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Special Issue on
The African Public Sphere: Concepts, Histories, Voices and Processes

Guest Editor
Abdul Raufu Mustapha

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Introduction

The 'Missing' Concept: What is the 'Public Sphere' Good for?

Abdul Raufu Mustapha*

The concept of 'civil society' was introduced into the African political discourse and practice in the 1980s, following the collapse of the nationalist post-colonial project in many African countries and the ascendance of the neo-liberal Washington Consensus. As Willems points out in her contribution to this volume, the term 'civil society' sparked an intense debate among African and Africanist scholars about its appropriateness and applicability to the African context. Regardless of the issues raised in this debate, these days across much of Africa, 'civil society' (or 'stakeholders', as it is sometimes referred to) has become an ubiquitous shibboleth in public policy discourse. Nothing of substance is decided, from the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to voters' registration, without the real, or as is more often the case, contrived 'consultation' of civil society. However, it is important to note that the concept of the 'public sphere', just as important in the liberal political repertoire as 'civil society', was largely ignored in the African discourse. Despite the close links between both concepts in their original European milieu, why was one ignored and the other promoted in addressing the problems of failed statist modernisation in post-colonial Africa?

It would seem that the neo-liberal project in Africa needed only the concept of civil society, and not that of public sphere. Implicit in the neo-liberal thinking is that post-colonialism was the key problem holding back

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African development, controlled as it is by predator elites and vested interests.[2] The picture of African societies that emerged was a simplistic bifurcated one with predator elites on the one hand and hapless peasants on the other. With time, civil society was conceived as the correcting mediator between these two antagonistic camps. Needless to say, all three caricatures – blood sucking elites, hapless peasants, and virtuous 'civil society' – are all discursive inventions of neo-liberalism, bearing only a vague resemblance to African realities. Within the context of neo-liberal economic reforms, therefore, 'civil society' was seen as providing a societal anchoring for a reform programme that was at heart technicist and heavily influenced from abroad. However, it is important to note that the view of society, implicit in the neo-liberal worldview, had little room for an African whole; no common purpose or collective interests bound the disparate groups together – states controlled by parasitic elites stood in opposition to oppressed peasantries and the struggling 'civil society'. Where there is no notion of a collective will or social solidarity, there cannot be a public or a 'public sphere'. Under such circumstances, shock therapy induced from outside would seem a more appropriate response to perceived elite capture of the state.

In the face of the now acknowledged dismal failure of the neo-liberal project in Africa[2] can we afford to continue to ignore the concept of the public sphere? This question becomes even more important in the context of the advocacy by some of an alternative development path in the form of the 'Beijing Consensus'.[3] Proponents of the Beijing Consensus intend the concept to mean a combination of economic reform, authoritarian politics, pragmatic adaptation, social stability, and rapid growth as a potential alternative to the failed Western neo-liberal model built around structural adjustment.[4] This economistic seduction is also against the background of democratic recession in places like Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, where recent elections from 2007 led, not to the enthronement of the popular will, but to power-sharing regimes or sit-tight losers. Africa's political and economic future might, therefore, benefit from a closer examination of the worth and applicability of that long ignored concept of Western liberalism: the public sphere.

In the opening contribution to this volume, Santos poses the questions: does Africa really need the concept of the public sphere? What is it good for? Indeed, as Willems points out in her contribution, Eurocentrism was one of the accusations levelled against the uncritical transfer of the notion of civil society to Africa. Santos warns against the repeat of such a blinkered transference. He argues that the theoretical and cultural presuppositions of Habermas' public sphere are entirely European, reflecting the emergence of the bourgeois male citizen at the start of the eighteenth century. He notes

that some of these presuppositions – such as the presumed separation of state and society – are difficult to sustain even in the contemporary global north, and are evidently unsuited to African realities.

Santos, therefore, makes a key epistemological point: northern derived concepts like the public sphere might claim universal applicability, but this claim must always be tested against specific realities in the global south before they are used to explain such realities. He argues that social theories produced in the global north might not necessarily be of universal applicability. He traces the complex paths through which theories specific to the northern experience assume the toga of undeserved universalism. Santos makes a strong case for epistemological diversity which reflects the complexities and knowledge systems of the north and south. Knowledges, not just a universalist all-explaining Knowledge, are key to capturing the complexities of the real world. Yet, Santos is not calling for epistemological autarchy or epistemological relativism. Instead of the current universalist assumptions, which privilege northern-derived theories, he advocates intercultural translations between knowledge systems which promote open dialogue and mutual intelligibility across cultures and historical experiences.

In the African context, Santos suggests that this intercultural translation involves two distinct moments – a deconstructive moment which critically evaluates the Eurocentric social theories inherited from colonialism and northern intellectual dominance; and a reconstructive moment which taps into the indigenous historical and cultural legacies of African societies. He asserts that this two-fold movement promotes mutual epistemological intelligibility and responds more directly and appropriately to African realities. This challenge posed by Santos is taken up by all the other contributors to this volume, each emphasising both the strengths and weaknesses of Habermas' public sphere in the task of understanding Africa's historical and contemporary realities.

In my substantive contribution, I explore how Habermas can be used to improve current economic and political policy making processes in Africa. I argue that the many criticisms of Habermas within northern academia by scholars like Fraser and Bolton bring the concept more in line with African realities.[5] These critics raise important issues around the place of gender, class and race in Herbamas' conceptualisation, and also echo Santos' allegations of Eurocentrism. The deconstruction of theories internally in the north might, therefore, contribute to similar efforts in Africa. Furthermore, I highlight the fact that even before Habermas' work (1962) became accessible in Africa through its translation into English, there was already a fascination within African intellectual circles with the Western notions of

the public and private spheres. In his seminal work on *Colonialism and the Two Publics*,[6] Peter Ekeh borrowed the Western separation of the public and private spheres to explain the prevalence of 'tribalism' among African elites. His work is, therefore, more concerned with 'tribalism' in African politics, than with the public sphere as we would understand it today from a Habermasian lens. I offer a critique of Ekeh and argue that the African public spheres might best be understood as a multiplicity of publics and counter-publics, rather than Habermas' unitary conceptualisation. The rest of my contribution seeks to show how this notion of a multiplicity of publics can be useful in improving economic and political policy making in Africa by shifting from the constricting Weberian utilitarian rationality that informs contemporary policy to a much more Habermasian communicative rationality that emphasises deliberation and pluralism. This strategic shift could potentially build common grounds that unite Africa's multiple publics and create the moral anchor for a more inclusive and sustainable public policy. Such a moral anchor would penetrate society more than the real – as distinct from the neo-liberal ideological construct of – 'civil society' has so far achieved.

Willems continues the deconstructive engagement with the concept of the public sphere by comparing its introduction into African discourses with the ways in which the concept of civil society was introduced in an earlier period. She notes that both concepts derive from the same Western liberal-democratic intellectual genealogy. But while there has been a lively deconstructive debate on civil society in Africa, the same cannot be said for the concept of the public sphere. Instead, she argues that, woolly conceptions of the public sphere are often used interchangeably with the concept of civil society, and very little critical attention is paid to its European roots or its problematic applicability. Citing Mamdani and the Comoroffs, Willems highlights efforts made to adapt the concept of civil society to African realities against the background of its Eurocentric baggage. She suggests that the same deconstruction can be done for the concept of the public sphere, and argues that popular culture in Africa holds the key to this adaptation. Willems argues that Africa's rich sites of popular culture should be seen as the relevant sites for Africa's public spheres. Popular culture, she asserts, is the public sphere of ordinary Africans. This position helps us to redress the bourgeois elitism implicit in Habermas' conceptualisation. Secondly, it opens important doors for the inclusion of African cultural elements – orality, songs, stories, jokes, and drama – into our conceptualisation of the African public sphere.

Willems' challenge on the importance of popular culture is taken up by Awasom in Cameroon. Awasom's contribution highlights how Habermas' public sphere can be fruitfully used to explore aspects of Cameroon's cultural,

social, and political histories – all through the lens of the palm-wine drinking joints that sprang up in the colonial town of Bamenda. This is a cultural history centred, not on colonial proconsuls or important traditional elites, but on the daily rituals of the lives of ordinary Africans as they engaged with colonial modernity in all its ramifications. Awasom points out continuities with social practices in the pre-colonial countryside and the transference and modification of these practices in the new colonial Bamenda to create new subjectivities, collective identities, gender roles, and economic interests. Our understanding of the cultural and political histories of colonial Cameroon is greatly enhanced through this creative deployment of Habermas in the analysis of a specific African context.

In understanding the African public sphere, we must also pay attention to the connections between the public and the private spheres, as well as between the social and the personal. This is obviously a deviation from the Habermasian separation of the private from the public, based on a long established tradition of European thought. In Africa, on the other hand, cultural and religious values in the private and social spheres impinge on the nature and constitution of the public sphere. Gendered and generational exclusions from spaces of religious ritual are often accompanied by exclusions from public and political spaces, with significant implications for citizenship rights and the constitution of the public sphere. Furthermore, we must however cast our gaze beyond the cultural and political limitations to the full membership of African women in the public sphere. The processes of production and reproduction also affect the ability of African women to take their full place in the public sphere. Access to education, jobs, and the enjoyment of equal property rights are all important constraints on women's participation in the public sphere. Also important is the lack of social provisioning – child care, basic health – such that too many women are too weighed down by survivalist drudgery to have anytime to partake in public affairs.

The last two contributions by Yau and Manganga bring us up to the contemporary world of globalisation and the internet. As both contributors highlight, this brave new world of the 'twitterati', bloggers, Facebook, YouTube, and 'hacktivists' has significant implications for the African public sphere. In late colonial and post-colonial Africa, the radio was the key instrument of mass communication and the delineation of the public. Government control ensured that a rigid hierarchical separation of producers of news and views on the one hand, and consumers of same on the other, was maintained. Government appointees produced media content that was consumed by a largely passive audience of peasants and the urban poor. TV

broadcasting and print journalism – both heavily focused on urban areas – did not significantly change the dominant structure of communication within African states. However, there were some important changes to print and electronic broadcasting in the era of neo-liberalism. Particularly, the emergence of commercial and community radio and TV broadcasting diluted, but did not overthrow, the basic structures of broadcasting established in the late colonial period. As both Yau and Manganga show in their contributions, the rise of the internet has overthrown the extant state domination of the media. The internet has been a privilege to new individuals and groups – often from educated urban middle class backgrounds – in the production and dissemination of news and views, at the expense of the hitherto dominant post-colonial state. This has had significant implications for the African public sphere, from Cairo's Tahrir Square to Cape Town.

Contemporary globalisation has led to the emergence of a global public sphere – networks, internet-based media and campaigns – within which the African public sphere must be understood. Yau points out how the combination of globalisation and ICTs has radically transformed the nature and reach of the African public sphere – creating an on-line virtual public. Traditional dichotomies between producers and consumers of news and views have been overthrown by multi-media formats that unite users and producers in a seamless whole. Secondly, the media monopolies of the post-colonial state have been swept aside. For instance, some have argued that ignoring the social networks on the internet was a major factor in the downfall of the Tunisian regime and the initiation of the political convulsion that is sweeping through the Arab world since December 2010. The Tunisian authoritarian regime tightened its grip on the TV and print media at the onset of the demonstrations, but ignored the internet-based social networks:

> In a way, there is an intriguing parallel between the failure of the Tunisian regime to spot the significance of social networking, and mainstream media's conviction about its overriding importance. Both camps persist in regarding this stuff as exotic, which for them it is, which in turn highlights how out of touch they have become with reality. For the reality is that the net and social networking have become mainstream, even in societies that seem relatively underdeveloped…[7]

Within these global processes, Yau is keen to highlight uniquely African characteristics, dimensions, and peculiarities. He also points out that the de-institutionalisation of the media that has resulted from globalisation and ICTs has resulted in both costs and benefits for the public sphere. One key benefit is that the cost of producing, reproducing, and transmitting news and views has been drastically reduced by digitalisation. At the same time,

the reach of the average person has been greatly enhanced by ICT networks. The resulting simultaneity and interactivity mean that many more Africans and persons interested in African affairs can now be in constant real-time touch with each other and the wider world. The downside of this quickening and thickening of communication flows is the lack of quality control and reliability regarding the news and views pumped out, and the dubious authenticity of the authors and producers. Both Yau and Manganga emphasise that despite Africa's infrastructural and access constraints, there is increasing cyber mobilisation across the continent, generating a virtual public sphere that complements the off-line public spheres. This has important consequences, not just in terms of internal mobilisation within such countries as Zimbabwe and Egypt, but also in the establishment of important connections between internal actors and external and diasporic constituencies. Manganga gives a candid picture of some of the limitations of cyber mobilisation in Zimbabwe.

Finally, while the contemporary importance of the internet for the African public sphere is not in doubt, what is the likely future of this ICT-mediated virtual public? Yau points out the tendency for participants to recreate off-line gender, ethnic, and national cleavages within on-line virtual communities. Manganga also notes that partisan Zimbabweans often use the internet to shout past each other, rather than seek to engage in dialogue. Will the internet, therefore, not affect the values and identities of those drawn into its networks? Or can it contribute to the emergence of a 'new pan-Africanism' based on people-to-people contact at the individual level, as distinct from the current pan-Africanism of states? Will this 'new pan-Africanism' be sufficiently robust to undermine the ethnic, national, gender, and racial intolerance that have plagued many African societies? Will this 'new pan-Africanism' advance the communitarian and humanitarian ethos of Ubuntu? Or will it promote the 'networked individualism'[8] which we can identify with 'afropolitanism': 'we are not citizens, but rather 'Africans of the world' … we choose which bits of a national identity (from passport to pronunciation) we internalise'?[9] The tremendous powers of globalisation and ICTs on the African public sphere will be felt, not only in contemporary events like the contagious mobilisation of long-quiescent populations across North Africa and the Arab world, but also in the ways these instruments (re)shape the long term values and identities of network participants.

Contributions in this volume highlight both the problems and promises of the use of the concept of the public sphere in the study of Africa. It is a concept whose original formulation has been substantially and fruitfully reworked by critics in the West. Furthermore, like all borrowed concepts

and paradigms, it has to be critically adapted to new contexts like those in Africa. Some of the contributions in this volume suggest ways through which this critical adaptation might be best approached. Finally, the contributions also explore ways in which an adapted concept of the public sphere may be useful, indeed important, in the analysis of African history, popular culture, and political dynamics.

Notes

1. Cf. Bates, R., 2005, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Berg, E., 1981, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: an agenda for action*, World Bank, Washington DC.; Toye, J. 1992, 'Interest Group Politics and the Implementation of Adjustment Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa', in P. Gibbon, Y. Bangura, & A. Ofstad, eds., *Authoritarianism, Democracy and Adjustment: The Politics of Economic Reform in Africa*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala.
2. Easterly, William, 2001, 'The Lost Decades: Developing Countries' Stagnation in Spite of Policy Reform 1980-1998', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 6, pp. 135 - 157; Stiglitz, J., 1998, 'More Instruments and Broader Goals: Moving Toward the Post-Washington Consensus', World Bank; Mkandawire, T., 2001, 'Thinking about developmental states in Africa', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 25, 3., pp. 289 – 314.
3. Zhao, Suisheng, 2010, 'The China Model: can it replace the Western model of modernization?', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19: 65, pp. 419-436; Lagerkvist, Johan, 2009, Chinese eyes on Africa: Authoritarian flexibilities versus democratic governance', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 27, 2, pp. 119 – 34.
4. Other readings of the Chinese model which support the notion of state-led development, but argue for a democratic rather than an authoritarian state, are more likely to use the term 'Bandung Consensus' or 'Southern Consensus' cf. Arrighi and Zhou (forthcoming) 'Beyond the Washington Consensus: A New Bandung?', in J. Schefner and P. Fernandez-Kelly, eds., *Globalization and Beyond: New Examinations of Global Power and Alternatives*, Penn State University Press, University Park, PA.; Gore, C., 2000, 'The Rise and Fall of the Washington Consensus as a Paradigm for Developing Countries', *World Development*, 28, 5, pp. 789 - 804.
5. Fraser, N., 1992, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Calhoun, C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 111; Bolton, R., 2005, 'Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action and the Theory of Social Capital', paper presented at the Association of American Geographers, Denver, Colorado, April, 2.
6. Ekeh, Peter, 1975, 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17, 1.

7. John Naughton, 2011, 'Yet another Facebook revolution: why are we so surprised?' *The Observer*, Sunday, 23 January. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/jan/23/social-networking-rules-ok.
8. Cf. Manuel Castells, 2005, 'The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy', in Manuel Castells & Gustavo Cardoso, eds., *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy*, Johns Hopkins Centre for Transatlantic Relations, Washington DC.
9. Taiye-Tuakli, 2007, 'What is an Afropolitan?', http://theafrobeat.blogspot.com/2007/03/what-is-afropolitan-by-taiye-tuakli.html.

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Interrogating Public Sphere and Popular Culture as Theoretical Concepts on their Value in African Studies

Wendy Willems*

Abstract

Concepts such as civil society and public sphere have been frequently used both as analytical tools and as normative concepts deemed essential to a well-functioning liberal democracy. Because of its theoretical roots in Western liberal thinking, scholars in African studies such as Comaroffs, Mamdani and Ekeh have vigorously debated the extent to which the concept of civil society is useful in explaining and interrogating developments in Africa. However, the concept of the public sphere has been subjected to less rigorous debate in the field of African studies. In media studies and political science, however, a number of scholars have problematised the normative connotations and idealistic assumptions of the Habermasian public sphere. This article argues that both the debate on civil society in African studies and the debate on public sphere in media studies and political science could inform a more critical discussion on the relevance of the concept of public sphere in African contexts. Secondly, the article contends that the concept of popular culture addresses some of the concerns brought up by critics of the concept of public sphere. It argues that popular culture is the public sphere of ordinary Africans, but we must be careful about how we define popular culture itself.

