



Virtual Roundtable: Luigi Achilli's Response

written by Luigi Achilli
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1. To what extent does the notion of political agency help to understand political change?

“Political agency?! What is political agency?” When I first spoke about “political agency” with my mother, I did it to explain what was the main focus of my PhD research. I failed miserably – she did not really understand what I was studying, a



notion that I was actually struggling to make sense of myself. Pausing a moment and looking at me reflectively, she added: "...do you mean political action?" That day the woman probably gave up the idea that her only son did not do anything useful with the money that she diverted so lavishly to his education. On my side, her question was a terrible blow to my intellectual self-confidence, which led me to doubt the very use of the term:

Was political agency only jargon – just another way to reinforce scholars' haughty intellectual aloofness vis-à-vis "ordinary" people? No... of course not! The concept of political agency means something more, it points to those actions that are conducive to real change.

It is like political action, yes, but more effective, powerfully enabling and inherently benign. As James Laidlaw correctly points out, "only actions contributing towards what the analyst sees as structurally significant count as instances of agency. Put most crudely, we only mark them down as agency when people's choices seem to us to be the right ones."

In this sense, political agency represents a crucial analytical frame both to observe contemporary social and political transformations as well as to define the role of anthropology in the interpretation of our age. However, the problem with this conception of political agency is that it produces a set of interrelated issues. The first one is entailed in the unspoken presumption of what a person's actual or ultimate goal is. By taking for granted the universality of a desire to act, this understanding of agency looks only at those actions inspired by a genuine desire of freedom and equality. Secondly, although "resistance" – as an ideal form of action – is surely an important facet of political agency, its overemphasis denies dimensions of human action that does not fit into the logic of repression and resistance. This has been especially evident with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings: lured by the spectacular clarity of political demonstrations and acts of violence that have dramatically upset Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, many Middle East scholars and political analysts have, with few exemptions, missed the complexity



of political change in Jordan, occupied Palestine, and elsewhere in the region.



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A more nuanced analysis of political change in and beyond the Middle East would require an analytical shift away from the classic parameters of political agency. As several authors have pointed out, we need to understand political agency as not simply the capacity to act politically against overarching forces and practices of domination, but simply as to the ability to effect change. Such an approach can offer new insights into the nature and experience of the political in contexts where the complexities of political change often left authors recognizing as effective only those actions that are conducive toward freedom and liberation from subjugating forces.

2. Are Area Studies still relevant to understand



contemporary dynamics of political and social transformation?

As Edward Said and other scholars already warned, area studies contribute to shape a very specific understanding of the Middle East as well as other regions—an understanding that is very much anchored in the economic and political concerns and needs of others. Most importantly, however, the nature of these studies precludes the capacity to provide more nuanced analysis of a given phenomenon for a flaw intrinsic to its very gaze: while the processes that produce specific political and social transformations are global in character, the social scientist describe these phenomena in local terms.

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