

## 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”

*Deliberative Agency* is a field-shaping book. Calling foundations for the study of the African political experience into question, Uchenna Okeja presents an intricately woven argument for a novel orientation for African political philosophy. The book demands a reimagining of the problem of political life in this context and a reconceptualization of the task and form of scholarship able to tackle the problem.

If there is one aspect that captures African political experience, the book argues, it is political failure. Rather than a failure of structural politics, this is a failure engrained in political experience. It captures “the reality that there are generations of Africans who have not experienced and will never in their lifetimes experience what it means for a society to be governed properly” (4). This reality bears a constitutive powerlessness “in the feeling by individuals that they can do nothing to change the social and political circumstances shaping their lives. The result is that politics is experienced as a meaningless performance outside the realm of ‘normal’ life” (3). Okeja places the implications at the level of understanding in what he calls “cognitive disorientation.” What is at issue, most of all, is the political subject’s self-understanding which is in crisis, a crisis so deep that it affects fundamentally what it is to live together, to make meaning, and to imagine the future.


In light of this problem, Okeja proposes deliberative agency as an apt response to the experience of political failure. He argues that “agency should constitute the main value of political life” (182). This conception of agency is one which is tethered to the question of meaning. It is “a claim that, as political beings, individuals are cocreators of meaning and purpose” (184). The aspect of cocreation draws attention to the ideal of community, of living together, which political failure makes unreachable. The book’s ultimate recommendation of what to do is a call to making community. African individuals, suffering from cognitive disorientation are “to turn to each other as agents of meaning making” (193). Because political failure implies a limitation to any one individual’s ability to devise a solution to the problem, the turn to interpersonal relations marks a collective perspective as promising. As Okeja argues, “meaning emerges through engagement with others living through the experience of political failure” (194).

This proposal is open-ended. It suggests a form of political engagement rather than specific political actions.

The book's argument is meticulously constructed and commands the attention of scholars of African political philosophy and practice. The breadth of texts Okeja engages carves a unique space for the argument within African political thought. What sets the book apart is, among other things, its analysis of political failure which reveals a problem so fundamental, so global that it rejects previous analyses founded in such perspectives as culture, structural politics, or the economy. Moreover, the book stands out for its ability to speak to a familiar experience, taking African subjects' political experience seriously.

As any great book, *Deliberative Agency* puts forth significant questions which future theory must address. Here are two such questions. First, the conception of cognitive disorientation probes into the nature of political knowledge: Do we come to know political facts necessarily through the experience of these facts or can we preemptively imagine a well-organized society from within the experience of political failure? The question asks to illuminate the relation between political failure and cognitive disorientation. Second, on the normative call to turn to interpersonal politics, there is need for a specification of the particular mode of this political orientation such that it deals adequately with the powerlessness inherent in political failure and emerges fully in its capacity for transformation.

This is, in short, a book which provides a necessary foundation for scholarship and a challenge for political action. To the scholar, it proposes a new way of doing African political philosophy that returns to beginnings. To the political actors, it ignites a much-needed mission to pay due attention to the difficulty of our situation, not in order to despair, but to hope. To hope by making meaning. And to hope together.

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