
African Agency in International Politics

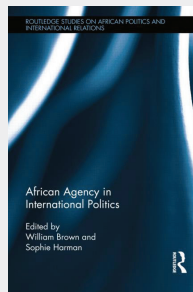
Edited by William Brown and Sophie Harman

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THE USE OF THE concept of agency in relation to Africa's foreign relations has, up to now, been very limited. This has often related to the actions of individual pivotal states, such as South Africa or Libya. Indeed, there has not yet been an in-depth examination of African agency in international relations, making this volume a welcome addition. Admittedly, this is an enormous subject, one that has grown in significance and relevance given the deepened involvement of actors such as China on the continent since the end of the last century. Questions started to be asked about how African states could structure their engagement with an actor so obviously superior in economic and political power. However, this is not the first time that African agency has been addressed, as these questions were previously inspired by the post-colonial experience and the analysis of enduring Great Power involvement in African affairs, during and after the Cold War.

This volume, edited by two scholars – Open University's William Brown and Queen Mary University's Sophie Harman – who have been theorising for some time about Africa's role in international affairs, is thus a long-overdue addition to studies on Africa's international relations. It contains contributions from a number of Africa scholars from the continent and beyond, including Siphamandla Zondi, Tom Cargill, Donna Lee and Scarlett Cornelissen, to name a few. A question mark does



arise, however, as to why only two scholars based in Africa, Zondi and Cornelissen, were included in the work leading up to the conceptualization and completion of the book, especially given its subject matter. The book comprises 11 chapters arranged into three parts: "Negotiating Internationally," "Agency: New

Modes, New Sites," and "States and Agency." It is well-written and mostly well-edited, although some issues do arise. The volume seeks to ask "how far and in what ways, African political actors are impacting on, and operating within, the international system? What are the key sites and sources of agency in Africa? What does African agency look like and how can we understand it?" (p.1). It should be noted that the book does answer many of the questions that it set out to answer. It finds Africa's impact on the UN system (chapter by Zondi), the WTO (chapters by Lee and Hurt) and U.S. foreign policy (chapter by Fisher) in new ways. However, in a few instances, African agency results from the behavior or changed behavior of others – a kind of passive agency.

The most fundamental critique that can be made of the collection of essays is that there is no single definition of 'agency' to which all of the contributors subscribe. For Donna Lee, agency is the ability to change rules; therefore more than simply an ability to act of one's own volition. For Stephen Hurt, agency implies, after Hay, "more than mere political

action or conduct...it implies a sense of free will, choice or autonomy” (p. 52). For Tom Cargill, it is having “the capacity, as a matter of deliberate policy, to exert political influence externally” (p. 65).

This variety of definitions and emphases betrays the editors’ reluctance to engage in the debates on structure and agency that animated ‘mainstream’ International Relations Theory (IR), especially after the publication of Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* in 1999, which expounded his version of constructivism. This reluctance also illuminates deeper issues that are only alluded to in passing, such as the constraining nature of the structure in which African states must act in the global environment. Indeed, the question ‘what is structure?’ is never addressed; thus, the question of agency is discussed in a conceptual vacuum. What of African states as members of that same global environment which supposedly acts upon them?

The second problem arising from this avoidance is that the role and agency of the African Union (AU) as an actor in international relations has not been examined at length. It would have been quite important for a book of this nature to examine the elision of ‘African’ agency with the agency of individual African states more closely. Instead, ‘African’ agency is examined as equivalent to the actions of individual African states, including Uganda, Rwanda and South Africa (with the exception of Zondi, who examines African agency as a function of the common positions adopted by the AU since its inception in 2002). This then makes it difficult to examine cases where continental agency has worked against the agency of any given African state.

Hurt does, however, recommend that African institutions’ agency should be investigated, highlighting that the AU Commission has recently played a greater role in the coordination of trade negotiations between African states (p. 61). However, disappointingly, by the end of the volume, there is still no clarity on what African agency looks like, nor is the reader left with a conceptual map for examining the interplay of structure and agency in the international relations of Africa and African states.

Although a theoretical discussion of the distinction between power and agency is not engaged, certain authors are careful to note that Africa’s improved material position over the last decade does not necessarily succeed in significantly increasing its level of agency in international trade negotiations, for example. This has been seen in the gradual marginalization of multilateral institutions in which African states increase their leverage, such as the UN General Assembly, and more recently, the WTO (on the latter, see chapters by Lee and Hurt).

Nevertheless, the book does highlight innovative new ways in which African agency can be measured, including African states’ use of prevailing discourses (“Doha Development Round,” the chapter by Donna Lee) and ‘image management’ (chapter by Jonathan Fisher) in their negotiating environment. Despite some of its theoretical and conceptual shortcomings, it represents a valuable first step in the analysis of Africa’s agency. This book is intended for scholars, from undergraduates to specialists, of Africa’s international relations and practitioners who deal with African agency – promoting it or managing it – on a daily basis.