

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”.

Uchenna Okeja’s book begins with a reappraisal of Africa’s postcoloniality not as a struggle for emancipation from colonial oppression but as the unquenched yearning for freedom from Africa’s own political elite. This condition, Okeja notes, having plagued the continent—almost without exception—since political independence in the late 1950s, is one of “political failure,” and it requires, for its solution, a distinctly new orientation in African political philosophy.

It is not, Okeja points out, that things do not go wrong in other places. However, the fact that the *everyday* experience of most, if not all, Africans—despite all their diversity—is one of a persistent misery grounded in an individual powerlessness defines, for Okeja, the sense in which the general, and generalizable, mode of politics has failed in postcolonial Africa. But it is not only that politics, or the practice of political governance, has failed, it is further that the very political or *public* culture of many African societies is, as a result, in deep crisis.

Certainly, the failure that pervades the daily infrastructure of African life seeps, unsurprisingly, out of a wider political system besieged by crippling international debt, bankrupt judiciaries, and ineffective bureaucracies. However, while the system busily perpetuates itself, ordinary civilians are left in a state of political inertia whereby their collective self-understanding provides little resource for developing new ideological meaning about the kind of lives and political futures they might wish. Instead, life is a constant firefight, and the task of political imagination is left to local and foreign elites that have none. For Okeja, the task posed by all this to a specifically African political philosophy is to restore the everyday agency of Africans in their own public experience.

It would be too simple to criticize the author for underappreciating the continued impact of colonial structures on Africa’s politics. If Okeja sidesteps this focus on the oppressive persistence of colonial subjection, it is not because he does not think it important but, rather, that it obscures thinking on new forms and modes of political being. If African political philosophy, Africanist political science, and almost all other areas of Africa-focused study have failed to improve the continent’s circumstance, it is, surely, not because much effort has not been spent diagnosing cause after cause, colonization included, for Africa’s persistently deflated predicament. What, therefore, are we missing?

Okeja's answer is that, regardless of its ultimate cause, a focus on the actual experiences of most Africans for the purpose of resolving those experiences, not for the upshot of a disciplinary concept—for example, the state—or in relation to some external object—for example, European historical procedure—but purely for the African's own sake, reveals a distinctive demand. This is a demand for agency.

As any good philosophy book should, this one takes no sides but its own. The author eschews the exhortations of decolonialists who would have us think that there are such things as “non-African” concepts that cannot, or should not, be used in analyses of African experiences regardless of the means or purposes of our enquiries. Just as vigorously, Okeja rejects the notion that these very concepts are the *only* ones we can, or should, employ in lieu of “adequate” indigenous conceptual resources.

Instead, Okeja argues for a conceptual creativity as fundamental to any political philosophy that could be capable of restoring, not a stagnant self-understanding but, a persistent, and self-renewed expression and comprehension of reality. Indeed, the book's major argument is that the contemporary deficit of public agency in most African countries is viably remedied by reconceptualizing past African deliberative structures in the aim of a specifically deliberative agency. This deliberative agency would not simply be a means of guiding everyday political action, nor merely a democratic mechanism for obtaining political consensus in view solely of the postcolonial state. Rather, it would constitute a new form for reimagining and instating new public cultures. That is, of giving comprehensive meaning to the African's perception, interpretation, and vision of their political life.


There is much to laud in Okeja's work here, and I do not doubt that the book will inspire much substantive scholarship in the field. But while the book provides fertile conceptual and epistemic grounds for deliberative scholars in the African tradition to push further with theorizing about the concrete political and socio-cultural structures that will be required to make the kind of deliberative agency that concerns Okeja structurally viable and sustainable, the book itself does not take on many of these questions. And yet, these are the kinds of questions that any understanding of a deliberative politics that seeks not merely to be realizable but, also, liberatory, will need to answer—will the state continue to exist? If so, what can, or should, it look like? What moral, political, and institutional resources will be required to structure its relationship with populations deliberatively revitalized?

Further, in the book's second chapter, the author notes that as African philosophers—so defined because we study the broad conceptual, moral, ethical and/or normative questions that strike us as most pertinently facing, or as substantively illuminated through, some significant part or parts of the continent—we owe to that place a duty of betterment. In this aim, I wonder if Okeja's notion of a conceptual creativity is enough. I wonder, also, what it could look like if African political philosophy was invigorated by a distinctly experimental energy. And what it might mean for African political philosophers, particularly of deliberation, not simply to aim for what Okeja calls “philosophical fieldwork”—a kind of observational methodology that goes beyond mere

description to incorporate reflective analysis and interrogation of contemporary daily experience—but to engage also in the *activation* of everyday ways of deliberative practice.

What would such an engagement mean for our own understandings, as philosophers, about the epistemic worth we place on conceptual ideals—like deliberation—regardless of whether they are given the kinds of value we theorize about them in the everyday reality of political life in Africa and elsewhere? I suspect such questions will only matter to a certain kind of philosopher. My read is that, at its core, Okeja's book is asking for more of us to identify as such a kind.

But if not, then Okeja will have to do more to answer the question: beyond merely the intuition of philosophers themselves, by precisely what proof should we distinguish the capacity of African political philosophy, new or otherwise, from that of any of the other disciplines that continue to fail to provide, for ordinary African life, any sustained relief from a structural politics of failure?

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