

The Question of Agency in African Studies

Edited by
Antonio Pezzano, Daniela Pioppi, Varona Sathiyah
and Pier Paolo Frassinelli



Il porto delle idee 6

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In copertina:
Street traders in Nairobi
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In Memory of our dearest PP

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Preface

The idea and material for this book on the question of agency in African studies came from an international workshop held at the Scuola di Procida per l'Alta Formazione, Conservatorio delle Orfane, Naples, from 3 to 5 October 2019. During three days of interdisciplinary sessions and panels, we tackled the topic from different perspectives that cover many of the approaches to African studies in the humanities and social sciences. The chapters of the book are a double-blind peer reviewed selection that represents the diversity and richness of the papers presented in Procida – one of the last academic gatherings we attended before coronavirus.

The workshop was organised by the Centre for Contemporary African Studies (CeSAC) at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, the American University in Cairo, Cairo University, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, and Université Mohammed V de Rabat. We wish to take this opportunity to thank the additional members of the workshop’s organising committee: Livia Apa, Maria Cristina Ercolessi, and Ersilia Francesca, as well as all the workshop participants, the anonymous reviewers, the book’s copyeditor, Andy Grewar, and the publishers. Thanks also must go to the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and to the University of Johannesburg for cross-subsidising the publication.

Pier Paolo Frassinelli, Antonio Pezzano, Daniela Pioppi, Varona Sathiyah

At the last stage of this publication, before printing, our dearest colleague, Pier Paolo Frassinelli, left us in mid-November. Pier Paolo has always dedicated great commitment to his work. His passion, altruism and generosity were evident in co-organising the Procida workshop and the following publication. We dedicate this volume to his memory.

Antonio Pezzano, Daniela Pioppi, Varona Sathiyah

PART I
AGENCY IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STUDIES

Introduction

Agency in Social and Political Studies

Antonio Pezzano and Daniela Pioppi

Agency is generally defined as the ability to act according to one's own desired goals. In this sense, agency is more than pure observable action as it also implies the meaning, motivation and purpose that people bring to their activities. Social sciences have long debated the relationship between human agency and social structures. Stances range from the neo-liberal view, according to which free and independent actors act for the greatest individual benefit, to a more deterministic one arguing that agency should be conceived as embedded within society and constrained by the culture, society, politics and economy of the day or, in other words, by the surrounding power structures.

Beyond the agency-structure divide, the *agency* debate has also involved a variety of other issues: the definition of *transformative agency* and the identification of the social group better placed to be the engine of change or, in other words, to "make history" – ranging from elitist or statist views to the bottom-up approaches of subaltern studies, passing by the "modernising role" attributed to the middle class, or the vanguard role of the industrial proletariat.

In Africa, since the start of the decolonisation process, intellectuals have been concerned with the necessity to conceptualise political agency and the contribution of Africans to history, along with their struggles to achieve emancipation. More generally, social sciences focusing on Africa have followed the twists and turns of the global debate, with African studies reflecting contrasting views and approaches to the agency-structure dilemma. Recently, the debate on *agency* has been revamped on the political and intellectual agendas of the African continent, following the mass popular uprisings in North Africa and their consequent reflections in sub-Saharan Africa, despite – or maybe because of – counter-revolutions or the apparent failure to significantly transform their respective political systems.

The first part of this volume collects nine research contributions in the field of social and political sciences with very diverse spheres of enquiry such as migration and urban studies, religious practices, informal labour, elites, and analysis of public policies. Notwithstanding their variety, all contributions share a strong emphasis on empirical research and an interest in local, often micro-realities and dynamics. Moreover, they also have in common a focus on individual, non-organised or informal forms of collective action rather than more explicitly political, formal and organised collective endeavours. This last aspect is also combined with a relational approach inspired by Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus" and "fields" (Bourdieu, 2019) or, particularly useful in investigating agency in difficult or uncertain situations, by Vigh's concept of "social navigation" (Vigh, 2006; 2009). In so doing, all the contributions firmly avoid any pre-given ontological conviction on or definition of agency and structure, which do not exist *per se*, but only in their mutual interactions, and only detectable by researchers through their empirical explorations of people's actions.

Reflecting a larger tendency of recent literature on social change in Africa as elsewhere, the shared assumption of the volume's contributions is, in fact, that humans may challenge, react to, or adapt to power relations in a variety of ways, not all conducive to structural change or immediately recognised as such. Human agency can take various forms and is not limited to a struggle for change or to actions explicitly aimed at changing power relations. Agency can produce unpredictable, contradictory outcomes that cannot be easily categorised in terms of either transforming the unequal power order or reinforcing it. Therefore, the mere consideration of processes of active resistance and explicit transformation fails to capture the more nuanced and incremental ways in which structural modifications are activated. Furthermore, all contributions bring to the fore the fact that the outcomes of agency both at the individual and the collective level require to be contextualised and cannot be assumed *a priori* by the researcher, representing in this way a radical departure from "normative" as well as "militant" approaches that have long influenced social scientists in Africa and elsewhere.

