

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.”

Africa needs a new politics, specifically a new political praxis that aligns with everyday experiences of political life. This is the work and critical significance of Uchenna Okeja’s groundbreaking book, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy*.

In *Deliberative Agency*, Okeja explores a simple, yet pointed question: *what does political failure demand in the context of the African political experience?* Naming “political failure” rather than a failed state, corrupt leaders, nativistic infighting, or vestiges of colonialism already presents a break from traditional analyses of the African political scene. Instead of following his predecessors and some contemporaries down the rabbit hole paved by perennial questions about the legitimacy of African philosophy, history, and sovereignty, Okeja pitches his analysis on what he describes as the “dormant potential” of political agency. In so doing, Okeja shifts our political focus from worn debates to lived experience, from political structures to the human condition. The sequencing of the chapters in this book also follows this rhythm, moving from the abstract, distant, and historical, to the intimate, existential, and contemporaneous.

While on the face of it, *Deliberative Agency* reads as yet another explanatory foray into African political dynamics or even an escapist political dream, this book does more than other analyses on this topic. Reading with a careful eye towards the existential crisis at the heart of his analysis, we find that Okeja is asking a more pointed question about the role of individual and collective ownership in creating, defining, and resolving political dilemmas in Africa. Short of talking about the “will of the people,” or mentioning the circularity of “citizens of the state,” Okeja isolates the meaning and material impact of political powerlessness as the central problematic plaguing African political theory and African philosophy alike. Put simply, African political theorists and philosophers are unable to articulate meaning into the lives of everyday Africans. This is because the meaning-making apparatuses African political theorists rely on to help guide the actions of citizens and navigate economic mobility does little to dislodge the prominence of the legacies of colonialism, patrimonialism, and other long-standing issues that constitute the base of African political theory. Likewise, African political philosophy’s engagement with the modalities of life forestalls the coming of life through an obsession with conceptual retrieval and primordial blame.


Furthermore, in their successive attempts to identify the first cause, they left hollow the means to thrive (and in some instances, survive) in the here and now. When the political experiences of everyday Africans are superimposed into projects used to explain political failure, they are unable to mitigate the recounted experiences, revealing a crisis of meaning at the heart of failed political projects, or as Okeja frames it, a *normative deficit*. By casting the stakes in this way, Okeja brilliantly lays bare the tautological underpinnings of African political critique.

Taking a critical approach to this project brings to light further observations and prompts important questions. One notable observation is what the book omits. Missing from this project and Okeja's overview of influential African scholars and political activists are the countless African women whose ideas shaped the political landscape, if not the political experiences of many Africans and whose writings and ideas have helped us conceive collective imaginaries of social life, social order, and liberation. Women like Aoua Kéïta and Andrée Blouin, as well as the better-known activists and writers like Miriam Makeba, Buchi Emecheta, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, are all absent from these pages.

Okeja repeats, almost obsessively, the need for political theory to "make sense of the postcolonial African experience" and respond to current political challenges. To be certain, the political theory Okeja prescribes in this seminal work is not another backward-looking remedy or retroactive pursuit that lacks the ability to be contemporaneous with lived experience. Okeja is engaged in a form of normative political theory that persists through the political project to remake the African world. However, other than his discussion of palaver and the introductory vignettes in some chapters, Okeja does not engage with a current case of political failure or analyze a recent political crisis in his explanation of deliberative agency. An eager practitioner might become disheartened looking to find the practical roots promised in the first half of the text. Okeja could argue that, while there are contemporary examples of deliberative agency at work in the lives of African people (e.g., La Sape, Afropolitanism, Afrobeats), these activities have yet to engage in the type of deliberative agency that is central to political life. If this is the case, Okeja still has to explain why these acts of deliberative agency failed to have transformative political and material impact. Furthermore, he will need to provide a scenario, (akin to Rawls's "veil of ignorance") that possesses the type of dormant potential that can effectively alter political life. Additionally, each of the five typologies of palaver/public deliberation Okeja overviews in Chapter Four is convened by political rulers or as an extension of political life. In other words, they seem to require invitation and, in some instances, even the permission of tribal and political leaders to convene. Yet, effecting the type of revolutionary change capable of transforming the present political landscape requires grassroots activism. This is why it becomes necessary to interrogate forms of deliberative agency, like La Sape, that sit outside of formal political life. In essence Okeja has to answer the question he poses in Chapter Eight, namely, "*what is the nature of the agency postulated as the core of political life?*"

Another approach to framing this question and delving into the core of systems change work is this: *what is the nature of agency in the midst of, not political failure, but political design?* There is a specific response given when navigating situations involving the compounding of systems of racism and oppression: *the system wasn't made for you*. What is implied here is that instances of discrimination and exclusion are not evidence of the system working badly but, rather, evidence that the imposed system is working accordingly and adhering to its design principles. Similarly, if we (hypothetically) assume that certain political structures were, by design, intended to fail in particular contexts in order to maintain dependencies on foreign resources, how could this political reality affect the liberatory potential of deliberative agency?

A different question emerges as one reflects on the ability of the current African political milieu to safeguard the fundamentals of life: *what is agency in the face of the ontological terror and existential—not only conceptual or cognitive—disorientation created and perpetuated by political failure?* In offering us the potential for deliberative agency, Okeja may be offering a more radical alternative, namely that in breaking with the design elements of colonial governance structures, African societies are showing the inadequacies of political programs and pushing towards a radical future. A truly new politics. One that can be realized, not through a focus on governmental structures and political leaders, but evident in the actions of everyday people. In exploring the intricate tapestry of African political theory, life, and practice, *Deliberative Agency* provides the very roadmap to a future where Africa's rich heritage shapes a destiny of resilience, justice, and transformative governance.

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