Résumé

Les concepts tels que société civile et espace public ont souvent été utilisés comme des outils d'analyse, mais aussi comme des concepts jugés essentiels pour une bonne démocratie libérale. Du fait que ses origines théoriques se retrouvent dans la pensée libérale des Occidentaux, des intellectuels africains

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tels que Comaroffs, Mamdani et Ekeh ont vigoureusement débattu l'utilité du concept de société civile dans l'explication et l'analyse de ce qui se passe en Afrique. Seulement, le concept de l'espace public n'a pas été soumis à autant de débats dans le domaine des études africaines. Pourtant, au niveau des études des médias et de la science politique, plusieurs chercheurs ont étudié la problématique des connotations normatives et des conceptions idéalistes de l'espace public habermasien. Ce qui est d'un apport considérable dans la discussion critique sur la pertinence du concept de l'espace public dans le contexte africain. Aussi, l'article soutient que le concept de culture populaire est l'espace public du commun des africains. Cependant, on doit faire attention à la manière dont on définit la culture populaire.

Introduction

The genealogy of the concepts of civil society and public sphere are inextricably linked. Both constitute fundamental building blocks of liberal-democratic political theory. While there has been a lively debate on the relevance of the concept of civil society in African studies, the concept of public sphere has been subject to less rigorous discussion and debate. It has often been deployed in a rather loose manner and has frequently been used interchangeably with the concept of civil society. This article starts by providing a brief outline of debates on civil society in African studies and critiques in media studies and political science of the Habermasian public sphere. It argues that both debates could inform a more rigorous discussion of the concept of the public sphere in African studies. Secondly, the article seeks to demonstrate the value of the concept of popular culture in contributing towards a fuller and richer understanding of public spheres in Africa.

Civil Society as Policy Recommendation

The concept of civil society gained popularity in the early 1990s in the wake of the so-called 'third wave of democratisation' which comprised a gradual disappearance of autocratic one-party and military governments and the introduction of multi-party regimes in Eastern Europe and parts of Africa. The rising popularity of the concept of 'civil society' in both policy and academic accounts on Africa should be understood against the background of the end of the Cold War and the declining legitimacy of communism as ideology (Abrahamsen 2000). Whilst previously a strong state was considered to be crucial for economic growth, the Washington consensus that emerged in the 1980s prescribed a reduction of the state and an increasing role for civil society. Civil society then primarily emerged as policy prescription in order to improve the performance of African states (Lewis 2001). While the state was perceived as bad, civil society was considered to be inherently good.

The concept of civil society features prominently in the discourse on 'good governance' which has been a major policy priority of Western donors. Donors have sought to promote more effective states through support of civil society organisations which are expected to watch over state performance. For example, in 2007, the British Department of International Development (DfID) launched a £100 million Governance and Transparency Fund which was designed to 'help citizens hold their governments to account, through strengthening the wide range of groups that can empower and support them'.[1]

With concepts such as 'civil society', 'democracy' and 'good governance' at present dominating the development debate on Africa, it is easy to take these ideas for granted and to conclude that these have always been regarded as intrinsically good values. However, while at present there appears to be a consensus that liberal democracy is required for development, until the early 1990s, it was commonplace to argue that development could only be obtained in the absence of democratisation (Abrahamsen 2000). In order to accelerate economic growth, it was deemed necessary to temporarily suspend democratic freedoms. But with the growing hegemony of neoliberal ideas since the 1980s, liberalisation of the economy and a retreat of the state have been advocated as measures required in order to speed up economic growth. Until the post-Washington consensus of the mid-1990s, the state had been presented as inherently bad for development and an increased role for civil society organisations was often proposed as a solution that would improve state performance.

In the post-Cold War context, civil society thus increasingly began to emerge as programmatic ideal or policy prescription, not only in grey literature but also in academic analyses. It was seen as both a counterweight to a 'bad state' and a replacement for a 'reduced state'. For example, Harbeson (1994:1-2, quoted in Lewis 2001:5) argued that 'civil society is a hitherto missing key to sustained political reform, legitimate states and governments, improved governance, viable state-society and state-economy relationships, and prevention of the kind of political decay that undermined new African governments a generation ago'. The emphasis here is on 'missing key' which suggests that Africa does not have a 'civil society', and that it, therefore needs to be 'established'. This is echoed in development policy reports such as the guidelines of DfID's Civil Society Challenge Fund which state that '[m]ost Civil Society Challenge Fund projects involve a partnership based around the applicant helping 'to build the capacity' of the southern partner to empower the poor'.[2]

The strengthening of civil society was conceptualised as a means towards poverty reduction and good governance. Civil society was considered as intrinsically 'good' and as a 'power-free' zone which, nevertheless, has the capability to hold the state to account. However, this approach assumes that power is concentrated in the state and that by increasing the power of civil society, a more accountable government is created. This simplistic conceptualisation of power is very similar to what Foucault (1980:122) summed up as to 'cut off the king's head', i.e. the idea that just by cutting the King's head off, one is able to solve the problem of too much power vested in the state. However, this ignores the actual workings of power and the way in which power tends to be dissipated in networks of relations. Foucault objected to the idea of power as a system of total domination. He understood power not as emanating from a certain point but as dispersed through a network of relationships. Hence, civil society can then not be seen as a zone where there are no conflicts of interests. Like the state, civil society is subject to a range of contestations and power struggles. Because of this entanglement in relations of power, it cannot be assumed that a strengthening of civil society automatically will result in a more democratic state. While the state cannot be conceptualised as a priori bad, the aims and objectives of civil society should be evaluated critically in order to assess their potential contribution to a more benevolent state.

The Debate on Civil Society in African Studies

The recurrent deployment of civil society as policy prescription for Africa in the 1990s in both policy and academic discourse provoked a response from scholars in African Studies. They argued that the prescription that Africa should 'build' its civil society assumed that Africa did not have a 'civil society'. The dominant normative discourse profoundly masked the historical legacy of civil society organisations on the continent and also excluded African organisations which did not neatly fit with assumptions made about civil society because these organisations were not defined in opposition to the state but organised along the lines of kinship, ethnicity or local 'tradition'. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, has criticised the practice of carrying out 'history by analogy', i.e. to assume that 'civil society exists as a fully formed construct in Africa as in Europe, and that the driving force of democratisation everywhere is the contention between civil society and the state' (1996:13). Mamdani is concerned about the way in which the concept of civil society has been deployed as normative concept, i.e. where it is expected to operate as a counterforce to the state.

Instead of using civil society as a programmatic and prescriptive tool, Mamdani proposes to deploy the concept as an analytical and

historical tool. In this regard, he has advocated for 'an analysis of actually existing civil society so as to understand it in its actual formation, rather than as a promised agenda for change' (1996:19). In his book *Citizen and subject*, Mamdani (1996) describes what he calls the 'bifurcated state' in Africa which he considers to be a result of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism entailed the creation of a category of citizens who enjoyed full civil, political and economic rights, and the creation of a category of subjects who were denied these fundamental rights. Settlers were given citizen status and had access to the cities while natives were subjected to customary rule and were contained in rural 'reserves'. Mamdani argues that civil society should be seen as primarily the creation of the colonial state. As Mamdani has pointed out, civil society was profoundly racialised and '[t]he rights of free association and free publicity, and eventually of political representation, were the rights of citizens under direct rule, not of subjects indirectly ruled by a customarily organised tribal authority' (1996:19). This is what Mamdani calls the first historical moment in the development of civil society in Africa. The second moment is the moment of the anti-colonial struggle. Mamdani sees this period as profoundly a struggle of the 'native' strata, the subjects, to gain entry into civil society. That entry, that expansion of civil society was the result of an anti-state struggle, and the consequence was the creation of an indigenous civil society. Mamdani, therefore, does not consider the emergence of civil society in Africa as a recent phenomenon that took off in the 1990s, but treats anti-colonial liberation movements as perfect examples of African civil society organisations (which later often established themselves as post-independent African governments).

In their edited volume *Civil Society and the Political Imagination*, anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (1999) also deem it necessary to move away from the Eurocentric tendency to limit civil society to a narrowly defined institutional arena. They advocate for the acknowledgement of African forms of association, often perceived as 'uncool', 'partisan', 'parochial' or 'fundamentalist' in donor policy discourses. Instead of asking what the idea of civil society can tell us about contemporary Africa, they propose to ask what a specific set of African cases can 'tell us about the planetary appeal of the idea of civil society' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:3). Given the historical roots of the concept of civil society in European eighteenth century thinking, the Comaroffs ask: what were the circumstances under which the idea of civil society gained prominence in the European context, and what could civil society mean in the African context? Like Mamdani, they propose to look at 'actually existing civil society' instead of transposing a prescriptive concept of civil society onto the continent.

Similarly, Wachira Maina (1998:137) has argued for the need to open up the concept of civil society in order to reveal the broader spectrum of associational life:

> A shift in perspective from a preoccupation with organisations and institutions to an activity view of civil society. Those who focus on organisational forms and institutions do great injustice to civil society in Africa. Much of that is both interesting and transformative in the continent occurs outside or at the periphery of formal organisational life. Spontaneous protests, laxity and lack of discipline and active non-cooperation with the State are important civil activities […]. Spontaneous, non-confrontational methods […] are safer ways of registering one's disagreement with the government than more robust public activities such as protest marches, placard-waving and burning effigies.

By broadening the definition of civil society, issues not captured in conventional theories on civil society suddenly become visible. While civil society as policy prescription merely seeks to highlight the absence of civil society in Africa in order to justify intervention from Western donors who have a vested interest in a weakened state and a stronger civil society dependent on donor funds, deployment of the concept of civil society as explanatory concept assists in revealing a complex, vibrant, diverse and historicised picture of associational life on the African continent.

The Public Sphere in the Habermasian Sense

While the concept of civil society has often been considered as a policy prescription, a similar tendency can be discerned in writings on the public sphere in Africa. Of course, both are treated as fundamental building blocks of liberal-democratic political theory and considered as essential to a well-functioning liberal democracy. The term 'public sphere' is mostly associated with the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas who used the term in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* which was published in 1962 in German but translated into English in 1989 and has since then become very influential.

In this book, Habermas argues that the emergence of capitalism in European feudal societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries enabled a new sphere or space for the exchange of ideas through rational communication. In the feudal era, public communication was always constrained by the power of the two most powerful feudal institutions: the church and the state. Both exercised a very considerable degree of control over the circulation of ideas and information. However, with the expansion of capitalist markets and production relations, a new space emerged between the church and the state which opposed the absolutist monarchical regime.

Habermas argued that this space 'may be conceived as a sphere where private people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern' (1989:27). In the public sphere, individuals were expected to put aside their private interests and to deliberate about the collective good. Habermas argues that the emergence of such a level of collective discussion was unprecedented in history, and was sustained by the emergence of a network of theatres, coffee shops, newspapers, journals and debating societies.

Habermas considers the public sphere as a normative concept and as a precondition for 'true' democracy, just like civil society has been considered as a crucial counterweight to the state. For Habermas, public deliberation is essential in order to ensure that public policy decisions are made in an informed and enlightened manner. He considers the public sphere as a space where public opinion is shaped. Politicians then take their decisions on the basis of democratic debates in the public sphere. The function of the public sphere is to mediate between civil society and the state and it provides a space for rational debate that ultimately will give rise to a consensus on public affairs. Media act as conduits in this regard; they constitute a discursive space, a space in which issues of public concern are deliberated. Audiences are seen as citizens engaged in public dialogue in and through the media. Media are considered as important in carrying information that enables citizens to make informed political choices. Having access to information on, for example, the positions of different political parties is taken as 'the precondition for political knowledge and action, and the creation of citizenship' (Bignell 2000:155).

In his book, Habermas presents the concept of public sphere as a profoundly normative concept. For example, he describes a historical transformation from the 'good' eighteenth century public sphere to a decline in what he considers a 'worsening' public sphere in the nineteenth century. Habermas argues that in the nineteenth century communication and the exchange of ideas increasingly became dependent upon a new group of sponsors and patrons and upon new structures of authority which pose an increasing threat to the rationality of debate and the universalistic criteria by which arguments should be evaluated. For Habermas, the capitalist system gradually coming into place in the nineteenth century replaces monarchs, church and feudal lords with advertising, public relations and commercial sponsorship of mass communication. In this transformation, the distinction between rational communication and the public representation of private interests becomes increasingly blurred. As capitalism progressively re-feudalises the public sphere, the selection and representation of information placed in the public domain is undertaken according to commercial or political interests rather than based on 'pure' reason and rationality. In this regard,

the demise of public service broadcasting and the commercialisation and tabloidisation of media is often brought up as an example of the declining public sphere and the 'dumbing down' of public debate.

Habermas' account of the public sphere has been criticised for a number of reasons by media scholars and political scientists. First of all, critics have argued that the Habermasian public sphere was essentially a bourgeois space and was not as easily accessible as was implied in his book. For example, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) have argued that the public sphere is not the exclusive property of the bourgeoisie, but they distinguish elite and proletarian public spheres which exist simultaneously along class lines. Both spheres are formed by different and often competing constituencies and are not usually recognised as legitimate public spheres. As examples, they include phenomena such as labour strikes and football matches which operate outside the usual parameters of institutional legitimation, and constitute different arenas of self-expression by groups excluded from formal arenas of public discourse. Similarly, Todd Gitlin (1998) highlights a trend towards a segmented public sphere split into public sphericules which further undermines Habermas' idea of a unitary public sphere. Nancy Fraser (1992) also argues against the desirability of a unitary public sphere as normative ideal. She accuses Habermas of idealising his liberal public sphere and of failing to examine non-liberal, non-bourgeois and competing public spheres. Fraser particularly highlights the way in which women were excluded from Habermas' liberal public sphere.

Another point of contention in Habermas' theory is his focus on rational-critical debate which arguably is based on an elitist conception of liberal democracy that precludes a more radical conceptualisation of democracy as dissensus and conflict (Mouffe 2000). Habermas' understanding of democracy merely favours an elite minority and has not resulted into a true 'democratisation' of power relations. For example, Laclau and Mouffe have argued that 'the problem with "actually existing" liberal democracies is not with their constitutive values crystallised in the principles of liberty and equality for all, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of those values. This is why our project of 'radical and plural democracy' was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the "democratic revolution", as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations' (1985:xv). These scholars thus advocate for a more substantive definition of democracy which goes beyond merely the regular conduct of free and fair elections, a multi-party system and respect for human rights. Scholars such as Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) have used Laclau and Mouffe's normative concept of 'radical democracy' to assess the democratising potential of the Internet.

Habermas' idea of rational debate as a power-free zone should thus be understood as a profoundly ideological construct. It presumes that particularly those with access to education and those with property can participate in a rational debate, thereby excluding those without education and property. In his account of the public sphere, Habermas assumes the possibility of a consensual world in which there is a shared, mutual understanding of the conventions of debate and a shared interest in the outcome of political and moral debates. The Habermasian public sphere is characterised by rational communication that is undistorted by interests or power structures. This is in strong contrast to, for example, Foucault who questioned whether it even makes sense to speak of the possibility of 'rational communication', given that power relations permeate all of human relations. Foucault would firmly reject the possibility of a power-free zone of communication. Habermas does not deal with the exclusion that is involved in the designation of a 'particular' form of communication as the rational and democratically legitimate norm.

Foucault would be more interested in investigating under what conditions knowledge is considered as true and under what conditions a public sphere is considered to be rational. For him, truth is something that is contingent and constantly changing while Habermas retains a firm belief in the enlightenment project, in a single truth which he would define as the outcome of rational public deliberations. For Foucault, rationality and power are not two opposing categories, in the sense that one situation is characterised by power and the next step is to move towards consensus and rationality. Foucault does not deem it possible to conceive of a public sphere as a space which is free from power relations under the right circumstances. However, for Habermas, the absence of market pressures under capitalism – which according to him resulted in the decline of the public sphere in the nineteenth century – could lead to a 'better' public sphere. Foucault, on the other hand, considers power relations to be always prevalent, and he prefers to see the public sphere as a site of political struggle and conflict rather than as a consensual space.

Like the concept of civil society, the Habermasian notion of 'public sphere' should thus be understood as primarily a normative concept. Although many African(ist) scholars have critiqued the concept of civil society, the concept of public sphere has predominantly been criticised from the fields of media studies and political science. Points of contention have been: the bourgeois character of the Habermasian public sphere, his assumption of a unitary public sphere and Habermas' neglect of power relations within the public sphere.

The Debate on the Public Sphere in African Studies

While there has been a vigorous debate on the notion of civil society in African studies and a lively exchange on the public sphere in media studies and political science, there has been less explicit theorising on the concept of the public sphere in African Studies. Peter Ekeh's seminal 1975 article entitled 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement' probably springs to mind most immediately. In this article, Ekeh (1975:111) argues that the Western experience of a unified public sphere, which the state and civil society both occupy, is not reflective of African social spaces:

> [I]f we are to capture the spirit of African politics we must seek what is unique in them. I am persuaded that the colonial experience provides that uniqueness. Our post-colonial present has been fashioned by our colonial past. It is that colonial past that has defined for us the spheres of morality that have come to dominate our politics.