The focus is on the power relations within the explored realities. The authors engage in an analytical approach based on empirical works that reflect on the relationship between the structure and the agency of individual and sometimes collective actors, who give rise to multiple, fragmented and sometimes contradictory and ambiguous identities. Reading through the chapters of the volume, we could take an overview of some of the many possible forms of agency encountered on the continent.

Several chapters concern the agency of migrants. We thus see how migrants, refugees and returnees act in liminal spaces characterised by strong external constraints, not only as agents of resistance, but how they have the capacity of creatively engaging with these constraints. This research topic helps to highlight the power relations at the base of the social actors' agency in relations with the structure/state.

For instance, in Chapter One by Sara de Simone, South Sudanese refugees in Adjumani, Uganda, living in a constantly changing and unstable environment characterised by strong structural constraints, exercise their agency strategically, modifying their identity or pursuing invisibility in certain situations (Bøås, 2013; Thomson, 2013). Even though this agency does not ultimately change the structural condition of the refugees, it contributes to ensuring a space for action that makes their lives more secure and helps them to “navigate” their experiences of exile as well as to challenge the Ugandan state's regulatory role. Chapter Two by Nicola Di Mauro outlines the strategies and tactics of some young Moroccan Muslims in Italy in a mobile transnational space where to achieve a leading role in the religious field is to navigate their “double presence” – to paraphrase Sayad's concept of “double absence” that analyses the fundamental contradictions of the migrant's condition (Sayad, 1999).

Chapter Three by Lucia Ragazzi, on an Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programme from France to Morocco, analyses migrants' agency in the return phase, adopting an actor-oriented perspective based on reconstructed life stories and migrancy trajectories. The life stories analysed are representative of different strategies through which returnees confront the structural reality matching ambitions against constraints before their decision to join the AVR project. Such life experiences allow identification of the complexity of the factors influencing the decision-making process, beyond the dichotomy between voluntary and forced return.

Chapter Four by Alessio Iocchi considers the agency of young Nigerien Muslim men in the *fada*, urban informal circles of peers where young men meet for information-sharing, chatting and self-help. Conversations in the *fada* could be a prism through which the researcher could disentangle the complex interaction between the public and the private self and the modes to “navigate” reality as, for example, concerning the lived meaning of being a good Muslim in Niger's Salafi-oriented movements, and how identity is mediated by individual subjectivity and morality connected to the diverse discourses, repertoires and practices of youth belonging to different classes in Nigerien society. The space of the *fada* in Niamey functions as a repertoire

of informal practices of belonging for deprived young people to rescue their powerless position with a sense of empowerment and a feeling of living an Islamically full life, sharing information, solidarity and camaraderie. Through “making *fada*”, they actually produce a social space “alternative to the dominant public space” (Banégas, Brisset-Foucault, Cutolo, 2012). The formation and multiplication of *fada* in Niamey is also an indirect response to the incapacity, inability, or unwillingness and disengagement of political parties and state actors to meet youth needs and aspirations to a social and political space. The *fada* are “alternative spaces” to criticise the status quo and denounce youth marginalisation, but at the same time, many *'yan fada* also appear to be embedded ambivalently in “belly politics” (Bayart, 2006) and clientelist practices through which they can have a chance of *bouffer* (slang for “eating”). It is evident in this case that local agency and agendas are articulated in the face of a disparity between resources and ambitions.

The urban space is also the locus of agency in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Particularly in Chapter Five by Erika Grasso, the market of the town of Marsabit is a repertoire of performances and practices and a place where northern Kenyan inhabitants interconnect and navigate their perceived and real marginality and remoteness in practices of “tactical cosmopolitanism” (Landau, 2010; Landau, Freemantle, 2010). Marsabit is a place where gender and ethnic lines are produced and reproduced, but also questioned and negotiated. The ethnographic approach allows us to grasp the entanglement between space and power, through social relations. In particular, the “impossible things market”, like the Soko Gabra, allows individual and collective subjects to elude social and cultural constraints in terms of ethnicity, gender and age. The chapter demonstrates how the ethnography of everyday practices and individual trajectories can be a good lens through which to observe the transformative and political potential of ordinary spaces and encounters (Simone, 2004; Massey, 2005; Allen, 2016; Darling, 2009).

The relational approach inspired by the analytical concept of Bourdieu’s social field stands out also in Chapter Eight by Edgar Cossa and Orlando Nipassa on the interest groups in the national food and nutrition security policy-making in Mozambique. According to Bourdieu (2019), in each social field there is a conflict between the “suitors” and the “dominants”. The power relations between agents and institutions compose the structure and the rules of the field. The position in the field determines the decision-making process. In this case, the groups of interest act to impose external factors, such as private financial investment facilities, on public policies, seeking to make an autonomous social space that secures their interests.

