

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 by Uchenna Okeja is a project (i) on the development of ideas on the course of politics, (ii) the rethinking of the political for regeneration of ideas, and (iii) resignification of the agency at the core of political imagination. The cumulative convergence of these ideals maps the boundary of our discussion in ways that challenges and yet opens utopian space to have a meaningful conversation on African political philosophy.

The creative adaptation on the concept of political deliberation by way of double maneuver makes deliberation as relevant for transformative politics but also relocates the agent as central in the generation of new ideals that is less anachronistic to the very nature of politics. Politics is understood here as a discursive space of contestations and negotiations for power and its distribution thereof. Notice, however, that even in this negotiation or contestations through deliberative agency, the parochial focus on politics as a pre-given moral order is exposed. Everyone involved in political discourse collectively engages with one another in tandem with the postcolonial state. Thus understood, deliberative agency is not a hierarchically infused activity but a dialogical space of contestation and renegotiation both amongst agents and within the state.

Public deliberation with agency at the center now becomes a space of consideration and negotiation and not consensus. The individual is recognized as a political agent, not just a conformist participant (as in consensus) or uncritical recipient of normative values, but one endowed with potentials as cocreator of meaning and purpose. This is the point of groundbreaking effort to expand our meaning for public deliberation from mere abstract negotiation to embedded practice with which the agency is centralized. Two critical points are at stake at this juncture. (i) There is subjective reclamation in historical structures in which the agent becomes central in public deliberation. The resignification of the political agent is a necessary space for creative adaptation where political discourse and agency mutually reproduce each other within a meaningful context that is neither abstract (consensus) nor alienated (colonialism). (ii) Creative adaptation is possible because of endowed capacity to cocreate meaning, but not just *any meaning*, rather one that responds to political philosophy as a contemporary practice. Deliberative agency recognizes the very nature

of politics as discursive; a space of constant negotiation, contestation, rupture, and meaning creation.

Deliberative agency challenges the notion of politics as given or as is hierarchically infused. Instead, an ideal emerges where individuals become cocreators in generating what political good is meaningful for them. There is an element of metaphysical investment since in cocreation of meaning, or whatever political good at stake, one is also responsible for the outcome. This last point constitutes the epistemic thrust of deliberative agency in recognizing the discursive nature of politics as sphere of human engagement. It is neither a regulative ideal nor a guide to conduct of actions. It is not prescriptive since it is signified only as ontologically mobile. Actors and participants engage, interact, and generate new meaning of what their political life should be, that is sensitive to the context of experience.

Granted that cognitive dissonance and apathy poses timeless challenge in the normative framing of political ideals in the postcolony, yet since contexts are rarely universal, would the African context and experience offer a noumenal space to transcend these challenges? If colonialism ruptured the political unconscious through cognitive dissonance, are there resources within the African context experience for conceptual reclamation? Reclamation in ways that maintains “normative potential” within contemporary circumstances and experiences? First, Okeja recognizes the impact of what he terms conceptual loss, and he proposes an ideal of what he terms “conceptual creativity” as “a viable response to the challenge of method in African political philosophy” and “correct the deficit of conceptual retrieval ... [and] ... provides a basis for imagining a coherent political ideal capable of responding to the phenomenon of political failure” afflicting “contemporary African experience” (135). Political ideas are internal to the goods of a community. The challenge of cognitive disorientation is *not* an indictment of cognitive capacity; it is rather a charge against the inherent regularized conceptual ideas of political discourses that are anachronistic to the noumenal experience and ideal of political life with a purpose.

Drawn to the African experience, a reflective application of this ideal is to articulate ways in which deliberative agency become useful in tackling political challenges confronting us as a people. Take, for instance, the question of dialogue as a condition for deliberative exercise. While dialogue as an ideal conceptual tool may be said to be constitutively universal, it is merely a prescriptive value. What dialogue means for the Athenian butcher is different from the wheat farmer in Somali; what it means for the bus driver in New York is different from the Sufi philosopher in Timbuktu. The substantive content of what dialogue means and how one approaches it is shaped by reality of history, culture, and political experience. It is therefore a cognitive disorientation to impose the Athenian idea of dialogue as substantively the same as the wheat farmer in Somali. In politics the imposition not only results in cognitive disorientation but alienates and disables the people from being active agents in the postcolonial order.

In deliberative agency, the political unconscious of the postcolonial state is not only challenged, but also contested and no longer accepted as given. Individuals in deliberative agency determine what then is the nature, mode or

what could be the metaphysical utility of the state. They are not just residual receivers but active and meaningful cocreators. If deliberative agency offers an imaginative ideal of negotiations, contradiction, ambivalences or contestation, conceptual creativity is what animates the process of deliberative agency with epistemic enrichment and interpretative perception of reality.

That is all!

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[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.184](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.184)