Crucial to this colonial inheritance is Ekeh's distinction between two publics: the primordial and the civic public. Ekeh argues that the post-colonial African state has not been successful in its hegemonic drive, so that the political space it occupies is by no means the only public space that exists in Africa. For Ekeh, the sphere of what he calls the primordial public 'occupies vast tracts of the political spaces that are relevant for the welfare of the individual, sometimes limiting and breaching the state's efforts to extend its claims beyond the civic public sphere' (1975:107). Ethnicity offers a shared identity in Ekeh's primordial public. He provides voluntary ethnic-based associations as example of primordial publics.

However, even though Ekeh uses the term 'public', one could argue it actually refers to the notion of civil society. Subsequent scholars have also primarily adopted Ekeh's concept in this way. For example, Eghosa Osaghae (2006) has used Ekeh's ideas to argue that Western scholars in their conceptualisation of civil society have only focused on those organisations that had the capacity to challenge the state, and hereby they have excluded 'rural and kinship, ethnic associations' from their analysis, which for Ekeh would belong to the 'primordial public'. In this way, as Osaghae argues, they have made it appear that Africa does not have a civil society. Because of their particular definition of civil society, they have not fully appreciated associational life in Africa.

As Calhoun (1993) has argued, it is common for scholars to use the concepts of civil society and public sphere interchangeably. However, as he outlines, the concepts have very different connotations. For Calhoun, the public sphere refers to a discursive space of public deliberation whereas civil society implies some form of political organisation. Furthermore, civil

society is defined by virtue of being a realm outside the state (often in opposition to the state although this has been fiercely contested in African Studies). The notion of the public sphere, on the other hand, is defined in opposition to a private sphere, i.e. the domain of the home or the space where private interests dominate. Hence, the public sphere partly overlaps with the state and civil society; it is a sphere where both the state and civil society articulate their interests.

While Ekeh's work may not explicitly engage with the definition of public sphere as an arena of public debate, his acknowledgement of the bifurcated nature of publics in Africa is useful. As stated above, Fraser, Gitlin and Negt & Kluge have all criticised the unitary nature of the Habermasian public sphere. Ekeh similarly argues that colonialism resulted into two fundamentally separate publics: the primordial and civil public. If for example, we look at the way in which media in Africa constituted publics during colonialism, these could be referred to as civic publics which mainly targeted settler audiences. Africans were fundamentally excluded from these publics, and hence forced to establish their own spaces in what Ekeh refers to as the primordial public. A focus on a unitary public sphere such as Habermas recommends then prevents us from appreciating alternative publics that emerged, for instance, both during Rhodesia's settler regime and in post-independent Zimbabwe. It is, therefore, more useful to speak of publics in the plural sense than to construct a single public as it will bring to light the different publics which contest each other.

Apart from Ekeh's work, scholars working on popular culture have also – albeit implicitly – addressed the issue of publics in Africa (Ellis 1989; James and Kaarsholm 2000; Schulz 1999, 2002; Spitulnik 2002). An advantage of conceptualising sites of popular culture as publics is that it avoids Habermas' elitist connotation of his concept of the public sphere. Popular culture often engages, interacts and responds to official debates. The concept is frequently defined in terms of its opposition to power, as is apparent from Stuart Hall's definition: 'The people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than "class-against-class", is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarised. Popular culture, especially, is organised around this contradiction: the popular forces versus the power-bloc' (1981:238). Hall derives his definition from Antonio Gramsci who considers popular culture as the arena where hegemony is contested.

In this regard, popular culture can be seen as a public space where ordinary Africans are able to debate issues and bring up matters of concern. Karen Barber (1987:2) has argued that the most important attribute of popular culture in Africa is its power to communicate because 'for the majority of Africans, the arts are the only channel of public communication at their

disposal'. And as Barber (1987:3) points out, this is especially so in a climate where the ruling elite dominate public space:

> In Africa, ordinary people tend to be invisible and inaudible. In most African states, numerically tiny elites not only consume a vastly disproportionate share of the national wealth, they also take up all the light. Newspapers, radio and television offer a magnified image of the class that controls them. Not only does the ruling elite make the news, it is the news – as endless verbatim reports of politicians' speeches, accounts of elite weddings and birthday parties, and the pages and pages of expensive obituaries testify.

Hence, the importance of songs, jokes and drama as important channels of communication for people who are not being granted access to official media. Barber sees popular culture as a space that is dominated by 'a pervasive sense of "us" and "them", even though the boundaries between these categories may be highly porous and shifting' (1997:4). However, this is not to suggest that popular culture is necessarily class-based. It is not per se related to a particular stratum of society. Barber considers the 'popular' more as a field of exploration rather than as a stable identity. Popular culture is defined in its opposition to 'them', often political elites.

A central problem with studies of popular culture, however, is that these sometimes end up naively celebrating agency. As Lila Abu-Lughod has argued, they begin to read 'all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated' (1990:41). But, as she argues, '[b]y reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). In many ways, the study of popular culture and resistance should be seen as a response to the privileging of elite culture as worthy of studying and the ignorance of working class culture. Also, it was a response to Marxism which considered popular culture as escapist and as a repository of false consciousness. Cultural studies opposed these ideas and argued that popular culture was something worth studying and could even form the basis for social change. But to some extent, this point has now been made: the study of popular culture has been placed firmly on the agenda and cultural studies has almost become institutionalised as Johannes Fabian (1998:139) points out in his book on popular culture in Africa:

> As I look back on this project […] I conclude it is, or should be, both. It is a manifesto in that the conclusion can only be a plea for more attention to and better understanding of elements that, so far, seem to have been revealed mainly with the help of the concept of popular culture. It is an epitaph in that popular culture studies in Africa should probably be thought of as

> belonging to those self-liquidating disciplines, the need for which disappears to the extent that they are successful in accomplishing their work.

Similarly, Mbembe is concerned about what he calls 'the rediscovery of the subaltern subject and the stress of his/her inventiveness' which has 'taken the form of an endless invocation of the notions of "hegemony", "moral economy", "agency" and "resistance'" (2001:5). Mbembe has also been critical of the hydraulic models of domination and resistance that have long dominated historiographies within African Studies. Instead, he proposes a deconstruction of these oppositional models and draws attention to 'popular' rituals of power and subordination that seem to simultaneously ridicule and reinstate state power. Unlike Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a 'popular' site of the inversion of hierarchies through ridicule and parody, Mbembe's postcolonial subject enthusiastically participates in state power through its rituals of ratification. As an example, Mbembe mentions how during a political rally, Togolese poached the meaning of the party acronym RPT making it synonymous not with Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais (RPT) but subverting the acronym's meaning to 'the sound of a fart emitted by quivering buttocks which can only smell disgusting' (2001:6). So Mbembe argues that the relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled 'is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterised as convivial' (Mbembe 2001:104). This relationship then robs both the dominant and those dominated of their agency and makes them both impotent. Mbembe speaks of an 'intimacy of tyranny' which according to him inscribes 'the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme' (2001:110, 128).

While Mbembe does not explicitly claim to build up his theoretical framework around concepts of 'public sphere' and 'popular culture', both implicitly play an important role in his account of the post-colony. In his book, Mbembe shows how the rulers make attempts to claim public spaces through their extravagant state ceremonies which display the grandiosity of their power but at the same time, he demonstrates how the ruled manage to carve out a space for themselves, therefore constituting their own alternative popular publics next to official publics. Mbembe's work is also important because it does not uncritically celebrate agency but provides a more complex and nuanced account of power.

Conclusion

In this article, I have highlighted the problems and opportunities that the concepts of civil society, public sphere and popular culture offer when used in African Studies. First of all, the concept of civil society as policy prescription and Habermas' concept of the public sphere should both be

seen as highly normative and idealised notions which have often been used to demonstrate Africa's lack, i.e. the absence of a civil society or the presence of an inadequate public sphere tightly controlled by government. These notions have, therefore, not always contributed towards a richer and fuller understanding of associational life and publics in Africa. Hence, it may be necessary, as Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) have suggested, to determine the meaning of civil society and public sphere in the specific African context and to remove these concepts from their European baggage:

> […] to loosen the link between the word public and the history of civil society in Europe, and to agree that it be used to refer to a set of arenas that have emerged in a variety of historical conditions and that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life. Public in this usage ceases to have any necessary or predetermined relationship to formal politics, rational communicative action, print capitalism or the dynamics of the emergence of a literate bourgeoisie. Thus the term becomes emancipated from any specific Euro-American master narrative and indicates an arena of cultural contestation in which modernity can become a diversely appropriated experience.

A major problem with Habermas' public sphere is its prescription of rational-critical debate as a precondition for a 'good' public sphere. This assumes that there is somehow a clear definition of what this would involve and it presupposes that it is possible to move from a situation characterised by power and conflicting interests to a consensual sphere. In line with Foucault, I prefer to see the public sphere as spaces of conflict and contestation. The notion of popular culture has been useful in understanding how this process of contestation evolves. However, sometimes, accounts of popular cultures have ended up in uncritically celebrating agency and resistance. Mbembe, in this regard, has offered a more complex account of power that moves away from the dichotomy between domination and resistance which has characterised a lot of work in African Studies. While this article merely aimed to offer a preliminary evaluation of work on the public sphere in African Studies, it has made an attempt to outline some ways in which a more engaged dialogue between political scientists and cultural studies scholars could potentially contribute towards a fuller and richer understanding of publics in Africa.

Notes

1. See: http://www.dfid.gov.uk/funding/gtf-guidelines07.asp (last accessed: 15 September 2008).
2. See: http://www.dfid.gov.uk/funding civilsocietyguidelines08.asp (last accessed: 15 September 2008).

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The Public Sphere in 21st Century Africa: Broadening the Horizons of Democratisation

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Abstract

The public sphere, as the crucible for public opinion, is indispensable to modern democratic politics. This paper traces the seminal contributions of the German critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas to the elaboration of the concept. However, while Habermas' conception has had a profound impact, it has nevertheless been criticised on fundamental grounds. And contemporary globalisation and technological changes have also had important implications for our understanding of the concept. I seek to elaborate the development of the idea of the public sphere from Habermas to the era of internet globalisation. I also examine the specific ways the idea has found expression in post-colonial Africa, showing how the global intellectual trajectory shapes the applicability of the concept to specific African contexts. If the concept of the public sphere is to relate to African realities, it must be understood not as a single public – a la Habermas – or 'Two Publics' – a la Ekeh, but as a multiplicity of overlapping publics. I argue that we can fruitfully re-interpret contemporary democratisation in Africa against the backdrop of this understanding of the concept of the public sphere, taking full cognizance of the other criticisms of the concept.

Résumé

En tant qu'instrument essentiel pour l'opinion public, l'espace public est indispensable à la politique démocratique moderne. Cet article retrace la contribution importante du critique allemand de la théorie, Jurgen Habermas, dans l'élaboration du concept. Cependant, même si la conception de Habermas a eu un profond impact, elle n'a jamais été critiquée à la base. La mondialisation

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actuelle et les innovations technologiques ont, elles aussi, eu des conséquences importantes dans notre compréhension du concept. Cet article retrace le développement du concept de l'espace public du temps de Habermas jusqu'à la mondialisation d'Internet. Il examine les différentes expressions du concept en Afrique après les indépendances, montrant ainsi que la trajectoire intellectuelle globale détermine l'applicabilité du concept aux contextes spécifiques africains. Si le concept de l'espace public doit être lié aux réalités africaines, il ne devrait pas être compris comme un seul public – à la Habermas – ou 'Deux Publics' – à la Ekeh, mais plutôt comme une multiplicité de publics qui se chevauchent par endroit. L'article défend l'idée qu'on peut d'une façon productive interpréter la démocratisation actuelle en Afrique en se basant sur cette compréhension du concept de l'espace public tout en prenant en compte les autres critiques du concept.

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, Africa has been involved in a process of political liberalisation and re-democratisation. This process has been shaped by the entrance or re-entrance of previously marginalised groups into public life, interacting with each other and with those in positions of authority, thereby redefining politics through the generation of a 'contentious pluralism' (Guidy & Sawyer 2003). This period has also been characterised by an increasing emphasis on civil society organisations, with important implications for the constitution of public life and public policy. Yet, scholars and activists alike have not paid sufficient attention to the public sphere as the important background for both re-democratisation and civil society. In this paper, I look at the nature of the African public sphere as a significant factor in the politics of democratisation.

The German critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas, developed the concept of the public sphere as 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens… The public sphere [is] a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion … that principle of public information which… has made possible the democratic control of state activities' (Habermas 2006:73-4). Habermas' conception of the public sphere locates it outside the state and the market and conceives of it as an institutionalised platform from which citizens produce and circulate discourses with the potential to influence and control the activities of the state. The public sphere is, therefore, an avenue for the generation of political participation through talk, an important underpinning for democratic associations which complement the state apparatuses and the market institutions of modern capitalist society.

The public sphere is consequently indispensable to modern democratic politics. However, while Habermas' conception has had a profound impact, it has nevertheless been criticised as being 'not wholly satisfactory' (Fraser 1992). In the next section, I seek to elaborate the development of the idea of the public sphere from Habermas to the contemporary era of internet globalisation. I highlight the ways in which technological changes have affected our understanding of the public sphere. In section three, I examine the specific ways the idea has found expression in post-colonial Africa, showing how the global intellectual trajectory shapes the applicability of the concept to specific African contexts. Section four re-interprets contemporary democratisation in Africa against the backdrop of the concept of the public sphere while section five concludes the discussion, pointing out the importance of the public sphere to the deepening of African democratisation.

The Public Sphere: From Habermas to the Internet

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* published in German in 1962, Habermas lays out a historical-sociological analysis of the rise, transformation, and eventual fall of a specific form of the public sphere, the 'liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere' (Fraser 1992). It was in 18th Century Europe that the concepts of public sphere and public opinion arose through the development of the bourgeoisie. Before this period, the monarch's power was represented before the people through the arcane and bureaucratic practises of the absolutist state. The subject of this monarchical representation of 'public authority' was the person of the monarch. Supporting this monarchical 'representative publicity' were ordinary opinions – cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values – which persisted as the sedimentation of history (Habermas 2006:74). These opinions allowed the monopolisation of some interpretations of meaning by the absolutist state and the church. It was with the rise of capitalism and the increasing economic power of the bourgeoisie that the public sphere arose as an intermediate space between the absolutist state on the one hand, and the bourgeois 'private sphere' of the family and the economy on the other. It emerged as a space 'in which private individuals assembled to form a public body' (Habermas 2006:73). Through this emergent public sphere, 'public opinion' separated itself from 'ordinary opinion'.

Unlike ordinary opinion steeped in history and prejudice, public opinion, by definition, comes 'into existence only when a reasoning public is presupposed'(Habermas 2006:74). Firstly, through the discussion of literary works in coffee houses and salons, a literary public sphere emerged. This was followed by a political public sphere based on intellectual newspapers and critical journals. Furthermore, there was a corresponding change in the

nature of journalism as the publisher changed 'from a vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion' (Habermas 2006:76). Through the public sphere, these private citizens 'assembled into a public body' and transmitted 'the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order, ideally, to transform political into "rational" authority'(Habermas 2006:76). Through this principle of critical supervision, the public sphere transformed the nature of power and authority because it ruled out 'authority based on anything other than a good argument' (Bolton 2005). The public sphere, based on dialogue and rationality, is society's defence against the illegitimate use of power as the state is held accountable through critical publicity.

The public sphere, as conceived by Habermas is a conceptual rather than a physical entity. It transcends the coffee houses, the salons, and the newspapers through which it manifested itself. It is an abstract forum for dialogue. A sphere of communicative action through which ideas and identities are forged and consolidated, and public opinion is transmitted into political action. According to Habermas, to function effectively, the public sphere must meet some institutional criteria. Firstly, it must ideally be inclusive. It must never close itself off into a clique and access must be as universal as possible. Secondly, there must be a disregard for social status and hierarchies. All participants must be treated as if they are equals, even when they are obviously not. Thirdly, participants must have autonomy and must not be subject to any forms of coercion. Fourthly, the quality of participation must reflect a common commitment to rationality and logic. And finally, there must be no monopoly of interpretation by either the state or the church – in the African context we may add the Mosque and the shrine – and the domain of common concern is discursively established by the participants themselves, not imposed by any authority of whatever description.

According to Habermas, this bourgeois liberal public sphere started to collapse with the establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state and the rise of the modern welfare state. With the establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state, the vibrant press was increasingly 'relieved of the pressures of its convictions' and we begin to have the 'transformation from a journalism of conviction to one of commerce' (Habermas 2006:76; see also Hallin 1994). On the other hand, the rise of social democracy and the welfare state meant that the public sphere expanded beyond the bourgeoisie. The public body lost its social exclusivity, its coherence, and its relatively high standard of education. According to Habermas,

> Conflicts hitherto restricted to the private sphere now intruded into the public sphere. Group needs which can expect no satisfaction from a self-regulating market now tend towards a regulation by the state. The public

> sphere, which must now mediate these demands, becomes a field for the competition of interests, competitions which assume the form of violent conflict' (Habermas 2006:76).

The dialogic and rationalist character of the public sphere is lost due to the pressures of the commercialisation of journalism and the intrusion of non-bourgeois groups into the public sphere. As a consequence of these developments, the state and economic forces begin to re-colonise the public sphere and blunt its objectivity and effectiveness.