This is also the case of the Cameroonian and South African elites in the urban spaces described in Chapter Seven by Federica Duca. The agency of these urban elites is read as the reflection of a search for autonomy in relation to the city and the nation. Agency analysed in connection with autonomy allows an understanding of how elites make sense of their position at individual and spatial levels in order to maintain their privileges. Their positioning in the urban space is facilitated by the role of mediators such as the residents' associations, in Johannesburg, or by their connections with the political network, in Yaoundé. However, this autonomy vis-à-vis local and national government is relative and depends on the relationship between the elites (as individuals and groups) and institutions which determine the way of belonging to the urban and national spheres and how these spaces are politically, socially and institutionally constructed.

Finally, for Beatrice Ferlino, the author of Chapter Nine on Moroccan agriculture reconversion projects, "agency is not conceived necessarily as something intentional or subversive, in contrast with structure; instead, it is considered as something which can also be identified in unorganised actions which reproduce social order and maintain stability". The assumption of the author is that agency could also be a "trace of the past", or the product of past policies as in a moral economy framework in which social actors reproduce well-established cultural and social norms "pointing out the mutual influence between individual and structure, between past and present".

We mentioned above the fact that the contributions to this volume, in line with most recent research on social change, place a great emphasis on individual or unorganised forms of agency. Yet, a context in which dominant norms and cultural values constrain the ability of people to make strategic life choices does not allow for structural inequalities to be addressed by individuals alone. Individuals can and do act against dominant norms, but their impact on the general disadvantage is limited and they may pay a high price for their autonomy. Collective organised agency thus plays an important role in creating the conditions for social change and in reducing the costs for individual action. However, it is also true that in contexts of multiple and interacting fields of power we could experience a variety of forms of opposition and resistance, which may or may not assume collective forms, often giving rise to more nuanced situations and to a politics of informality. Also, the reflection on different forms of agency throughout history can highlight the importance of structural contexts in determining or at least influencing the forms and dynamics of mobilisation that in turn have the potential of modifying such contexts. For instance, it has been observed in Africa (as elsewhere), that the general globally

reduced bargaining capacity of labour vis-à-vis capital has favoured the prevalence of localised, issue-based or particularistic forms of protest. This reveals the difficulty of building larger forms of cooperation and solidarity among the working classes, as well as sustainable alternative agendas in a context of social fragmentation and the decline of the global labour force, as the spread of informal work and activities demonstrate. Collective identities are thus constructed through the discursive identification of “framing” processes and reconstructed through interactions with a range of other actors in society. Two contributions in this volume, Chapters Two and Six, help us understand how informal actors construct interests and change their frames and discourses, sometimes by collectively challenging the practices and discourses of dominant actors in terms of claiming rights, sometimes by accommodating their discourses to appeal to potential allies.

The already mentioned Chapter Two on the Italian Islamic Confederation (*Confederazione Islamica Italiana* – CII) highlights the crucial role of Italian and Moroccan institutional devices to control, discriminate against or co-opt Moroccan migrants, even in what concerns their religious practices. The young members of the CII thus, in the interplay of uneven and mobile relations, try to navigate their position in a “force field” (Vigh, 2009) that disciplines them locally and nationally. Their social navigation disposes them strategically in a transnational space, where they try to escape the frustrating condition of the “double absence” (Sayad, 1999) by building their collective agency.

However, the most illustrative case of the non-linear process from quiet and individual resistance to collective mobilisation is Chapter Six by Mamokete Matjomane on street traders in Tshwane, South Africa. The chapter traces street traders’ politics from earlier atomised forms of “subversive adaptation” to a more collective agency engaging the state in participative urban governance practices. In this case, collective efforts maintained over time indeed produced a transformative agency but not in a linear progression as actors use different modes of agency at different times and scales (Lindell, 2010a; 2010b). The street trader leaders’ position in relation to the state is constantly shifting depending on opportunities and agendas, because there are “multiple sites of urban governance” (Lindell, 2008) depending on how the state interacts with non-state actors in the exercise of public authority (Lund, 2006; Hagmann, Péclard, 2010; Hibou, 2004; Menkhaus, 2008). In this chapter, the state is viewed through everyday practices in a continuous reconfiguration of power relations with informal actors. Street trader organisations and their leaders operating on the margins of the state (Das, Poole,

2004) rely mainly on a confrontational approach or clientelist practises, whereas leaders who act as quasi-state bureaucrats rely on cooperation as their position allows them easier access to state resources.

Overall, and to conclude, the contributions collected in this first part of the volume on *The Question of Agency in African Studies* offer at the same time nine rich self-standing empirical case studies on a variety of issues concerning the contemporaneity of the continent. At the same time, they are a collective example of the most recent tendency of research on social and political change that, far from the big overarching schemes of the twentieth century, focuses instead on local micro-dynamics, highlighting the continuous processes of society formation in which agency and structure are multiple, undefined and strongly intertwined, thus producing unpredictable results.

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