The book’s thematic focus is caught between two impossibilities: one defined as resistance away as every form of localised civic agency and the other dealing with resistance whose cause and enemy is entirely undefined. One can see the tensions that this produces throughout the chapters.

In the editors’ view, it is those practices that ‘transform, co-opt, undermine, reproduce or reinforce pavement politics’. In the editors’ view, there is a generally-accepted view that agency is complex and to a degree fluid: defined in terms of gender, class, culture, history, contingency, and choice.

So far, so good. Read in this spirit, individual chapters generally stand up well. But, what is the book saying about choice. It matters what resistance means. This second question is a necessary corollary because, if there is no connection to some form (however heroic) of liberation, then resistance is better understood as negation: the rejection or destruction of a political relation or identity. And, in this terrain, we are really analysing either forms of ‘exit’, or non-civic politics more centrally defined by violence and profound political rupture.

**Between Agency and Liberation: The Slippery Subject of Resistance**

Graham Harrison

Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century
by E. Obadare & W. Willems, eds

These forms of agency can recognizably be defined as resistance against states and they can generate a set of questions about categorisation and assessment. These examples can be found in various parts of Africa, but tend to be more easily performed in countries where the state’s presence is fragile and/or where there remain extensive spaces that peasants can move into. Neither of these conditions pertain to Rwanda, which is a central reason why resistance is difficult to identify sensu stricto. Might it not be better to identify the surreptitious ‘gossip’ that takes place in marketplaces or bars, or the surreptitious ‘gossip’ that takes the place of clapping in public meetings, certainly as agency but of a kind that is different to resistance? This is not a judgement that makes one categorisation of political action ‘better’ or ‘more valuable’ than another, but, analytically, we can draw different and more exacting kinds of insights from keeping these two forms of action separate. Let us for now imagine that the ‘gossip’ and equivocal public transcript of protest and ‘insurgent citizenship’:

This is not an easy task. The planners’ templates. In the other instances, we see both creativity and a kind of aesthetic value within which imagery (graphic, musical, and verbal) attempts to ‘speak to’ expansive notions of citizenship.

Other chapters are less easily located within a (proposed) insurgent citizenship and understanding of subalternity. Indeed, as with the Thomson chapter (and in varying degrees other chapters), the chapter by Lindell and Ihalainen as well as that by Ndjoyo offer an ostensible struggle against. This time, the protagonist is some form of neoliberalism.

In both of these strong chapters, we see what one might characterise as a ‘stronger’ kind of agency: challenging the authority of the law or the police in direct and physical ways; remaking spaces; manipulating the signifiers of propriety and property. In one case (Lindell and Ihalainen), this involves the complex agencies of street traders, moving and hence new mercantile spaces in spite of and against the planners’ templates. In the other case (Ndjoyo), it involves globalised financial fraud of a ‘cosmopolitan’ kind that makes the remit of citizenship and territory. But, even if one is struck by what appears to be a bodier set of public activism here, compared with the more soft-spoken and discursive
agencies of the other chapters, this does not necessarily mean resistance.

Neither chapter identifies a ‘moral economy’ against neoliberalism. Instead, each chapter is keen to identify complex forms of agency that are difficult to pin to one kind of political telos. Nevertheless, both chapters reveal a salient trend of what might be called assertive neoliberal subjectivity. The promise of neoliberalism as an ideology (not necessarily its reality) is of greater space to accumulate, of intensified forms of consumption and pleasure, of more mobility, risk, and power. This is the ‘spirit’ of neoliberalism, its quasi-religious appeal to all within its throes. It seems that in the Kenyan, Cameroonian, and Nigerian cases (each of which, from a political-economy perspective, provides country cases where capitalism has experienced extended periods of growth) vernaculars of the ‘cunning thief’ and the neoliberal celebration of the entrepreneur (which, remember, translates roughly as enter and take, or in English more crudely ‘smash and grab’) marry effectively to produce agencies of commercial individualism, mobility, and ambition. As with a great many historical experiences of ‘entrepreneurship’ (itself an ideological term), this may or may not invoke respect for the law of the state when faced with the law of the market.

So, there is a sense in these chapters that the agency that seems to be driving a great deal of the dynamics of hawking and fraud is closely familiar to the law-abiding entrepreneur. And, the norms embedded within agency are ones that relate strongly to profit margins and risk: norms that neoclassical economists assume drive the deliberations of homo economicus in the marketplace. Hence the suggestion of assertive neoliberal subjectivity.

Civic Agency in Africa is a great book. There is an editorial identity to the book that suggests an open-minded approach to civic agency in Africa which is laudable. Most of the chapters do a good job of exploring in fascinating ways civic agencies in the everyday and at the local level. That the book (in this reader’s view at least) maintains a core equivocation concerning the conceptualisation of resistance leaves us with an interesting question: how can we devise workable concepts for the energetic and extremely diverse forms of civic agency throughout Africa that allow us to move beyond a celebration of diversity and agency for its own sake?