Habermas' conception, important as it is, has nevertheless been subject to a number of important criticisms. Bolton argues that Habermas is Eurocentric because he says little about imperialism and its implications for the public sphere, both in Europe and in the non-European societies subject to it. He agrees that Habermas was too preoccupied with the 'redemption of the project of modernity' in Germany in the wake of Nazism to cast his gaze beyond Europe (Bolton 2005:21). Other critics like Fraser point out that Habermas' conception includes 'a number of significant exclusions' (Fraser 1992:113) – women, the working classes, and racial and ethnic minorities. By modelling society on the basis of rationalistic 'individual decisions rather than focusing on community aggregates' (Bolton 2005:24), Habermas makes the white, male bourgeois individual privileged over all others. He failed to examine the 'nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres' which Fraser called 'counterpublics'. She argued that 'the emergence of a bourgeois public was never defined solely by the struggle against absolutism and traditional authority, but … addressed the problem of popular containment as well' (Fraser 1992:116). Furthermore, Fraser argues that the idealistic suspension of class and status hierarchies advocated by Habermas might itself be a strategy for distinction, since deliberation may mask domination through 'the transformation of I into we' by some, but not by others. The import of Fraser's criticism is that there was never a 'single' public sphere built on rationality, consensus, and accessibility as Habermas presupposes, but a 'multiplicity' of public spheres and counterpublics, built on conflict, contestation, and the containment of 'awkward' classes and groups and their preferred modes of cultural and political expression.

The rise of contemporary globalisation and the internet have also re-shaped our understanding of the public sphere. Opinions vary on the effect of the internet and media globalisation on the public sphere. Some, like Poster, argue that the internet has special qualities that are bound to affect the nature of the public sphere. It is a network of networks, ideally suited to building connections; it is based on digital electronics which unifies all symbolic forms into a single system of codes; it renders transmission instantaneous; and makes reproduction effortless. These characteristics of

costless reproduction, instantaneous dissemination, and radical decentralisation have profound political implications. The internet with its 'virtual communities', 'electronic cafes', bulletin boards, e-mail lists, user groups, and video conferencing is a challenge to Habermas' view of the public sphere as 'a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations.' The 'magic' of the internet is that it puts all contemporary cultural acts – speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting – 'in the hands of all participants' (Poster 1995). Arguing along this line, some have suggested that globalisation is leading to the gradual deterritorialisation of the public sphere. The national embeddedness of the public sphere can no longer be taken for granted as public opinion increasingly forms across national boundaries. The result is that public opinion is now transnational, if not global, but the result is not a single global public opinion, but a multi-layered structure with blurring and interconnections (Boeder 2000).

Others have challenged this positive view of the connections between globalisation, the communication revolution, and the public sphere. We recall that Habermas himself lamented the effects of the commercialisation of the media and the conversion of public opinion into publicity and public relations. He argued that '[t]he world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only'(see Boeder 2000). In a similar vein, Hallin decried the effect of the culture of journalistic professionalism on the public sphere: 'The culture of professionalism is largely hostile to politics, preferring technical and administrative expertise or cynical detachment to engagement in the public sphere' (Hallin 1994:6). Other analysts have argued that computer-mediated communication cannot guarantee some of the central attributes of communicative action: truthfulness, sincerity, rationality, and a verifiable identity. Instead, 'character' is replaced by 'image'. In general, the ubiquitous mass media 'have created their own version of the public sphere in the form of "popular audiences" … for which they produce meaning as a replacement for the discourse communities of the Enlightenment' (Boeder 2000). It has been suggested that the internet is a 'shallow substitute' for the public sphere, performing a cathartic role which allows 'the public to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation' (Boeder 2000).

The representative nature of the internet is questioned by those who assert that it 'is dominated by white, well off, English speaking, educated males, most of whom are USA citizens' (Boeder 2000). The disadvantages that women suffer in off-line real-life society are often carried over into the 'virtual communities' where women are generally underrepresented and are often subjected to harassment and abuse (Poster 1995). At a more empirical level, Dahlberg asserts that the internet is never free of governmental or corporate power. Many virtual communities are corporate owned, and have

the tendency to seek out like-minded others, thereby creating an electronic ghetto, rather than an open platform for rational and critical debate of all positions. Furthermore, some political platforms and *e*-Governance facilities allow governments and politicians to sell their positions directly to the public without debate – or challenge. Only in a few instances does the internet create the rational, critical, and open discourse necessary for the public sphere and democracy (Dahlberg 2001).

In his own contribution to the debate on the public sphere, McGuigan emphasises the need to look beyond Habermas' literary and political public spheres to include a cultural public sphere in which politics, personal and public, is transmitted through aesthetic and emotional modes of communication. Though this may sound contrary to Habermas' emphasis on rationality and appropriately sober comportment within the deliberative process, free from distracting sentiments, McGuigan argues that the cultural public sphere is both affective and cognitive and no representational form is entirely cognitive and rational (McGuigan 2005). Arguing that 'television soaps are the most reliable documents of our era' (p. 430), he suggests that mass obsession with celebrity scandals and such gossip actually mask serious cultural concerns and anxieties. Concern with celebrity lives, along with the avid consumption of soaps, music and films generate a world of knowing that is more emotional (about feeling) than cognitive (about knowing). Yet, they teach the audience 'a lesson, everyday'. This 'edutainment' or 'infotainment', constitute a significant part of public sphere:

> In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters – the 18th century literary public sphere – … It includes … mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. … The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspension of disbelief; for example, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and should not do. … Affective communications help people to think reflexively about their own … situations …(McGuigan 2005:435).

Evidently, the concept of the public sphere has gone through many re-definitions since Habermas' seminal work. However, both the Habermasian core of the concept and its many re-definitions have important implications for our understanding of contemporary African politics. For example, Fraser's multiple publics and counter publics resonate with Africa's multiple identities, while Africa's orality and musical traditions demand that we pay special attention to the cultural public sphere and the importance of 'infotainment'.

Africa and the Multiple Publics

How have these debates about the public sphere been reflected in African political and academic life? As an issue of practical political concern, the public sphere has been debated largely in Nigeria and post-apartheid South Africa, each highlighting the unique characteristics of its society. What the debates in both countries share in common, however, is a pluralistic view of the public sphere; most African societies have multiple and conflicting public spheres.

The discussion of the public sphere in Nigeria was largely concerned with the challenge of ethnic diversity and ethnicity (often referred to as 'tribalism') and the associated problems of nepotism and corruption. Peter Ekeh's influential contribution, 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement' was published in 1975, before the translation of Habermas into English in 1989. Ekeh, therefore, does not relate to the issues raised by Habermas, but harkens back to an earlier tradition in Western political philosophy, concerned with the distinctions between the public and private realms (Ekeh 1975). For Ekeh, the public realm is made up of the collective interests of the citizenry. He argues that colonialism is to Africa, what feudalism was to Europe, that is, the historical context for the advance to modernity. As Western Europe embraced modernity, she developed a public realm (collective interests) distinct from the private realm (personal interests), but both are held together by the same Christian beliefs. In Africa, however, modernity through colonialism led to a unique historical configuration which led to the emergence of a private realm, and *two* public realms, the primordial and the civic.

While the primordial public, based on the ethnic group, is the sector of moral obligations and nurturing, the civic public, based on the colonial state is seen as the zone of amoral conduct with undue emphasis on rights and the de-emphasis on duties. The Western educated African elite that emerged from the womb of colonialism are seen as the chief architects of this bifurcated public realm. Due to the psychological stresses of modernisation, the Western-educated African belongs to the civic public 'from which they gain materially but to which they give only grudgingly', and simultaneously to the primordial public 'from which they derive little or no material benefits but to which they are expected to give generously and do give materially' (Ekeh 1975:108). The result of these conflicting notions of citizenship and obligation is the promotion of 'tribalism', nepotism and corruption.

Ekeh's analysis is, of course, an over-simplification of reality. Contrary to his assertions, the Western educated African elite cannot be solely held responsible for the invention of 'tribalism'. Most constructivist

understandings of ethnicity in Africa acknowledge the roles of colonial administrators, missionaries, and merchants, along with a wide array of African agency, including clan elders, chiefs, and Westernised Africans. Furthermore, Ekeh's argument tends to reduce ethnic conflict or 'tribalism' to the conscious choice of the Westernised elites, thereby ignoring the reality of deep socio-political inequalities between ethnic groups, and the resulting ethnic hierarchies which pervaded colonial and post-colonial Africa, shaping peoples' life chances and making ethnic mobilisation an attractive proposition for many elites and non-elites alike. Similarly, we cannot ignore the active fanning of ethno-regional differences by colonial and settler regimes intent on maintaining control through 'divide-and-rule' strategies. More recently, Ekeh's pioneering effort has been used to study patterns of differentiation within African civil societies (Osaghae 2006). These civil societies have been accused of ethnic fragmentation and primordial attachments.

In South Africa, the discourse on the public sphere relates more explicitly to the Habermasian tradition. Here, the concern has been directed at the effects of racial inequality and new technologies on the democratisation process in post-apartheid South Africa. In canvassing the importance of 'a participating public' in South Africa's democratisation process, Parliament in Cape Town drew attention to the importance of the Habermersian notion of the public sphere. However, attention is also drawn to the fact that there are 'two South Africas', one well resourced and the other poor and marginalised. It was implied that this had implications for the South African public sphere(s) (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa: nd.). This theme of the inter-connections between the heritage of racial inequality, the public sphere, and democratisation has been taken up by a group of local academics (Zegeye & Harris 2003a, b). It is pointed out in their study that 61 per cent of the black population is poor, compared to only 1 percent of the white population; in the top income quintile are to be found 65 per cent of white households, 45 per cent of Indian, 17 per cent of Coloured, and only 10 per cent of African. It is in this context of racial economic hierarchy that the media has played an important part, not only as a conveyor of information, but also of identities and interests of the different social groups that constitute post-apartheid South African society.

As Fraser pointed out in her critique of Habermas, the public sphere is the site for the constitution of multiple identities. And as Hallin (1994 10) pointed out in his critique of Fraser, even societies characterised by significant inequalities can develop functioning public sphere(s); multiplicity does not necessarily negate a sense of common purpose. Identities – deriving from differential locations in history and the contemporary political economy – are an important part of post-apartheid South African society. They are

important 'for understanding the relationship between the personal and the social realms; the individual and the group; the cultural and the political, [and] the relations between social groups …(Zegeye & Harris 2003b:4)'. These processes have had differential effects on notions of citizenship and belonging. Available evidence suggest that while the middle classes of all races have become more conscious of their shared 'South African' nationality, 'class, ethnic, gender, generational, religious, neighbourhood and political identification all increased by significant proportions' between 1997 and 1999 especially among African and Coloured respondents (Zegeye & Harris 2003b:9). It would seem that the public spheres in post-apartheid South Africa are simultaneously generating an all embracing middle class 'South Africanism' as well as more particularistic and restrictive notions of citizenship among others classes and social groups.

The role of information technologies has also featured prominently in the South African discourse. Daniel Drache (2008) suggests that modern communication technologies have led to an unprecedented expansion in 'public spaces'. In previous times, communications technologies used to be highly centralised and aligned with the mechanisms of governance and public authority. Under globalisation, technologies of communication are increasingly decentralised and unhinged from public authorities. They have become networked and rooted in a complex culture of consumption. This 'democratisation of communication' is expected to affect the exercise of power as 'digital technology reallocates power and authority downwards from the elite few towards the many' (p. 7). In Africa, internet and mobile phone technologies are said to represent 'the closing of the last great intellectual divide' between Africa and the rest of the world.

Evidence from South Africa suggests that Drache's view is a gross exaggeration. Though the end of apartheid saw the explosion of print and electronic media and the access to this by hitherto marginalised groups, 'virtual South Africa' continues to reflect the divisions and inequalities of 'off line South Africa'. Though South Africa had 2.5 million of the 4 million internet users in Africa in 2001, 'the majority of South Africans do not have enough money, equipment and education to access the Internet' (Zegeye & Harris 2003b:13).

As I have shown above, in Africa the discussion of the public sphere has been coloured by the key concerns of activists, scholars, and politicians in particular countries. In Nigeria, it is a concern with the effects of ethnic diversity and 'tribalism'. In South Africa, it is a concern with the legacies of state sanctioned racism and contemporary racial inequalities. What has not featured with sufficient prominence and vigour in the Nigerian and South African discourses, however, is Habermas' central concern, that is, the

promotion of a deliberative democracy. I argue that the importance of the concept of the public sphere in contemporary Africa lies precisely in the opportunities it gives to transform electoral democracies, prone to authoritarian tendencies and instrumentalist elite capture, into deliberative democracies, oriented towards inclusive social dialogue and the recognition of common citizenship right.

Weberian Rationality and Deliberative Democracy

Since the 1980s, Africa has been in the grip of rationalistic movements of an economic or political nature. Structural adjustment – with or without a human face – was premised on the alleged rationalistic logic of the supremacy of market signals in economic management. Deliberation on economic policy with concerned communities was foreclosed by state elites and their supportive cast of experts from the World Bank and the IMF on the grounds of the TINA ideology which stipulated that 'There Is No Alternative' to the one-size-fits-all remedies that were being dished out under the Washington Consensus. Similarly, Good Governance programmes and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) were formulated along rationalistic and technicist lines which sought to maximise economic efficiency at the expense of genuine consultation and participation (cf. Whitfield 2005; Brown 2004). In short, despite democratisation, economic and political governance in Africa over the last two decades have been guided by a Weberian rationalistic logic which undermines social deliberation and consensus building and promotes the cult of allegedly objective 'neutral expertise'. This emphasis on 'rationalism' has tended to shut out the bulk of the citizenry from the determination of crucial public policies. Instead, policy determination is monopolised by a narrow band of local and foreign elites engaged in self-referential discourses. For example, in analysing the South African public sphere, it has been noted that:

> Well-funded non-governmental organizations, pressure groups and lobbyists are replacing the mass-based and grassroots organizations that arose to oppose the apartheid regime and serve as the voice of the citizenry. The new deliberative processes are increasingly restricted to policy professionals and already empowered … non-governmental, business, and professional groups as well as policy think tanks (Zegeye and Harris 2003b:17).

In Malawi, a similar process of elite capture of the formal public sphere, based on the English language and the written word, has made discussion of HIV/AIDS within the wider society virtually invisible to the official eye. Echoing McGuigan's notion of the cultural public sphere, Lwanda notes

that most rural and poor Malawians are engaged in a 'dominant musical and oral public sphere' which exists parallel to the elite dominated English medium public sphere. It is in this cultural public sphere that notions of HIV/AIDS and sexuality are created, contested, deposited, and withdrawn, outside the gaze of the elite-dominated public sphere (Lwanda 2003). In much of Africa, the rationalistic and elitist tilt to the mainstream public sphere has a tendency to stifle fuller societal discussions on important political and social policies. This brings to mind Fraser's assertion that the public sphere can be designed as 'an institutional mechanism for rationalising political domination by rendering states accountable to [only] (some of) the citizenry' (Fraser 1992:112).

Since the financial meltdown of 2008, the crisis of the global economy has woken the world to the limits of the rationalistic neo-liberal frenzy that had hitherto regulated the governance of the global economy. Consequently:

> It appears that not only the state, as an organizing entity, but the public domain …is ready to make a come-back…. The current crisis of neo-liberalism has put on the agenda the need to move beyond the Washington consensus and its belief in the frictionless operation of markets. What needs specification and development is the modern notion of the public as an instrument of governance (Drache 2001:37).

Habermas provides some of the insights we can use in this quest to overcome the rationalistic, elitist, and techno tilt in the governance of contemporary African countries.

Key to his theory is the notion of 'communicative action' through which actors seek to reach common understanding and coordinate action in society through reasoned argument and consensus building (Bolton 2005:1). Communicative action can be distinguished from three other forms of social action: strategic, normatively regulated, and dramaturgical. In strategic action, the social actor is guided by the need to realise a particular outcome, guided by maxims and calculations, often of a rationalistic nature. In normatively regulated action, actors are guided by the norms and values of the group they belong to and generally seek to fulfil expected patterns of behaviour and outcomes dictated by those values. In dramaturgical action, the actor seeks to evoke a certain image of himself within a target audience:

> He has privileged access to his own intentions, desires, etc. but can monitor or regulate public access to them. There is a 'presentation of self', not spontaneously but stylized, with a view to the audience (Bolton 2005:8).

What are crucial in these four forms of social action are the mechanisms for societal 'coordination'. In strategic action, like much of the policies under structural adjustment, PRSPs, and good governance, coordination is based on 'egocentric calculations of utility'. Action is oriented directly and

solely towards the successful achievement of the utilitarian objectives desired by so-called 'neutral experts'. In normatively regulated action, on the other hand, coordination is based on 'socially integrating agreement about values and norms instilled through cultural tradition and socialisation'. In dramaturgical action, though coordination is based on a consensus between 'players and their publics', the player dictates the game. It is only communicative action that seeks to achieve coordination through 'cooperative understanding' in which individual desires are sublimated under a collective goal; all the other forms of action are oriented towards achieving pre-determined objectives. It is only communicative action which bases social agreement on common convictions mutually agreed on through deliberation (Bolton 2005:8-10). Paraphrasing Steven White, Bolton argues that the central concern for Habermas is to show that:

> the historical process of increasing Weberian rationalisation is a threat to the full potential of human beings to bring reason to bear on the problems of their social and political existence (Bolton 2005:18).

It is also important to emphasise that 'Reason' for Habermas, transcends the narrower instrumentalist definition of the term by Weber.

> This is the procedural concept of reason, in which we call a dialogue 'rational' to the extent that it is unrestricted. Reason in this sense is not opposed to passion, but to tradition and authority, to coercion, and finally – because we are dealing here with communicative and not instrumentalist rationality – it is opposed to the strategic pursuit of ends that are not themselves subject to dialogue (Hallin 1994:9).

