



University of Napoli "l'Orientale"  
Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies  
Center of Contemporary African Studies (CeSAC)

## The question of *agency* in African Studies

***International Doctoral Workshop, University of Naples "l'Orientale"***  
***Scuola di Procida per l'Alta Formazione – Conservatorio delle Orfane***  
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*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 structure.

Beyond the agency-structure divide, the 'agency debate' has also involved a variety of other issues: the definition of *transformative* agency or 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 processes in the 1950s, 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. The debate on agency has been recently revamped on the political and intellectual agendas of the African continent, following the mass popular upsurge in North Africa, despite - or maybe because - of the counter-revolutions or of the (perceived?) failure to significantly transform their respective political systems.

**The International Doctoral Workshop *The question of agency in African Studies* aims at tackling the 'agency debate' through different disciplinary approaches in social sciences and humanities. In particular, we aim at investigating three sets of interrelated questions: What is transformative agency? Who are the transformative agents? How do they act?**

### **\*What is transformative agency?**

*Transformative* agency, is normally meant as any purposeful action that ends up transforming power relations. However, human agency could take various forms and it is not only limited to a struggle for change or to actions explicitly aimed at changing power relations. Humans may challenge/react/adapt to power relations in a variety of ways not all conducive to social change or immediately recognised as such.

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. To explore the concept of transformative agency and incremental processes of change, we would

need to engage in an analytical approach, based on an empirical work reflecting on the relationship between structure and the agency of individuals.

Moreover, agency can produce unpredictable, contradictory outcomes that cannot be easily categorized in terms of either transforming the unequal power order or reinforcing it. This means that the outcomes of agency both at the individual and the collective level, require to be contextualized and cannot be assumed *a priori* by the researcher. This also opens the debate on 'normative', as well as on 'militant' research or more in general on the political aims or principles guiding the researcher. Is it correct to analyse and measure change only with respect to a pre-established and fixed end-point such as for instance the model of 'liberal democracy'? Shall we consider transformative agency only that agency operating towards a more equal society?

Possible theoretical and/or empirical contributions shall:

- *Explore the social conditions that give rise to transformative agency and institutional change.*

**\*Who are the transformative agents?**

Much of the recent literature on social change in Africa and elsewhere places a great emphasis on individual agency or on 'multitudes of *individuals* moved into actions' thus running the risk of downplaying the role of ideology and collective organized action. 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. Mass organizations and social movements thus play 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 a politics of informality. Individual and collective actors thus carry multiple, fragmented and sometimes contradicting and ambiguous identities.

Collective identities are thus constructed through the discursive identification of 'framing' processes and reconstructed through interactions with a range of other actors in society. From this perspective, it could be useful to understand how organised informal actors construct interests and change their frames and discourses, sometimes by challenging the practices and discourses of dominant actors in terms of claiming rights, others by accommodating their discourses to appeal to potential allies.

Finally, quoting Michael Neocosmos (2014), "does the fact that we can no longer seriously maintain today that there is a subject of history of whatever kind (the working-class, the people, the masses, the nation, the multitudes), mean that all emancipatory political thought must be simply discarded? Does the extinction of the idea of an emancipatory working-class politics (in other words of 'classism') worldwide mean the disappearance of emancipatory thought today?"

Possible theoretical and/or empirical contributions shall:

- *Discuss individual vs collective forms of agency;*
- *Discuss the differences of top-down and bottom-up approaches/elite vs. subaltern studies;*
- *Explore how movements define themselves and socially share meanings for mobilisation and collective struggles (questions of framing and ideology).*

### **\*How do agents act?**

Reflecting on different forms of agency throughout history can highlight the importance of the structural contexts in determining or at least influencing the forms and dynamics of mobilisation that in turn have the potential of modifying such context. 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 localized, issue-based or particularistic forms of protest, revealing the difficulty of building larger forms of cooperation and solidarity among working classes, as well as sustainable alternative agendas in a context of decline of the global labour force and social fragmentation.

Other recent forms of mobilization in Africa (and beyond) have been described as non-institutional, popular, diffused and atomized, taking place both in the street and in cyber space, through social media and blogs. Much has been written for instance on the new social movements based on loose networks of urban, middle-class, techno-savvy youth individuals in perpetual self-redefinition, which stress the multiplicity of identities, positive diversities and cosmopolitanism. Their horizontal and loose character coupled with their spontaneity constituted a novelty and a value added in confronting the coercive apparatus of regimes, but their atomized character is also clearly undermining the chance to engage in long-term battles, to build larger alliances and to form a solid political alternative to the regimes.

### **Possible theoretical and/or empirical contributions shall:**

- *Analyse new forms and dynamics of mobilisation;*
- *Analyse the relations between a given structure and different forms of agency (e.g. the impact of changes in the organization of labour on mobilization; new communication technologies, etc.);*
- *Explore the role of individual and collective agency and creativity in effecting social transformations (immaterial forms of cultural, symbolic, social capital are often converted into material forms of capital and vice versa).*

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The workshop is organized by the Centro Studi sull’Africa Contemporanea - CeSAC (Centre of Contemporary African Studies) at the University of Naples “l’Orientale”, in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; the University of Johannesburg; the American University of Cairo; the University of Cairo; Muhamed V University, Rabat; Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo.

The aim of the workshop is to bring together advanced Master and PhD students, and early career researchers with senior academics in order to: exchange field and research experience and methodology; to improve the students’ ability to prepare and present their research in an international context; to stimulate African-European inter-university cooperation.

The workshop is open to about 20 students. Applicants are invited to submit proposals (a 500-word abstract as well as a one-page outline of their status and current research) addressing the overall themes. Papers that apply and/or refine conceptual and theoretical approaches to the subject matter, as well as presenting fresh empirical information, will be especially welcome. Priority will be given to students and researchers with recent field experience. The deadline for submitting proposals is **12 May 2019**. Participants will be informed of acceptance by **3 June 2019**. The cost of travel to and from Procida is to be met by individual participants. Food and lodging in Procida are provided by the organizing committee. Each participant will be asked to contribute with a lump sum of **200 euro**. Depending on the final budget, the Organizing Committee will subsidize students coming from Universities in agreement with “L’Orientale”.

**CeSAC Organizing and Scientific Committee:** *Livia Apa, Maria Cristina Ercolessi, Ersilia Francesca, Antonio Pezzano, Daniela Pioppi.*

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