

The Act of Living is an outstanding book, and an important resource for all those interested in questions of urban youth, work, aspiration, development and marginality within and beyond Ethiopia; it deserves to be read widely.

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Despite the ubiquity of the hustler in contemporary accounts of Africa's urban life and cities, few ethnographic accounts take hustlers seriously, as people who want to not only make a livelihood but live meaningfully, and few take the streets they occupy as dynamic terrains of action that are socially and historically produced. This is what Marco Di Nunzio does in his book *The Act of Living*, showing how Arada (the inner city of Addis Ababa) is more than a place but also the embodiment of a mode of urban living characterized by 'street smartness'. Such street smartness is central to how street hustlers describe themselves, make sense of their condition of marginality, and give meaning to their everyday actions and practices.

The book revolves around the stories of two men called Ibrahim and Haile. It follows them as they grow up in Addis Ababa and in their multiple engagements with the street economy, low-wage labour and government-supported cooperatives in search of a better life, showing how Ethiopia's recent economic growth and poverty-alleviation policies did not provide them with avenues to improve their lives. In noting the 'multiplicity of lives' Ibrahim and Haile have lived, Di Nunzio demonstrates the futility of the notion of 'waithood'. Di Nunzio's hustlers do not have the luxury of 'waiting', nor did they think it made sense to wait, in part because they do not expect their condition of marginality to change in the future. They are instead engaged in a continuous hustle to get by, which involves constantly moving about to find new avenues to improve their lives.

Di Nunzio insists that 'the act of living' through marginality involves 'embracing uncertainty', which implies a particular way of experiencing the present and its relation to the future. The future is a source of anxiety and stress for men like Ibrahim and Haile. It is, therefore, only by staying grounded in the present that these men have options for action and hope. Di Nunzio demonstrates how the 'open-endedness' of living in the present enables his interlocutors to see their lives through the lens of the possible. In doing so, the book challenges the idea that being stuck in the present (or 'still youth') is all abjection and precariousness, showing instead how living through marginality involves a distinct mode of 'living with others' (p. 131) and moments of enjoyment (such as chewing khat) in the 'here and now'.

Nevertheless, Di Nunzio's hustlers are deeply sceptical about Ethiopia's new-found growth and development. They feel that they have been cut out of the deal and 'left with nothing' (p. 173). Their continued marginality and exclusion in the face of the promise of abundance is what leads them to question the foundation of this wealth and the moral authenticity of those who benefit from it. This (moral) critique of power, wealth and success shapes his interlocutors' understanding of their marginality as a 'shared predicament', but this critique, Di Nunzio tells us, does not constitute a collective consciousness or resistance. Nor does it challenge the status quo. Instead, he shows how this critique provides the (moral) ground to justify his interlocutors' economic practices – with the criminal activities involved in hustling seen to be nothing compared with the big cheating of the rich – while also recapturing their sense of self-worth.

It is here where several theoretical concerns that frame Di Nunzio's rich ethnography come into view, in particular his concern with how, in academic debates, the

agency of the oppressed is either celebrated for its capacity to resist or seen to reproduce marginality. The emphasis on resistance, defiance and protest, he argues, limits our capacity to understand resistance as something more ambiguous and limited, such as the everyday practice of maintaining self-worth and respect in the face of sustained marginality. It also perpetuates a conception of history as a series of events that happen *to* people rather than something people *make* within the powerful constraints they operate within.

The book does not use E. P. Thompson's work directly, but Di Nunzio's argument echoes Thompson's challenge to scholars who treat history as a 'process with no subject'.³ Thompson's frame of 'making' sought to capture the interplay between conditioning and agency. He also prioritized lived experience in accounts of social and historical formations, conceptualizing lived experience as the mediating element between making the world, on the one hand, and being made by the world, on the other. Yet, despite Di Nunzio making the case for viewing everyday acts of living as central to the 'imagination of the political' (p. 224) and an 'important and often unaccounted part of making history' (p. 4), the book is vague on how ordinary people's attempts to transcend their constraints shape political imaginaries or impact historical processes. How does 'the act of living' not only refashion ways of being in the world but shape forms of political life? Why does the individual quest to 'live otherwise' not constitute a collective claim to distribution? In what ways does the 'embrace of uncertainty' undermine the articulation of a political claim to redistribution?

Di Nunzio's insightful analysis of the way in which the project of domination is contingent upon people's everyday acts of living is crucial for beginning to imagine the world 'otherwise'. Yet the book's focus on individuals rather than (collective) experiences and (class) consciousness begs the question: in the absence of social expectation and a sense of entitlement, what social forces are required to bring about the 'politics of redistribution' (p. 225) the book calls for?

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Caught in The Act of Living: socialities, history and positionality in an ethnography of Addis Ababa's street life – a response

How do we narrate the complex entanglement of hustling, development, marginality and existence? Does engaging with the street economy make street hustlers co-producers of their condition of marginality, locked in by their networks and modes of action? Or is this engagement a challenge to their marginality? While writing *The Act of Living*, I was determined to go beyond these two potential explanations to make sense of how men who are engaged in Addis Ababa's street economy seek to be something other than the constraints of their oppression, albeit from within a condition of marginality and exclusion. My key concern was to situate ethnography and theory, and accounts of Ethiopia's growth, within an appreciation of that tension. This tension remains fundamentally unresolved, yet is a fertile terrain for the elaboration of existential and moral concerns about open-endedness, respect, chance, the self and the future.

³Thompson, E. P. (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Gollancz.