Over the past two decades, despite great strides in rolling back authoritarian military and racist regimes, Africa continues to suffer from deformations caused by the reliance on instrumentalist Weberian rationality in the determination of political and social policies. The promotion of deliberative democracy built on an understanding of multiple and competing public spheres becomes necessary against this background.

Conclusion: Deliberation and Mutual Recognition

Despite two decades of democratisation, the ethos and values of democratic conduct remain fragile in most African countries. Many cannot even conduct credible elections and some continue to wallow under authoritarian mindsets graphically described by the Nigerian Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, as 'I am right, and you are dead'. In some African parliaments, female legislators are routinely subjected to sexist taunts and parliamentary business – as in the Nigerian Senate – can sometimes degenerate to a 'raucous, rude and unruly' level (Ogan 2010). At best, the pluralist conception of democracy is

about the free contestation of ideas and interests and the societal ordering of these competing interests and ideas through peaceful democratic negotiations. My criticism of contemporary African democratisation is that it has not sufficiently engaged the ordinary citizenry in the sort of negotiations necessary to embed democratic values within the social fabric.

Habermas' concept of the public sphere suggests that we can also aspire to do better than just improve the capacity of our democratic structures to promote inclusive pluralist negotiations:

> The difference between dialogue and negotiation for Habermas is that in a dialogue interests themselves are open to criticism; and it is essential to his concept of the public sphere that it is a place where dialogue and not merely negotiation can take place (Hallin 1994:8).

The challenge therefore is to open key public policy questions: social welfare, civil rights, state security, religious freedom, public morality and ethical conduct, and cultural differences, to Habermasian dialogue without the irrationalism and contempt for standards which sometimes mars 'tabloid' journalism and some web-based discussion fora. In the 21st century, Africa must move beyond Weberian rationality and its associated concepts of good governance, 'participation', and stylised civil society. As Boeder (2000) argues, the quality of a society depends on its ability and capacity to communicate within itself in a reasoned way. Building consensus and institutions through all-embracing and sustained rational debate is the key to addressing the social, economic, and political problems that confront Africa. This is not to eschew social conflict which is inevitable, but to channel it away from the destructive, and often violent, paths of the 1980s and 1990s. Fraser is right when she asserts that multicultural and multi-ethnic societies need multiple publics. Africa's multiple publics are therefore a bonus. But the terms of engagement of these publics are very important. Inter-public relations will necessarily be both contestatory and consensus-building. However, the 'contestatory interaction of different publics' (Fraser 1992:128) must be guided by mutual recognition and not based on 'I am right, and you are dead'.

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Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South

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Abstract

The 'public sphere' is one of the key concepts of the social theory produced in the global North. But does the global South need this concept? Its theoretical and cultural presuppositions are entirely European. They are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories. If the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for, other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – the epistemologies of the South that adequately account for the realities of the global South. This paper is a meta-theoretical critique of the concept of the public sphere from the standpoint of the need for this epistemological diversity. It emphasises the need for intercultural translation, understood as a procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the diverse experiences of the world. Such a procedure does not endow any set of experiences with the statute either of exclusive totality or homogenous part. In the African context, this work of translation involves two moments. First, a deconstructive challenge which consists in identifying the Eurocentric remains inherited from colonialism. Secondly, a reconstructive challenge which consists in revitalising the historical and cultural possibilities of the African legacy, interrupted by colonialism and neocolonialism. In this twofold movement of social experiences relations of mutual intelligibility emerge which must not result in the cannibalisation of some by others.

Résumé

L'espace public est l'un des principaux concepts de la théorie sociale produite dans le Nord. Mais est-ce que le Sud a besoin de ce concept ? Ses présuppositions théoriques et culturelles qui sont entièrement européennes ne sont pas toujours valables universellement, même si elles prétendent être

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des théories générales. La diversité épistémologique dans le monde est une évidence. Par conséquent, d'autres théories doivent se baser sur d'autres épistémologies. Tel doit être le cas des épistémologies du Sud qui doivent adéquatement refléter les réalités du Sud. Cet article est donc une critique métathéorique du concept d'espace public vu sous l'angle de la nécessité d'une diversité épistémologique. Il met en relief la nécessité de la traduction interculturelle qui doit être comprise comme étant la procédure qui permet l'intelligibilité mutuelle des différentes expériences du monde. Une telle procédure n'investit un statut de totalité exclusive ou d'homogénéité à aucun ensemble d'expérience. Ce travail de traduction en Afrique implique deux moments. Premièrement, le défi de la déconstruction qui consiste à identifier les vestiges eurocentriques qui émanent du colonialisme. Deuxièmement, le défi de la reconstruction qui consiste à revitaliser les possibilités historiques et culturelles de l'héritage africain qui a été bouleversé par le colonialisme et le néocolonialisme. C'est à travers ce mouvement à deux temps des expériences sociales qu'une relation d'intelligibilité mutuelle va naître. Une relation qui ne devra pas résulter sur la cannibalisation de l'un par l'autre.

Introduction

The concept of public sphere is one of the key (and most widely debated) concepts of the most elaborate and monumental social theory produced in the second half of the twentieth century in the global North, the social theory of the world-renowned German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. It is not my purpose to engage here in a detailed analysis of the concept.[1] I rather intend to lay out the ground upon which the following question may be answered: Does the global South need the concept of public sphere?

Why this question? The concept of public sphere reflects, in a stylised way, the political practices of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It expresses the emergence of the bourgeois citizen as a political actor through practices and institutions (coffeehouses, salons, newspapers, clubs, etc.) that mediate between the private sphere of civil society (family and the economy) and state political authority. Accordingly, its theoretical and cultural presuppositions are entirely European: it is based on the individual bourgeois and life experience; it assumes the separation between the state and civil society; it sees the bourgeois citizen and his public sphere as external to the structure of power; it takes for granted its informal and equal inclusiveness (which, as Habermas himself later recognised, concealed flagrant exclusions, such as women, workers and non-proprietors in general); its dynamic component is the reasonable discussion and a culturally shared discourse (reasonable arguments and counter-arguments, recognised as such by the participants) through which a consensus is reached on matters of common concern; political action consists of political discussion, not political action and transformation. These presuppositions are today highly problematical, even in the global North.

What about the global South? Do other presuppositions present in the global South require other concepts? How much political reality is left out or made invisible by the concept of public sphere? On the other hand, is it not true that some of these presuppositions are also present in some other Eurocentric concepts with wide usage in the global South, such as democracy and human rights? Can the limitations of Eurocentric origin be superseded by theoretical and political reconstruction? At what cost? Assuming that the public sphere has become a hegemonic concept, is it possible to use it in a counter-hegemonic way?

There are, therefore, good reasons to ask: does the global South need the concept of public sphere? This question implies three other questions. If we answer in the affirmative, is the problem of the eventual inadequacy of the concept vis-à-vis the realities prevailing in the global South to be solved by adjectivising or qualifying the concept? If the answer is negative, which epistemological procedures should be undertaken to allow for the development of other concepts that might be both more adequate to the realities of the global South and helpful in designing post-imperialistic, truly decolonised relationships between the global North and the global South? More generally, which are the main issues concerning the relationship between theory and practice in our time?

These questions suggest that the social theories produced in the global North are not necessarily universally valid, even when they purport to be general theories. Moreover, they suggest that a hermeneutics of suspicion is recommended *vis-à-vis* such theories, if the epistemological diversity of the world is to be accounted for. At this point, to account for such diversity involves the recognition that the theories produced in the global North are best equipped to account for the social, political and cultural realities of the global North and that in order adequately to account for the realities of the global South other theories must be developed and anchored in other epistemologies – the epistemologies of the South.[2]

The West, or global North, claims the right to the dominant view of the world.[3] But, on the other hand, the global South is entitled to have its own view of the world (and of the global North). It should come as no surprise that between these two views the differences are so vast that they seem to refer to different worlds. Herein lies the distance this article argues for *vis-à-vis* Eurocentric or West-centric social theories, including critical social theories. Such distance opens up the epistemological and theoretical ground upon which new analytical possibilities may develop as more attuned to the political needs of radical social transformation, that is to say, to a social transformation that puts an end to the unequal divide between the global North and the global South.

Keeping a Distance vis-à-vis Western Eurocentric Theoretical Tradition

Keeping distance does not mean dumping all this rich tradition into the dustbin of history, let alone ignoring the historical possibilities for social emancipation of Western modernity. It means assuming our time as a time displaying an unprecedented, transitional feature which we may formulate in the following way: we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions. The modern problems of equality, liberty and fraternity are still with us. However, the modern solutions proposed by liberalism as well as Marxism no longer work, even if pushed to its possible maximum consciousness (to use Lucien Goldmann's phrase),[4] as is the case of Habermas' magisterial intellectual reconstruction of Western modernity.[5] The limits of such a reconstruction are inscribed in the dominant version of modernity from which Habermas takes off, and which is, actually, a second modernity developed from the first one, the Iberian modernity of the Coimbra scholars in the sixteenth century[6] What characterises the second modernity and renders it predominant is the abyssal line it traces between metropolitan societies (Europe) and colonial societies.[7] This abyssal line traverses Habermas's thinking in its entirety and is therefore also relevant for the concept of public sphere. His extraordinary lucidity allows him to see it but not to overcome it. His theory of communicative action, as a new model of discursive rationality, is well known.[8] According to Habermas, this theory constitutes a *telos* of development for all humanity and that with it, it is possible to refuse both relativism and eclecticism. However, once asked if his theory, particularly his critical theory of advanced capitalism, could be useful to the progressive forces of the Third World, and if such forces could be useful to the struggles of democratic socialism in developed countries, Habermas (1984) begged not to answer: 'I am inclined to reply "no" in both cases. I am aware that mine is a limited and Eurocentric vision. I would rather not answer'.[9] Such response implies that Habermas' communicative rationality, in spite of its resounding universality, actually excludes four fifths of the world population. This exclusion is declared in the name of inclusion/ exclusion criteria whose legitimacy resides in their supposed universality. In this way, exclusion may be declared simultaneously with extreme honesty ('I am aware that mine is a limited and Eurocentric vision') and extreme blindness vis-à-vis its non-sustainability (or, to be fair, the blindness is not total, considering Habermas' strategic way out ('I would rather not answer'). Thus, Habermas' universalism turns out to be a benevolent but imperialist universalism, for it fully controls decisions concerning its own limitations, imposing on itself, with no other limits, what it includes and excludes.[10]

Beyond the dominant ones, other versions of modernity were marginalised for questioning the triumphalist certainties of the Christian faith and modern science and law, which both produced the abyssal line and rendered it invisible. I have in mind, for instance, Nicholas of Cusa and Pascal, who (together with other, equally forgotten thinkers) keep alive still today the possibility of a non-occidentalist West.[11] Keeping distance vis-à-vis the dominant versions of Western modernity thus entails getting closer to subaltern, silenced, marginalised versions of modernity and rationality, both Western and non-Western.

Keeping distance means, therefore, placing oneself simultaneously inside and outside what one critiques, and thus making possible what I call the doubly transgressive sociology of absences and emergences. This 'transgressive sociology' is actually an epistemological demarche consisting in opposing the dominant epistemologies of the global North with an epistemology of the South in the sense specified below. In the following sections, I mention two good reasons to keep a distance from Eurocentric critical theory: the loss of critical nouns and the phantasmal relationship between theory and action.

The Loss of Critical Nouns

There was a time when critical theory 'owned' an ample set of nouns to distinguish itself from conventional, bourgeois theories. Among them, socialism, communism, dependency, class struggle, alienation, participation, popular front, and so on and so forth. For the last 30 years, the Eurocentric tradition has been identified by the adjectives with which it qualifies the proper nouns of conventional theories. Thus, for instance, if conventional theory speaks of development, critical theory refers to alternative, democratic or sustainable development; if conventional theory speaks of democracy, critical theory propounds radical, participative or deliberative democracy; the same is true of cosmopolitism, which is then qualified as subaltern, of opposition or insurgent, or rooted; the same regarding human rights, which turn out to be radical, collective, intercultural. These changes, however, must be taken with caution.

Hegemonic (substantive) concepts are not, on the pragmatic level, the unalienable property of conventional or liberal thinking. One of the dimensions of the present context is precisely the ability of social movements to use hegemonic tools in a counter-hegemonic way and with counter-hegemonic ends in view.[12] The truth is that nouns continue to establish the intellectual and political horizon, defining not only what is sayable, credible, legitimate or realistic, but also, by implication, what is unsayable, incredible or unrealistic. That is to say, by resorting to adjectives, theory assumes it can

creatively take advantage of nouns, while agreeing, at the same time, to limit its debates and proposals to what is possible within a horizon of possibilities which is originally not its own. Critical theory, therefore, takes on a derivative character which allows it to engage in debate but not to discuss the terms of the debate, let alone explain why it opts for one kind of debate and not another. The efficacy of the counter-hegemonic use of hegemonic concepts or tools is defined by the consciousness of the limits of such use.

Such limits are now more visible as social struggles aim to resemanticise old concepts, while, at the same time, introducing new concepts without precedent in Eurocentric theory, if for nothing else, because they express themselves in languages other than the colonial ones in which it was first constructed. Being particularly evident in Latin America through the recent protagonism of the indigenous peoples' struggles, this also occurs in other continents. It does not seem to me, therefore, that the 'problem' of bringing the concept of the public sphere to bear on the political concerns of non-Eurocentric conceptions of social emancipation might be solved by a new set of adjectives, be they subaltern, plebeian, oppositional, or counter-insurgent public sphere.

The Phantasmal Relation between Theory and Practice

A second reason to keep a distance vis-à-vis Eurocentric critical tradition concerns the huge discrepancy between what the theory anticipates and the transformative practices going on in the world. For the last 30 years the most progressive struggles featured social groups (indigenous, peasant, women, afro-descendents, miners, unemployed) whose role in history was not foreseen by Eurocentric critical theory. They often organised themselves in ways other than according to the party or unions, as allowed by the theory (social movements, grassroots communities, pickets, self-government, popular economic organisations). They do not dwell in urban, industrial centres but rather in far away Andean heights, in Amazonic planes, by the River Narmada in India, or in the African hinterland or urban suburbs. They often speak their struggles in their national languages rather than in any of the colonial languages in which critical theory was written. When their claims and aspirations are translated into colonial languages, the usual terms of socialism, human rights, democracy and development give way to dignity, respect, territory, self-government, good life, mother earth.

This discrepancy between theory and practice was highly visible in the World Social Forum (WSF) which took place for the first time in Porto Alegre in 2001. The WSF has shown that the gap between the practices of the left and the classical theories was wider than ever. The WSF is not an isolated phenomenon, as proven by the political experiences of Latin America,

where the WSF emerged. Just think of the Zapatist movement in Chiapas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional/EZLN); the Argentine *piqueteros* and the movement of the landless in Brazil (MST); the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador; the Frente Amplio in Uruguay; the many victories of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela; the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay and José Mujica in Uruguay; the continental struggle against ALCA;[13] the project of alternative regional integration championed by Hugo Chávez (ALBA).[14] All these are political practices that cannot but be acknowledged as emancipatory, although they have not been foreseen by the great theoretical tradition of the Eurocentric left and may actually contradict it. As an international event and meeting point of so many practices of resistance and alternative projects, the World Social Forum has given a new dimension to this mutual blindness (of theory vis-à-vis practice, and of practice vis-à-vis theory), while creating the conditions for a broader and deeper reflection on this problem.

The blindness of theory entails the invisibility of the practice, and hence its sub-theorisation, while the blindness of practice entails the irrelevancy of the theory. The blindness of the theory may be observed in the way in which the conventional left parties, and their intellectuals, refused at first to pay attention to the WSF, or minimised its relevance. The blindness of the practice, in turn, manifests itself in the contempt of the great majority of the WSF activists for the rich theoretical tradition of the Eurocentric left and their utter scorn regarding its renovation. This mutual mismatch brings about, in practice, an extreme oscillation between revolutionary, or pseudo-revolutionary, spontaneity and an innocuous, self-censored action; as well as, in theory, an equally extreme oscillation between a post factum, reconstructive concern and an arrogant indifference about what is not included in such reconstruction.

Under these conditions, the relation between theory and practice assumes strange characteristics. On the one hand, theory is no longer at the service of the future practices it potentially contains, and serves, rather, to legitimise (or not) the past practices that have emerged in spite of itself. Theory stops being orientation to become ratification of the successes obtained by omission or confirmation of foreseen failures. On the other hand, practice justifies itself by resorting to a theoretical potpourri focused on the topical needs of the moment, made up of heterogeneous concepts and languages which, from the point of view of theory, are no more than opportunist rationalisations or rhetorical exercises. In a nutshell, the phantasmal relation between theory and practice can be formulated in this way: from the point of view of theory, theoretical bricolage never qualifies as theory; from the point of view of practice, a posteriori theorisation is mere parasitism.

The causes of this phantasmal relation between theory and practice are multiple, but the most important one is that, while Eurocentric critical theory was constructed in several European countries (Germany, England, France, Russia, and Italy) in order to influence the progressive struggles in that part of the world, in recent times, the most innovative and transformative struggles have been occurring in the South in the context of very distinct socio-politico-cultural realities. It goes without saying that the phantasmal distance between theory and practice is not merely the result of context differences. It is a far more epistemological, if not ontological distance. Way beyond context, the movements in different continents construct their struggles on the basis of ancestral, popular and spiritual knowledge that has always been alien to Eurocentric critical theory. Moreover, their ontological conceptions of being and living are quite distinct from Western individualism. Human beings are communities of beings rather than individuals; in their communities, the ancestors are present, as well as animals and mother earth. We are confronted with non-Western world visions which call for intercultural translation before they can be understood and appreciated.

