

In this edited book, Obadare and Willems aim to identify the ‘arts of resistance’ in African politics. What the book offers is a set of engaging and interesting case studies of political agency, largely out of sympathy for the ‘everyday’, the local, and the socially ‘thick’. Many of the chapters rely on primary research data and bring us insights that only specific case studies can. The book as a whole gives us an open-minded, pluralist, and unorthodox perspective on the nature of political agency. This means that the editors and contributors eschew a single interpretation of the nature of agency, whether it be that of the liberal citizen, the class-derived peasant or worker, or the national-culturally authentic community member (autochthon). There is a generally-accepted view that agency is complex and to a degree fluid: defined through interactions of class, gender, 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 the arts of resistance? This is less clear. Willems and Obadare certainly want to emphasise the centrality of resistance. For them, resistance is a concept that has to be opened up to be of use in analysing contemporary African ‘pavement politics’. In the editors’ view, it is those practices that ‘transform, co-opt, undermine, reproduce or reinforce the postcolonial African state’ (p. 7). And, herein lies the problem. Let us put it as a thought experiment: once one has accepted that civil political agency involves (by definition) some form of relationship between political action and the state, what kind of political action can one imagine that is *not* encompassed by Willems and Obadare’s categorisation? I would suggest that there are none. Consequently, the big editorial issue concerning the conceptualisation of resistance is that every facet of ‘everyday’ civic agency – street protest, riot, attending political rallies, the formation of a pressure group, the political aesthetics of art and performance, ‘hidden’ discourses of gossip, trickery, the appeal to patrons for favour, the mixing and switching of allegiances, and public chat – is part of the resistance repertoire.

This might seem pleasing to those who fear the ‘Eurocentric’ or ‘structuralist’ constraints of social science; who wish to recover in full African agencies; who find themselves attracted to the multiplex. But, the authors’ insistence on using the term ‘resistance’ begs the question: resistance against what? And, closely behind, resistance for what – or driven by what kind of notion of liberation? 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

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Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century

by E. Obadare & W. Willems, eds

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So, the book’s thematic focus is caught between two impossibilities: one which defined 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. Each of the authors has been asked to engage with the concept of resistance; and each has done so in their own fashion. As a result, the meaning of resistance might mean ‘the construction of citizenship practices’; the practices of complex subalternity; assertions of ingenious accumulation; quietly-voiced critiques of the state which might contain protean citizen identities; articulating a ‘real’ critical voice to the masses; identifying ambivalence in fixed political discourses; sober reflections on political realities; the affirmation of localised feelings of belonging; and a heterogeneous set of resistances that includes ‘resistance to the expression of resistance’ (p. 204). These renditions of the meaning of resistance come from each of the chapters and I think they clearly represent the danger of making a concept too fungible.

It matters what resistance means. If we are going to keep the concept of resistance in our academic lingua franca, then it should have some distinctiveness from, say, civic activism, everyday political agency, autonomy and non-domination, and the many other kinds of political ontology. The starting point for the editors and the individual chapters do offer a slender connection between the various political agencies explored and the concept of resistance which is perhaps best condensed into a political aesthetic: of local or small-scale actions against some kind of large and powerful political agency or structure; in other words, the resistance of the subaltern against the great structures of politics. The chapters are, in varying degrees, stories of action by those with little power in adverse conditions. As the editors put it, resistance relates to those who have been dispossessed of their humanity: ‘short-changed, upstaged, or displaced... by the economic and political ideologies imposed and promoted by an ascendant neoliberalism’ (p. 19). So, resistance against neoliberalism? That would be familiar enough: the term ‘neoliberalism’ indeed has encoded within it an ontology

of resistance and critique because it is a word coined and disseminated by those wishing to challenge the economics of the free market and the politics of liberal governance.

But, the two thematic chapters – one by the editors and another by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni – do not identify in this way. Both chapters define resistance against an even broader set of forces: the state, ‘the global’, historical legacies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni introduces the rather vaguely-defined concepts of subjectivation and coloniality which, whilst seeming roughly intelligible within a broadly Foucauldian and post-colonial tradition, do not give us a sense of how we might clarify conceptually and analytically the meaning of resistance. Indeed, for Ndlovu-Gatsheni, resistance is posed against colonialism, modernity, Eurocentrism, imperialism, and post-colonial states. Both chapters also allow for a broad range of forms of resistance action: struggle against, reconciliation with, ‘sly civility’ and autonomy from. In essence, defining such great forces as oppression and such diverse forms of action as resistance creates the corollary that a great many (all?) political agencies can be in some sense defined as resistance.

So, to explore the question ‘resistance against what?’ we can look at the case study chapters. For some contributors, the answer lies in the state. Perhaps this is most clear in Susan Thomson’s chapter on peasant resistance in rural southern Rwanda. To draw on James Scott’s popular categorisations, the kind of resistance that Thomson narrates from her meticulous research is the most hidden of hidden transcripts. Indeed, she honestly identifies the ways in which the inter-subjectivity of the interviews *generates* the beginnings of a resistance to top-down state fiat. Here, we can see connections with a broader tradition of agrarian historiography in which peasant societies resist authoritarian state national projects. They might do this by tricking the state – boiling the seeds of a government-driven farming enterprise so that the crops don’t grow and therefore need no tending, for instance. They might do this through acts of evasion – constructing ‘Potemkin’ government villages whilst maintaining residences and plots elsewhere. It might involve the beating up of a visiting tax officer, or it might involve participation in open and armed rebellion. In an age of enclosure, it might involve the cutting of fence wires.

These forms of agency can recognisably 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 deployment of laughter and an absence 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 developed’; but I do think that, 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 performance aspects can be categorised as ‘insurgent citizenship’: making identifications of political agency that are addressed towards the state as much as against it; contesting the content and nature of what it means to be a citizen within a state.

Most chapters want to find forms of culturally-embedded, inventive, and diffuse insurgent citizenships. Again to follow Scott (who is a major influence throughout the book), there are many transcripts: radio, comedy, music... The principal value of these chapters (Mhlambi, Musila, Hungbo, Schulz, and Hammett) lies in their excavation of creative civic agency in varied locations. In these examples, 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 understanding of political agency. Indeed, as with the Thomson chapter (and in varying degrees other chapters), the chapter by Lindell and Ihalainen as well as that by Ndjio offer an ostensible struggle against. This time, the antagonist 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 being moved, remaking mercantile spaces in spite of and against the planners’ templates. In the other case (Ndjio), it involves globalised financial fraud of a ‘cosmopolitan’ kind that remakes the remit of citizenship and territory. But, even if one is struck by what appears to be a bolder 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?

