual in political theorizing. The diagnosis of political failure in a context leads quite naturally to taking the latter route in developing an emancipatory political philosophy.

To conclude, let me reflect briefly on Michael Eze's generous remarks. Although Eze agrees with the outline and arguments I put forward in *Deliberative Agency*, he cautions that we must be vigilant about the pitfalls of attributing universality to the notion and ideal of democracy. As he puts it, "is democracy an adaptable or imposed political good?" I affirm with Eze that any cogent answer to this question must recognize the importance of context. It seems to me, nonetheless, that the crucial issue is not necessarily the idea of democracy but the meaning we attribute to our experience. Against this background, we can reformulate Eze's question as follows: what is democracy when it is imposed under certain circumstances or adapted to serve certain ends? What is the meaning of the experience of democracy when it is adapted to serve squarely as the means to enable people to "put food on the table"? The argument of *Deliberative Agency* is that whatever meaning we attribute to the experience of democracy must remain open-ended because this is the only way to guarantee that experience does not become subservient to theory but rather its very foundation.

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