In his brilliant survey of the progressive history of the Latin American continent and, especially, the various subversive and emancipatory 'conceptions of the world' that have dominated Bolivia for the past few years, Alvaro García Linera eloquently explains how the 'modernist and teleological narrative' of history at a certain point became a theoretical blindness and an epistemological blockage vis-à-vis the new emancipatory movements. Here is García Linera:

> This modernist and teleological narrative of history, largely adopted from manuals of economics and philosophy, will create a cognitive blockage and an epistemological impossibility concerning two realities that will be the starting point of another emancipatory project which in time will overcome Marxist ideology itself. I mean the nation's ethnic and peasant themes (2009:482).

The loss of critical nouns, together with the phantasmal relation between Eurocentric critical theory and the transformative struggles in the world, not only recommends some distance vis-à-vis previous critical thinking; more than that, they demand thinking the unthinkable, that is to say, adopting surprise as a constitutive act of the theoretical work. Now, since, by definition, avant-garde theories are not taken by surprise, I believe that what we need in the present context of social and political change is not avant-garde, but rather rearguard theories. I mean theoretical work that goes hand in hand with the transformative work of the social movements, putting it in question, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, and symbolically enlarging its dimension by means of articulations, translations,

and alliances with other movements. It calls for artisanal rather than architectural work, work of committed witnessing rather than clairvoyant leadership, accessing what is new for some and very old for other people.

In light of the preceding discussion, I propose a debate on whether the concept of public sphere is part of the solution or part of the problem when we face the phantasmal relation between theory and practice, that is, whether the concept creates more transparency between theory and practice or whether, on the contrary, it reinforces the phantasmal relation. I dare to think that the latter is the case. If so, the task ahead consists in laying out the epistemological ground for the emergence of new theoretical possibilities.

The Construction of an Epistemology of the South

By epistemology of the South I mean the retrieval of new processes of production and valorisation of valid knowledges, whether scientific or non-scientific, and of new relations among different types of knowledge on the basis of the practices of the classes and social groups that have suffered, in a systematic way, the oppression and discrimination caused by capitalism and colonialism. The global South is thus not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of these populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is here rather a metaphor of the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well of the resistance to overcome or minimise such suffering. It is, therefore, an anticapitalist, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the global North,[15] in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia and racism.

The two premises of an epistemology of the South are as follows.[16] First, the understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world. This means that the progressive change of the world may also occur in ways not foreseen by Western thinking, including critical Western thinking (Marxism not excluded). Second, the diversity of the world is infinite. It is a diversity that encompasses very distinct modes of being, thinking and feeling, ways of conceiving of time and the relation among human beings and between humans and non-humans, ways of facing the past and the future and of collectively organising life, the production of goods and services, as well as leisure. This immensity of alternatives of life, conviviality and interaction with the world is largely wasted because the theories and concepts developed in the global North and employed in the entire academic world do not identify such alternatives. When they do, they do not valorise them as being valid contributions towards constructing a better society. To my mind,

therefore, we do not need alternatives; we need rather an alternative thinking of alternatives. The construction of epistemologies of the South must be built by four steps: sociology of absences, sociology of emergences, ecology of knowledges, intercultural translation.

Sociology of Absences

By sociology of absences I mean research that aims to show that what does not exist is actually actively produced as non-existent, that is to say, as an unbelievable alternative to what exists. Its empirical object is impossible from the point of view of conventional social sciences. Impossible objects must be turned into possible objects, absent objects into present objects. Non-existence is produced whenever a certain entity is discredited and considered invisible, non-intelligible or discardable. Thus there is no sole, rather several ways to produce absences. What is common to them is the same monocultural rationality. I distinguish five logics behind four modes of production of absence or non-existence: ignorant, backward, inferior, local or particular, and unproductive or sterile.[17]

The first logic derives from the 'monoculture of knowledge' and 'rigour of knowledge'. It is the most powerful mode of production of non-existence. It consists in turning modern science and high culture into the sole criteria of truth and aesthetic quality, respectively. The complicity that unites the 'two cultures' resides in the fact that both claim to be, each in its own field, exclusive canons of production of knowledge or artistic creation. All that is not recognised or legitimised by the canon is declared non-existent. Non-existence appears in this case in the form of ignorance or lack of culture.

The second logic resides in the 'monoculture of linear time', the idea that history has a unique and well known meaning and direction. This meaning and direction have been formulated in different ways in the last two hundred years: progress, revolution, modernisation, development, and globalisation. Common to all these formulations is the idea that time is linear and that at the cutting edge of time are to be found the core countries of the world system and, along with them, the dominant knowledges, institutions and forms of sociability. This logic produces non-existence by describing as backward whatever is asymmetrical vis-à-vis whatever is declared forward. It is according to this logic that Western modernity produces the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous, and that the idea of simultaneity conceals the asymmetries of the historical times that converge into it. The encounter between the African peasant and the officer of the World Bank in his field trip illustrates this condition. They meet simultaneously but are not considered contemporaneous. In this case, non-existence assumes the form of residuum, which in turn has assumed many designations for the past 200

years, the first being the primitive, closely followed by the traditional, the premodern, the simple, the obsolete, the underdeveloped.

The third logic is the logic of social classification, based on the monoculture of 'naturalisation of differences'. It consists in distributing populations according to categories that naturalise hierarchies. Racial and sexual classifications are the most salient manifestations of this logic. Contrary to what happens in the relation between capital and labour, social classification is based on attributes that negate the intentionality of social hierarchy. The relation of domination is the consequence, rather than the cause, of this hierarchy, and it may even be considered as an obligation of whoever is classified as superior (for example, the white man's burden in his civilising mission). Although the two forms of classification (race and sex) are decisive for the relation between capital and labour to stabilise and spread globally, racial classification was the one most deeply reconstructed by capitalism, as Wallerstein and Balibar (1991) have shown, and, even more acutely, Césaire (1955), Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2000), Dussel (2001), Maldonado-Torres (2004) and Grosfoguel (2007).[18] According to this logic, non-existence is produced as a form of inferiority, insuperable inferiority because natural. The inferior ones, because insuperably inferior, cannot be a credible alternative to the superior ones.

The fourth logic of production of non-existence is the 'logic of the dominant scale'. According to this logic, the scale adopted as primordial determines the irrelevance of all other possible scales. In Western modernity, the dominant scale appears under two different forms: the universal and the global. Universalism is the scale of the entities or realities that prevail regardless of specific contexts. For that reason, they take precedence over all other realities that depend on contexts and are therefore considered particular or vernacular. Globalisation is the scale that in the last 20 years acquired unprecedented relevance in various social fields. It is the scale that grants privileges to entities or realities that widen their scope to the whole globe, thus earning the prerogative to designate rival entities as local. According to this logic, non-existence is produced under the form of the particular and the local. The entities or realities defined as particular or local are captured in scales that render them incapable of being credible alternatives to what exists globally and universally.

Finally, the fifth logic of non-existence is the 'logic of productivity'. It resides in the monoculture of the criteria of capitalist productivity. According to this logic, economic growth is an unquestionable rational objective. As such, the criterion of productivity that best serves this objective is unquestionable as well. This criterion applies both to nature and to human labour. Productive nature is nature at its maximum fertility in a given

production cycle, whereas productive labour is labour that maximises generating profit likewise in a given production cycle. According to this logic, non-existence is produced in the form of non-productiveness. Applied to nature, non-productiveness is sterility; applied to labour, sloth or professional disqualification.

There are thus five principal social forms of non-existence produced by metonymic reason: the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the non-productive. They are social forms of non-existence because the realities to which they give shape are present only as obstacles vis-à-vis the realities deemed relevant, be they scientific, advanced, superior, global or productive realities. They are, therefore, disqualified parts of homogeneous totalities which, as such, merely confirm what exists and precisely as it exists. They are what exists under irretrievably disqualified forms of existing.

Sociology of Emergences

The sociology of emergences consists in replacing the emptiness of the future according to linear time (an emptiness that may be all or nothing) by a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one time, and constructed in the present by means of activities of care.

To deal with emergences implies speculativeness, and thus requires some philosophical elaboration. The profound meaning of emergences can be grasped in many different cultural and philosophical traditions. As regards Western philosophy, emergences are a marginal topic, best dealt with by Ernst Bloch**.** The concept that rules the sociology of emergences is the concept of Not Yet (*Noch Nicht*) advanced by Ernst Bloch (1995). Bloch takes issue with the fact that Western philosophy was dominated by the concepts of All (*Alles*) and Nothing (*Nichts*), in which everything seems to be contained in latency, but from whence nothing new can emerge. Western philosophy is, therefore, a static philosophy. For Bloch, the possible is the most uncertain and the most ignored concept in Western philosophy (1995:241). Yet, only the possible permits to reveal the inexhaustible wealth of the world. Besides All and Nothing, Bloch introduces two new concepts: Not (*Nicht*) and Not Yet (*Noch Nicht*). The Not is the lack of something and the expression of the will to surmount that lack. The Not is thus distinguished from the Nothing (1995:306). To say No is to say yes to something different. The Not Yet is the more complex category because it expresses what exists as mere tendency, a movement that is latent in the very process of manifesting itself. The Not Yet is the way in which the future is inscribed in the present. It is not an indeterminate or infinite future, but rather a concrete possibility and a capacity that neither exists in a vacuum nor is completely predetermined. Indeed, they actively re-determine all they touch, thus questioning the

determinations that exist at a given moment. Subjectively, the Not Yet is anticipatory consciousness, a form of consciousness that, although extremely important in people's lives, was completely neglected by Freud (Bloch 1995:286-315). Objectively, the Not Yet is, on the one hand, capacity (potency) and, on the other, possibility (potentiality). Possibility has a dimension of darkness as it originates in the lived moment, which is never fully visible to itself, as well as a component of uncertainty that derives from a double want: 1) the fact that the conditions that render possibility concrete are only partially known; 2) the fact that the conditions only exist partially. For Bloch, it is crucial to distinguish between these two wants: it is possible to know relatively well conditions that exist only very partially, and vice-versa.

The Not Yet inscribes in the present a possibility that is uncertain, but never neutral; it could be the possibility of utopia or salvation (*heil*) or the possibility of catastrophe or damnation (*unheil*). Such uncertainty brings an element of chance, or danger, to every change. This uncertainty is what, to my mind, expands the present, while at the same time contracting the future and rendering it the object of care. At every moment, there is a limited horizon of possibilities, and that is why it is important not to waste the unique opportunity of a specific change offered by the present: *carpe diem* (seize the day). In accord with Marxism, which he in any case interpreted in a very creative way, Bloch thinks that the succession of horizons leads or tends toward a final state. I believe, however, that not agreeing with Bloch in this regard is not relevant. Bloch's emphasis stresses the critique of the mechanical conception of matter, on the one hand, and the affirmation of our capacity to think and act productively upon the world, on the other. Considering the three modal categories of existence – reality, necessity, and possibility (Bloch 1995:244-245) – lazy reason focused on the first two and neglected the third one entirely.

According to Bloch, Hegel is mainly responsible for the fact that the possible has been neglected by philosophy. According to Hegel, because the possible is contained in the real, either it does not exist or is not different from what exists. In any case, it need not be thought of. Reality and necessity have no need of possibility to account for the present or future. Modern science was the privileged vehicle of this conception. For this reason, Bloch invites us to focus on the modal category that has been most neglected by modern science: possibility. To be human is to have a lot ahead of you (1995:246). Possibility is the world's engine. Its moments are: 'want' (the manifestation of something lacking), 'tendency' (process and meaning), and 'latency' (what goes ahead in the process). Want is the realm of the Not, tendency the realm of the Not Yet, and latency the realm of the Nothing and the All, for latency can end up either in frustration or hope.

The sociology of emergences is the inquiry into the alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities. Whereas the sociology of absences amplifies the present by adding to the existing reality what was subtracted from it by metonymic reason, the sociology of emergences enlarges the present by adding to the existing reality the possibilities and future expectations it contains. In the latter case, the enlargement of the present implies the contraction of the future inasmuch as the Not Yet, far from being an empty and infinite future, is a concrete future, forever uncertain and in danger. As Bloch says, by every hope, there is always a coffin (1995:311). Caring for the future is imperative because it is impossible to armour hope against frustration, the advent against nihilism, redemption against disaster. In a word, it is impossible to have hope without the coffin.

The sociology of emergences consists in undertaking a symbolic enlargement of knowledges, practices and agents in order to identify therein the tendencies of the future (the Not Yet) upon which it is possible to intervene so as to maximise the probability of hope vis-à-vis the probability of frustration. Such symbolic enlargement is actually a form of sociological imagination with a double aim: on the one hand, to know better the conditions of the possibility of hope; on the other, to define principles of action to promote the fulfillment of those conditions.

The sociology of emergences acts both on possibilities (potentiality) and on capacities (potency). The Not Yet has meaning (as possibility), but no direction, for it can end either in hope or disaster. Therefore, the sociology of emergences replaces the idea of determination by the idea of care. The axiology of progress is thus replaced by the axiology of care. Whereas in the sociology of absences the axiology of care is exerted vis-à-vis available alternatives, in the sociology of emergences the axiology of care is exerted vis-à-vis possible alternatives. Because of this ethical dimension, neither the sociology of absences nor the sociology of emergences are conventional sociologies. But they are not conventional for another reason: their objectivity depends upon the quality of their subjective dimension. The subjective element of the sociology of absences is cosmopolitan consciousness and non-conformism before the waste of experience. The subjective element of the sociology of emergences is anticipatory consciousness and non-conformism before a want whose fulfillment is within the horizon of possibilities. As Bloch says, the fundamental concepts are not reachable without a theory of the emotions (1995:306). The Not, the Nothing, and the All shed light on such basic emotions as hunger or want, despair or annihilation, trust or redemption. One way or another, these emotions are present in the non-conformism that moves both the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences.

Ecology of Knowledges

The third core idea of the epistemology of the South is the ecology of knowledges.[19] The ecology of knowledges is founded on the idea that there is no ignorance or knowledge in general; every kind of ignorance ignores a certain kind of knowledge and every kind of knowledge triumphs over a particular kind of ignorance.[20] Learning some kinds of knowledges may imply forgetting others and ultimately ignoring them. In other words, concerning the ecology of knowledges, ignorance is not necessarily the original condition or starting point; it may well be the point of arrival. That is why throughout every stage of the ecology of knowledges it is crucial to ask if what is being learnt is valuable, or should be forgotten or not learnt. Ignorance is merely a discredited form of being and making when what has been learnt is more valuable than what is being forgotten. The utopia of inter-knowledge is learning other knowledges without forgetting one's own. Such is the idea of prudence underlying the ecology of knowledges.

The ecology of knowledges starts with the assumption that all practices of relations among human beings, as well as between human beings and nature, imply more than one form of knowledge, hence also of ignorance. Epistemologically, modern capitalist society is characterised by the fact that it favours practices in which scientific knowledge prevails. This privileged 'status' granted to scientific practices means that their interventions in human and natural reality are also privileged. Any crisis or catastrophe resulting from such practices is socially acceptable and counted as inevitable social cost that can be overcome by new scientific practices.

Since scientific knowledge is not socially distributed with proper proportion, the interventions in the world it favours tend to concern social groups with access to scientific knowledge. Social injustice is grounded in cognitive injustice. However, the struggle for cognitive justice will not be successful if it depends only on the idea of a more balanced distribution of scientific knowledge. Besides the fact that a balanced distribution is impossible under the conditions of global capitalism, this kind of knowledge has intrinsic limits regarding the kinds of possible intervention in the real world. Such limits are the result of scientific ignorance and inability to recognise alternative forms of knowledge and engage with them in terms of equality. Under the ecology of knowledges, granting credibility to non-scientific knowledge does not imply discrediting scientific knowledge. What it does imply is using it in a counter-hegemonic way. This consists, on the one hand, in exploring alternative scientific practices made visible through plural epistemologies of scientific practices[21] and, on the other, in promoting interdependence between scientific and non-scientific knowledges.

The principle of the incomplete nature of all kinds of knowledge is the condition of the possibility of epistemological dialogue and debate among them all. What every kind of knowledge brings to such dialogue is the way in which it manages a certain practice to overcome a certain kind of ignorance. The confrontation and dialogue among knowledges are confrontation and dialogue among difference processes through which practices that are ignorant in different ways turn into practices of knowledge in different ways. All kinds of knowledge have internal and external limits. The internal limits are restrictions concerning interventions in the real world. The external limits result from the recognition of alternative interventions made possible by other forms of knowledge. The hegemonic forms of knowledge only understand the internal limits. The counter-hegemonic usage of modern science constitutes a parallel exploration of both internal and external limits. Hence, the counter-hegemonic usage of science cannot be restricted to science alone; it only makes sense in an ecology of knowledges.

Intercultural Translation

The fourth core idea of an epistemology of the South is intercultural translation, understood as a procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible. Such a procedure does not endow any set of experiences with the statute either of exclusive totality or homogenous part. At different moments of the work of translation, the experiences of the world are treated either as totalities or as parts, as well as realities that do not exhaust themselves in those totalities or parts. For instance, seeing the subaltern both inside and outside the relation of subalternity.

According to Banuri (1990), what most affected the South negatively since the beginning of colonialism was to have concentrated all its energies in adapting and resisting the impositions of the North.[22] Having in mind the same kind of concern, Serequeberham (1991:22) identifies the two challenges facing African philosophy today. First, a deconstructive challenge which consists in identifying the Eurocentric remains inherited from colonialism and present in the most diverse sectors of collective life, from education to politics, from law to culture. Second, a reconstructive challenge which consists in revitalising the historical and cultural possibilities of the African legacy, interrupted by colonialism and neo-colonialism. The work of translation aims to capture these two moments: the hegemonic relation among the experiences and what in the latter (especially the experiences and resistance of the victims) remains beyond the said relation. In this twofold movement of social experiences relations of mutual intelligibility emerge which must not result in the 'cannibalisation' of some by others.

The work of translation concerns both knowledges and practices (and their agents). The 'translation of knowledges' assumes the form of a 'diatopical hermeneutics'. This kind of work is what makes the ecology of knowledges possible. 'Diatopical hermeneutics' consists in interpreting two or more cultures, aiming to identify isomorphic concerns among them and the different answers they provide. I have proposed an exercise in diatopical hermeneutics apropos the isomorphic preoccupation regarding human dignity, bringing together the Western concept of human rights, the Islamic concept of *umma* and the Hindu concept of *dharma* (Santos 1995:333-347; 2002:39-60).[23] Two other exercises of diatopical hermeneutics strike me as important. The first focuses on the concern for productive life as it is expressed in the modern capitalist conceptions of development and in Gandhi's conception of *swadeshi*,[24] or the indigenous peoples' conception of *Sumak Kawsay.* The capitalist conceptions of development have been reproduced by conventional economics. They are based on the idea of infinite growth resulting from gradually subjecting practices and knowledges to the logic of the market. *Swadeshi* and *Sumak Kawsay*, in turn, are based on the idea of sustainability and reciprocity.

The second exercise of diatopical hermeneutics consists in translating among various conceptions of wisdom and different visions of the world and the cosmos. It takes place, for example, between Western philosophy and the African concept of sagacity.[25] The latter underlies the actions of many African movements and organisations.[26] It resides in a critical reflection on the world that has as its protagonists what Odera Oruka calls *sages*, be they poets, traditional healers, storytellers, musicians, or traditional authorities. According to Odera Oruka, sage philosophy

> (…) consists of the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community and is a way of thinking and explaining the world that fluctuates between popular wisdom (well known communal maxims, aphorisms and general commonsense truths) and didactic wisdom, an expounded wisdom and a rational thought of some given individuals within a community. While popular wisdom is often conformist, didactic wisdom is at times critical of the communal set-up and the popular wisdom. Thoughts can be expressed in writing or as unwritten sayings and argumentations associated with some individual(s). In traditional Africa, most of what would pass as sage-philosophy remains unwritten for reasons, which must now be obvious to everyone. Some of these persons might have been partly influenced by the inevitable moral and technological culture from the West. Nevertheless, their own outlook and cultural well-being remain basically that of traditional rural Africa. Except for a handful of them, the majority of them are 'illiterate' or semi-illiterate (1990:28).

Diatopical hermeneutics stems from the idea that all cultures are incomplete and may, therefore, be enriched by engaging in dialogue with or confronting other cultures. Recognising the relativity of cultures does not necessarily imply adopting relativism as a philosophical stance. It does imply, however, conceiving of universalism as a Western particularity whose supremacy as an idea does not reside in itself, but rather in the supremacy of the interests that support it. The critique of universalism derives from the critique of a general theory. On the contrary, diatopical hermeneutics presupposes what I call negative universalism, the idea of the impossibility of cultural completeness. In the transition period we traverse, the best formulation for negative universalism may well be to designate it as a residual general theory: a general theory on the impossibility of a general theory.

The idea and feeling of want and incompleteness create motivation for the work of translation which, in order to bear fruit, must be the crossing of converging motivations with origin in different cultures. The Indian sociologist Shiv Vishvanathan formulated eloquently the notion of want and motivation that I here designate as the work of translation. Says Vishvanathan (2000:12): 'My problem is, how do I take the best of Indian civilisation and at the same time keep my modern, democratic imagination alive?' If we could imagine an exercise of work of translation conducted by Vishvanathan and a European or North American intellectual/activist or social movement, it would be possible to think of the latter's motivation for dialogue formulated thus: 'How can I keep alive in me the best of modern and democratic Western culture, while at the same time recognising the value of the world that it designated autocratically as non-civilised, ignorant, residual, inferior, or unproductive?'

The second type of the work of translation is undertaken among social practices and their agents. All social practices imply knowledge, and as such they are also knowledge practices. When dealing with practices, however, the work of translation focuses specifically on mutual intelligibility among forms of organisation and objectives and styles of action and types of struggle. What distinguishes the two types of translation work is, after all, the emphasis or perspective that informs them. The specificity of the translation work concerning practices and their agents becomes clearer in situations in which the knowledges that inform different practices are less distinguishable than the practices themselves. This happens particularly when the practices take place inside the same cultural universe. Such would be the case of a work of translation between the forms of organisation and the objectives of action of two social movements, say, the feminist movement and the labour movement in a European, Latin American or African country.

The work of translation aims to clarify what unites and separates the different movements and practices so as to ascertain the possibilities and limits of articulation and aggregation among them. Because there is no single universal social practice or collective subject to confer meaning and direction to history, the work of translation becomes crucial to define, in each concrete and historical moment or context, which constellations of subaltern practices carry more counter-hegemonic potential. For instance, in Mexico, in March 2001, the Zapatista indigenous movement was a privileged counter-hegemonic practice inasmuch as it was capable of undertaking the work of translation between its objectives and practices and the objectives and practices of other Mexican social movements, including the civic and labour movements and the feminist movement. From that work of translation resulted, for example, that the Zapatista leader chosen to address the Mexican Congress was a woman, Comandante Esther. By that choice, the Zapatistas wanted to signify the articulation between the indigenous movement and the women's liberation movement, and thus deepen the counter-hegemonic potential of both.

In recent times, the work of translation has become even more important as a new counter-hegemonic or anti-systemic movement took shape. This movement has been calling for an alternative to neoliberal globalisation on the basis of transnational networks of local movements. It caught the media's attention in Seattle in November 1999 and gained its first global organisational form in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2001.[27] The movement of counter-hegemonic globalisation reveals the increasing visibility and diversity of social practices which, in various corners of the globe, resist neoliberal globalisation. It is a constellation of many and much diversified movements. On the one hand, there are local movements and organisations not only very different in their practices and objectives but also embedded in different cultures. On the other, transnational organisations, some from the South, some from the North, that also differ widely among themselves. The articulation and aggregation among all these different movements and organisations, as well as the creation of cross-border networks, require a giant work of translation. What do the participatory budgeting practised in many Latin American cities, the participatory democratic planning based on *panchayats* in Kerala and West Bengal in India, and the forms of self-government of the indigenous peoples of Latin America and rural populations in Africa have in common? What can they learn from one other? In what kinds of counter-hegemonic global activities can they cooperate? The same questions can be asked about the pacifist and the anarchist movements, or the indigenous and gay movements, the Zapatista movement, the ATTAC,[28] the Landless Movement in Brazil, and the Narmada River movement in India, and so on and so forth.

These are the questions that the work of translation aims to answer. It is a complex work, not only because the movements and organisations involved are many and very diverse, but also because they are embedded in diverse cultures and knowledges. That is to say, the work of translation falls simultaneously on knowledges and cultures, on the one hand, and on the practices and agents, on the other. Moreover, this work tends to identify what unites and separates them. The common points represent the possibility of an aggregation from bottom up, which is the only alternative to a top-down aggregation imposed by a general theory or a privileged social actor.

Conclusion

In this article, I have used the concept of public sphere to illustrate the epistemological and theoretical tasks involved in creating new possibilities of progressive social transformation aimed at putting an end to the monumental Eurocentric theoretical justification of the unequal relations between the global North and the global South. I explored such possibilities by sketching in rough brush the contours of one or many epistemologies of the South. Seen from the latter, the public sphere is the tribalism of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Both capitalism and colonialism converted such a localism into a global aspiration and a universal theoretical concept, at the same time that an abyssal divide between metropolitan and colonial societies made public sphere unthinkable in colonial societies and transformed such denial of universality into the vindication of the universal idea. Unthinking such historical construction only becomes a credible theoretical task to the extent that theoretical work positions itself as the facilitating or supporting rearguard of the social movements and struggles that fight against capitalism and the many metamorphoses of colonialism.

Notes

1. A Google search on the concept shows more than five million results.
2. I have been working out this concept in empirical research projects conducted in countries as different as Portugal, Colombia, Brasil, India, Mozambique and South Africa. Thes projects are part of a much larger project entitled, 'Reinventing Social Emancipation' . As a result, four books have been so far published, Santos (ed.) 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010.
3. As mentioned below, the modern West does not have a single view of the world. It has a plurality of views, even if the dominant one has overshadowed all the others and has become the one that was successfully exported to/ imposed on the 'rest' of the world. See Santos, 2009a. As a consequence, the other views are little known even inside the global North and are not easily

identified as Western views when evaluated from the perspective of the global North.

4. See Santos, 2008a.
5. See Habermas, 1987a.
6. See Santos, 2009a.
7. Santos, 2007:45-89.
8. Habermas, 1984, 1987.
9. See Santos, 1995:479-519 and Santos, 2004:157-197.
10. The last attempt to produce a modern critical theory was that of Foucault focusing on the totalising knowledge of modernity – modern science. Contrary to current opinion, I consider Foucault a modern, not a postmodern critic. He represents the climax and, paradoxically as well, the defeat of critical theory. Pushing to its ultimate consequences the disciplinary power of the panopticon construed by modern science, Foucault shows that there is no emancipatory way out inside this 'regimen of truth,' since resistance itself becomes disciplinary, hence internalised, consented oppression. Foucault's great merit was to have shown the opacities and silences produced by modern science, granting credibility to alternative 'regimens of truth', other ways of knowing that had been marginalised, suppressed and discredited by modern science (Santos 2004). Foucault contributed immensely to disarming the imperial North epistemologically, but he was unable to recognise the efforts of the anti-imperial South to arm itself epistemologically. He was not aware that there were other knowledges and experiences in question (interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos *in* Tavares 2007:133).
11. On these authors, see Santos, 2009a.
12. Actually, the system of reappropriation works both ways. For the past 20 years, we have witnessed the World Bank's appropriation of watchwords of critical theory, such as participatory democracy and participation in general.
13. Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas (Free Trade Area of the Americas).
14. Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas).
15. There is also a global North in countries of the South, consisting of the local elites that take advantage of the production and reproduction capitalism and colonialism. This is what I call the imperial South.
16. On the epistemology of the South, see Santos, 2006a; 2006b; 2008b and 2009b. See also Santos and Meneses (eds.), 2009.
17. See Santos, 2004:157-197.
18. Quijano considers the racialisation of power relations as an intrinsic feature of capitalism, a feature that he designates as the 'coloniality of power' (2000:374).
19. On this topic, see Santos, 2007:45-89; 2008a; 2009c:509-541.
20. Santos, 1995:25; 2005a; 2007; 2008b.
21. See Santos (ed.), 2007.

22. Banuri argues that the capitalist and colonial project for the development of the South was negative for the South, 'not because of bad advice or evil intention on the part of the councillors or consultants of development ... but because the project constantly forced the colonial populations to separate their energies of *positive* search from a social change defined by themselves and focus on the *negative* objective of resisting the cultural, political and economic domination of the West' (italics in the original) (Banuri 1990:66).
23. On the concept of *umma*, see above all, Faruki, 1979; An Na'im, 1995, 2000; Hassan, 1996; on the concept of *dharma*, see Gandhi, 1929/32; Zaehner, 1982.
24. See Gandhi, 1941, 1967. On *swadeshi* see also, among others, Bipinchandra, 1954; Nandy, 1987; Krishna, 1994.
25 Similar conceptions may be found, for instance, among the indigenous peoples.
26. On sage philosophy see Oruka (1990, 1998) and also Oseghare, 1992; Presbey, 1997.
27. On counter-hegemonic globalization, there is a bibliography on the rise. See, among others, Santos, 1995:250-377; 2002 (ed.); 2006b; Keck y Sikkink, 1998; Evans, 1999; Brecher *et al*. 2000; Cohen and Rai, 2000.
28. Acronyme of *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financières pour l'Aide aux Citoyens*.

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The Emergence of Public Spheres in Colonial Cameroon: Palm Wine Drinking Joints in Bamenda Township

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Abstract

Habermas' concept of public sphere encompasses a variety of meanings, including social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by – i.e. 'the public' in this process. Thus, any area in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and, through that discussion influence public and political action, constitutes the public sphere. This paper argues that Habermas' conception is relevant to Africa and sets out to examine the emergence, functioning, and consequences of palm wine drinking joints in 20th century colonial Bamenda Township as public spheres par excellence à la Habermas.

Résumé

Le concept de l'espace public selon Habermas renferme plusieurs sens parmi lesquels les sites sociaux où les concepts sont articulés, distribués et négociés, en plus de l'entité collective constituée, par exemple, par le 'public' dans le processus. Ainsi, est espace public tout espace dans la vie sociale où les gens se rencontrent pour discuter librement et identifier les problèmes sociaux, et à travers cette discussion, influencent les actions publiques et politiques. Cet article défend la théorie que la conception de Habermas est pertinente pour l'Afrique. Il examine l'émergence, le fonctionnement et les conséquences des espaces publics par excellence qui étaient, durant la période coloniale, des endroits qui servaient à la consommation du vin de palme dans les bidonvilles de Bamenda.

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Introduction

Most contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere are based on the ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Although Habermas'concept of public space has been subjected to multiple criticisms, reviews and interpretations by other scholars (cf. Hohendahl 2001, Freundlieb, Hudson, and Rundell 2004) this author still finds his basic premise useful in capturing the public sphere scenario in Africa, represented by the periodic congregation of people in various sites to socialise and indulge in discourses, not necessarily orderly discourses, but any interaction whereby the interested members of the public engage themselves while relaxing in various ways, including drinking, playing cards, eating or dancing.

Habermas' concept of public sphere encompasses a variety of meanings including social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by, and in this process – 'the public'. Thus, any area in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and through that discussion influence political action constitutes the public sphere. In the public sphere, people participate in social and political discussions through the medium of talking, debating, entertainment and relaxation. From this complex web of interactions, public opinion is formed and refined in an informal way. Conceptually, the public sphere is distinct from the state because activities in the public sphere include the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical of the state. It is a counter public to the state. The basic belief in public sphere theory is that political action is steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere as an alternative voice. President Ahmadou Ahidjo's one-party state in Cameroon was very sensitive to public opinion, and critical political statements emanating from the public sphere in the shape of bars and 'chicken parlours' were often monitored by the secret police and its authors sometimes paid dearly for them. The Ahidjo government viewed the public sphere as the thermometer of societal thinking as well as centres of subversion which had to be monitored and repressed by the state security apparatus.

This paper sets out to examine the emergence and functioning of palm wine drinking joints in 20th century colonial Bamenda Township as public spheres par excellence *à la Habermas*. These palm wine joints were comparable to the *Banta Bas* or open spaces under baobab trees in The Gambia where men congregate on a daily basis to discuss and debate for hours and drink tea. Comparable to the coffee shops of early bourgeois Europe, the palm wine drinking joints in Bamenda Township and the Gambian

Banta Bas, also served as places of artistic creation, public opinion moulding, dangerous opposition politics, gossips, sinful behaviour, or the redefinition of public morality.

It is argued that the palm wine drinking joints represented public 'spaces and arenas'– together with the structures, processes, social actors and actresses and cultures associated with or built into them. The joints stood out as a distinctive *lieu de sociabilité* in Bamenda Township specialised in the sale of native liquor, particularly palm wine, during the day and at nightfall with the weekends as the key periods. As a public sphere, the palm wine drinking joints developed and functioned as regular meeting and discursive places for men and women; and such places became news and rumour generating machines. The palm wine drinking joints were also public spaces for the appropriation and reproduction of modernity through the bottle dance, an alternative form of high life music, and the centre for the discussion of the politics of independence.

Conceptualising and Contextualising the Bamenda Public Sphere

The public sphere refers to areas in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal problems and through such discussion influence public opinion and inadvertently politics. It is the sphere of private people who come together to constitute a public and engage in debates over general issues in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere. The public sphere is, therefore, a discursive space where private individuals or groups meet to relax and discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement, which may be encomiums for, or a mild or scathing critique of, a political regime. It is in such social and physical spaces that political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and where public opinion is moulded (Benhabib 1992, Warner 1992).

The 'public sphere' mediates between the 'private sphere' of the ordinary citizens and the 'sphere of public authority'. Whereas the sphere of public authority represents the state or the realm of the ruling class and the state security apparatus, the public sphere straddles both private and public realms and through the instrument of public opinion the state is sensitised on the concerns of its citizenry. The public sphere is conceptually distinct from the state in that it is the site for the production and circulation of discourses that can be critical of or hostile to the state. It is also different from the economy in that it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, 'a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling'. These fine distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic discussions are essential to democratic

theory and governance. The public sphere is potentially a regulatory institution against the abuse of authority by the state. The public sphere, therefore, hinges on participatory democracy from the angle of the influence of public opinion on government policy or action. The basic contention is that political action is influenced by the public sphere and the only legitimate governments are those who are sensitive to public opinion (Warner 1992, 2002). However, experiences from many parts of Africa might not comply with this concept of political legitimacy through the public sphere. Rather the political sensitivity of African governments is to issues which might provoke their ouster, and that is where the importance of the public sphere might lie under such circumstances.

The public sphere theory is admirably captured in Haine's (1996), *The World of the Paris Cafe: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914*. The Paris cafes, like palm wine drinking joints, were privately owned places open to the public for relaxation and they fall in the category of public sphere. The cafes had a remarkable presence in the political, social, cultural, and intellectual life of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Paris. These cafes therefore stood as informal institutions that 'bridged the distance between public and private life, leisure and work, the individual and the family'. They also 'provided a unique space in which the tensions arising from such juxtapositions could be articulated' (Haine 1996:236). The Paris cafes were important public spheres in French history owing to their importance as incubators of France's 18th and 19th century revolutions. During the times of repression following these revolutions, cafes served as shelters and as places where the working classes could express themselves by insulting government officials and the police.

The palm wine leisure joints in Bamenda township in Cameroon stood out as an equivalent of these French cafes in some respects. They had an equally interesting historical role in impacting public opinion and the political orientation of Cameroon's path to independence. Palm wine is a multi-purpose socialisation liquor, which Cameroonians, like other West and Central Africans, enjoy drinking, particularly during the evenings. Tapped from the palm tree, it is used for libation, bride price, and soothsaying among other things. Tradition requires that all notables must sit and drink palm wine with the chief (king) of the village on special days as a sign of fidelity, homage and togetherness. The British exiled Fai Ndzenzef, an notable figure in colonial Nso in Cameroon's North West Province, partly because he had stopped drinking palm wine with the king of Nso in his palace and it was suspected that he was up to making trouble and breaching the peace.[1] The palm wine drinking joints of colonial Bamenda, therefore, bring people together in a way reminiscent of deeply engrained cultural practices. In the township,

the typical village evening scene of togetherness and relaxation was recreated around palm wine joints, the only difference being that the clientele was cosmopolitan and the palm wine had to be paid for with money.

The palm wine leisure joint was a distinct African model of the public sphere in the sense that the class component of its constituents was not important. This model of the public sphere placed little premium on social differences or privileges. They were sites for the people of all backgrounds. This public sphere was, therefore, classless in the Nyererian sense of the word (cf. Nyerere 1967). In a period when newspapers and radios were near-absent and were only of limited elitist value, information dissemination and the formation of public opinion operated effectively within the medium of such palm wine houses during moments of relaxation and entertainment. Even with the advent and popularisation of the radio, particularly in the postcolony, the palm wine joints remained effective news, information, and opinion sites. In the palm wine leisure joints traditional liquor was the dominant form of alcohol for Africans during the British colonial rule in the Cameroons. Although the consumption of palm wine was ubiquitous in West and Central African villages, its importance took another dimension when the tradition was transported and reproduced in the townships for essentially commercial purposes. Willis (2002, 265) states that the sole purpose of consuming alcohol by individuals was to achieve happiness. On the contrary, the consumption of alcohol in the Bamenda joints was not an end in itself but went beyond the attainment of happiness. These palm wine joints came to mark a permanent aspect of an all-encompassing social life in Bamenda township as the inhabitants grappled with colonial modernity.

Historical Context of Colonial Bamenda Township

African townships have exhibited different types of public spheres as venues where people frequently congregate. Mosques, churches, and football stadia, are prime examples of such places.[2] Sites such as drinking joints, because they are accessible to all classes and the principal activity there is consuming alcohol and playing music,[3] very quickly became extremely important as focal points for leisure, entertainment, and socialisation into the evolving urban modernity. The township of Bamenda was one of such places and its growth was accompanied by the emergence and proliferation of public spheres including traditional bars where native palm wine was sold, on-license and off-licence bars where European-style bottled beer, grape wines and spirits were sold, and nightclubs, mosques, churches and brothels. However, the palm wine joints stood out as one of the distinctive public spheres that developed in the township and specialised over the years in the sale of native liquor, particularly palm wine.

Bamenda township developed hand in hand with palm wine leisure joints as the town created an enabling environment for the location of such businesses. Bamenda is a crossroad town and all the inhabitants of Cameroon's North West Region have to pass through it before getting to their various destinations. The town owes its origin both to colonialism and the inveterate Hausa traders. Following the German annexation of Cameroon in 1884 and its ultimate conquest and subjugation, Bamenda was selected as the German administrative headquarters for the entire Bamenda region, now the North West Region, and the German administration embarked upon building a Fort to serve as the German Governor's administrative offices (Awasom 2003). German presence created commercial opportunities in Bamenda and Hausa traders from Northern Nigeria took advantage of the propitious atmosphere and started to migrate to the township from 1903. The traders initially camped around the German Fort at the Bamenda up-station before being displaced to the Mankon-Bamenda vicinity downtown. There, the Hausa created a new residential quarter which they named Abakpa – present day Abakpa-Bamenda township. Hausa immigrants are, therefore, the real genesis of Bamenda township (Awasom 2003).

The township provided opportunities, which attracted other ethnic groups into the area. The tax records for 1934 indicated that over 5,000 taxable males from a mixed-bag of ethnic groups comprising the indigenous Mankon, Bali, Bamum, Bamileke, Igbos, Fulani, Banso, Meta and a host of others lived in the township.[4] Essentially, the increasing population of Bamenda was fast becoming heterogeneous. Bamenda was a place for business and the cultivation of colonial modernity around highlife music, and the palm wine joints were a major spot of attraction in this emerging milieu. The palm wine leisure joints developed from the private initiative of women who followed the emerging town to cater for the needs of its cosmopolitan population. An enterprising woman, Mama Ngum, is credited to have commenced the first palm wine joint in a haphazard manner in the parlour of her sun-dried brick house. The success of her business paved the way for other women to enter the trade. In the 1930s and 1940s the palm wine joints were located exclusively at the northeastern crossroads area of the town. The joints were littered along the same street about some 200 metres east of the Hausa Abakpa quarters.[5]

Before the introduction and popularisation of modern larger beer in Cameroon, local liquor including palm wine and corn beer reigned supreme. The palm wine joints gave Bamenda an atmosphere of regular festivity, although of different tempos. As Madoeuf notes:

> Indeed a town is viewed as the expression of the wish to be together, it is through the feast that this wish is confirmed. Also, the feast is the expression of what Michael Maffesoli calls 'social viscosity', this strange impulse that prompts people to attach themselves to each other (Madoeuf 2005:68).

Local liquor, including palm wine and corn beer, was responsible for pulling people to these *lieux de sociabilité* in the township. People tended to relax over calabashes of palm wine to kill the evening hours and tell stories. The corn beer sold in the palm wine joints was made from fermented corn from which two varieties of alcohol are extracted. The first is called 'shah' and is whitish in colour. The second, called 'nkan', is highly intoxicating.

Modes of Relaxation, Gender and the Drinking Pattern in the Joints

The palm wine drinking joints were rendezvous for entertainment and relaxation and were run exclusively by women. The explanation for the monopoly of the trade by women is that food also had to be provided in the palm wine joints, and food preparation is a domain culturally assigned to women within the society. Since food was an important precondition to drinking, women tended to combine selling cooked food and palm wine. Men restricted themselves to tapping and transporting the palm wine to town and selling them to their female customers who took over the responsibility of retailing the alcohol in their respective joints. So while men specialised as tapers and suppliers of palm wine, women concentrated on selling the liquor. A social network was therefore established in the palm wine industry from the male producers and distributors to the female buyers and retailers.

The palm wine leisure joints were real sites of socialisation in Bamenda, the most populous town in colonial British Southern Cameroons. Although palm wine drinking was an evening resort which capped the residents' daily activities, weekends and pay days were the busiest moments at the joints. How was drinking generally organised by customers? Drinking in the joints did not take place in a haphazard manner. Within the unique space of the palm wine drinking joints, the people developed a distinctive subculture with its own order, structure, and rituals. The world of the public sphere, as Hauser (1999:69) notes, consist of cultural norms and common meanings within which interaction takes place. The participants followed a specific communal pattern of drinking that was dictated by traditional etiquette in the villages. The calabash or bottle of palm wine was poured into the cup of each person in the joint, usually starting from the oldest or a title holder. Each drinker also took his turn to buy a round of palm wine for the others. If an individual was broke, he could continue drinking for free on the

understanding that he would also buy for others when his economy improved. Anybody who arrived in the palm wine joint and bought a bottle of palm wine had to serve his neighbour first as a way of starting a conversation. Although an individual may buy a bottle or gourd of palm wine, the common rule was that he had to share it with others who in turn would also buy and continue the sharing process. Generosity and sharing, and not individualism, was the rule at palm wine leisure joints.

Each time a calabash of palm wine was emptied by the group, the dregs of the palm wine would be poured into the cup of the identifiable elders in the group as custom demanded. Men took the dregs in the belief that it augmented and improved their sperm content and sexual potency. The drinking cups were usually fabricated from the horn of a cow, only in rare cases were modern drinking glasses used. Kola nuts often accompanied the drinking of palm wine and was bought and shared as a sign of solidarity. A popular Cameroonian aphorism says 'the truth lies in the cup'; which means when people drink alcohol, they tend to speak out their minds more freely and with less restrictions. Drinking therefore goes hand in hand with discussions. Hauser (1999:64, 69-70) notes that public spheres usually formed around certain issues that were deliberated on and the discussions would reproduce itself across a spectrum of interested publics who do not necessarily know themselves and might be meeting each other for the first time. In the palm wine joints, people would converse freely but with respect for their customs and tradition, especially age and titles. Such social differences were easily identifiable from the individuals' dressing and general comportment, especially the cap an individual wore and how it was decorated. This recognition of hierarchies notwithstanding, people in palm wine joints generally mixed freely and spoke their minds without any restrictions. No matter how heated debates became, fighting or physical assault was not culturally tolerated.

The palm wine leisure joints were generally considered wayward milieus in the night because of the presence of men and a handful of women who mixed the drinks with the usage of colourful language and sexual innuendoes. The more embarrassing a woman was with her usage of language, the more notorious she became and the more customers she would attract, who would come for a tease. Palm wine leisure joints were, therefore, places *par excellence* for the formulation of new sexual vocabularies. 'Decent' women, therefore, preferred to stay away from joints after night fall for fear of being labelled wayward. The palm wine that was sold at nightfall was called 'over night'. It means it had been allowed to ferment for about two days and, therefore, had a higher alcohol content relative to the freshly tapped palm wine.

The palm wine leisure joints often served as a stopover to the red light district in Bamenda township popularly known as Bayangi Quarters. The district was littered with brothels dominated by the Bayangi women from Cameroon's South West Region (Fomin 2004). Men would pass some time at the joint, drinking highly fermented palm wine, and consuming traditional 'Viagra', composed of bitter kola nuts and special chewable roots. At a time, bitter kola nuts used to be sold exclusively at palm wine leisure joints, the reason being that they were thought to enhance sexual performance. But the popularity of the bitter kola and its alleged medical potency in cleansing the body's system displaced the nuts from palm wine joints to market places. In general, the palm wine leisure joints were not only venues for drinking and meeting people but also places for discussions, exchange of information, music and politics.

The Appropriation and Reproduction of Modernity and Political Discourses

Whereas coffee houses in London were centres of art and literary criticism, the Bamenda palm wine joints were milieus for the appropriation and reproduction of urban colonial modernity in the form of popular music. If there is anything for which the indigenous Mankon people of Bamenda are known, it is the bottle dance. Bottle dance stars such as John Menang, Richard Nguti, Ni Ken and Depipson (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005:261) have been popularised by the Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV). What is hardly known is that this genre of music developed in palm wine drinking joints. Initially, the palm wine consumers would sing and dance to their traditional music. With the spread and popularity of highlife music, the Bamenda palm wine joint urbanites quickly appropriated it and gave it a completely new twist. The development of highlife music in Cameroon dates back to colonial times and is closely related to urbanisation. Popular highlife music that was produced in Ghana and Nigeria reached the Cameroon urban centres, thanks to powerful radio transmitters and individuals from these centres of highlife music (Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005:254). Highlife music was also played in Waterside Bar, a popular nightclub in Bamenda. But such nightclubs were elitist and patronised largely by the educated middle classes.

In the palm wine leisure joints, the popular music played in modern bars was appropriated in another way by the ordinary people, bent on demonstrating their own modernity. In the absence of guitars in the 1930s and 1940s, these modernists had to improvise music with bottles as the main instrument. Guitars were later acquired and used alongside the bottles. The entertainer used a metal object to hit the bottle while an accompanying musician played the guitar. The musicians sang a modified version of the

popular highlife music to communicate critical messages that caricatured the colonial elite, particularly their snobbishness and claims to superiority and their habits of monopolising all the beautiful women. With the introduction of political parties, hired bottle dance musicians often entertained people by playing pro-government songs. Ladies and gentlemen would be invited to engage each other on the dance floor and dance according to the command of the lead singer. The bottle dance display on a grand scale was reserved for special weekends, special occasions and pay days. As the bottle dance grew in importance, it was displaced from the palm wine joints to the township community halls on selected Saturdays reserved for the big dance for reasons of space. The women palm wine sellers would be organised on such occasions to supply wine to keep the occasion going. But the palm wine leisure joints remained the place for the production of bottle dance. Today, there are several Bamenda township musicians who have specialised in playing a modernised version of the bottle dance.

Palm wine joints also served as informal media centres in a society where newspapers were extremely difficult to come by until the early 1960s. Frequenting the palm wine joints was a regular practice of urbanites, not just for drinking but for the simple reason that they had to meet there to be informed about the latest socio-political events in town. There was always a story teller, a philosopher king, or a distinguished individual who would engage people in conversation on a variety of topics or simply entertain people with stories. Raconteurs and home-spurn philosophers honed their skills. Keeping away from palm wine joints meant missing a lot in town. The best source of information on the latest in town was therefore the version from the palm wine joints. From the dawn of nationalist politics in the 1950s, politicians had to socialise with the people in the palm wine joints in the evenings. They would order and pay for rounds of palm wine to customers as a prelude to being given the floor to make political statements in favour of their political programmes. Prince Ndefru, the President of the township palm wine joints, grew in popularity as 'the people's arbitrator'. With the formation of the first two political parties in the Southern Cameroons in 1953, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) of E.M.L. Endeley and the Kamerun People's Party (KPP) of M.N. Mbile (Chem-Langhee 2005), he was openly wooed by politicians

During the political campaigns preceding the United Nations plebiscite on the independence of the British Cameroons, which was to decide if the territory was to join either Nigeria or the French Cameroons, the various political protagonists used the palm wine joints to sell their programmes and discredit their rivals. The pro-Francophone Cameroon politicians spread rumours about the impending dangers of voting to join Nigeria by alleging

that Nigerian Igbo men were raping native women on a daily basis and compelling native people to buy their goods at exorbitant prices. Nigeria was presented as 'an ocean' that would drown the small British Cameroons were it to opt to join Nigeria while the aggressive Igbo traders would not give Cameroonians any breathing space in the economy. As for the pro-Nigerian politicians, rumours were spread to exaggerate the state of civil war between the anti-French guerrillas and the Ahidjo government in a bid to scare people from voting to join the Francophone Cameroon Republic. Francophone Cameroon was presented as a chaotic and lawless society where civil liberties did not exist and where the gendarmes continuously terrorised the population. Palm wine joints, therefore, served as propaganda and rumour-generating mills. Politicians hired bottle dance musicians to propagate their political manifestoes through their music.

The Public Sphere and the Question of Governance

As the palm wine joints grew in importance and popularity, they attracted a class of hooligans whose indiscipline necessitated the establishment of a governance structure for the joints. The British colonial administration in the Cameroons was particularly thin on the ground given that the Cameroons was more of an appendix of Nigeria and Britain was more concerned with its Nigerian colony than with the trust territory of the Cameroons. The women palm wine sellers at the joints wanted the township administration under the British-appointed Hausa Chief, the Sarikin Hausawa, to be more active in the affairs of the palm wine joints. The Hausa Chief was reluctant to involve himself in palm wine matters because his Muslim religion forbade alcohol. The women quickly resorted to Prince Ndefru, a native of Mankon-Bamenda township, who was a big patron of the palm wine joints, to oversee their administration. Ndefru accepted to assume the presidency of the palm wine joints and all conflicts related to the operation of the joints were brought to him for arbitration. For instance, Prince Ndefru's council of arbitrators policed the palm wine joints, and handled cases of fighting or refusal to pay for drinks consumed. The local government, the Ngemba Native Authority, came to recognise Ndefru's role in the palm wine joints and with the colonial administration, they enlisted his services in collecting taxes therefrom.[6] Although women were the principal proprietors of the joints, the leadership structure was composed exclusively of males under the leadership of Prince Ndefru. The Prince was popular among the palm wine women dealers given his imposing position as a native of Mankon-Bamenda.

The emergence of Prince Ndefru as the president of the palm wine joints resulted in strained relations with the Hausa immigrant community. The Hausa community were uncomfortable with the activities of the palm wine

joints for political, religious and security reasons. The British-appointed chief of the town, the Sarkin Hausawa, complained bitterly to the British colonial administration that Prince Ndefru was undermining his authority by interfering in tax collection matters in the urban area. He complained that it was unacceptable for the palm wine joints to operate within the residential areas of the Hausa Muslims in the township. Apart from dealing with alcohol which was offensive to Muslims, the palm wine joints were presented as unsafe places where hoodlums operated freely at night and gambling, fighting, prostitution were rife. The Sarikin Hausa requested the British to ban the sale of palm wine around Muslim Hausa quarters and to expel all women around the palm wine joints who were not involved in any visible gainful activity.[7] The native peoples felt that the Sarikin Hausawa had gone too far. Palm wine joints were their business and in their native land; immigrants had no right to determine which business they did. Moreover, palm wine was a cultural aspect of their lives. From the British perspective, the palm wine joints, were an important source of taxable revenue for the local administration and should not be displaced.

The conflict of authority between Prince Ndefru and the Sarikin Hausawa was subsequently resolved within the context of local government reforms. In 1949, the British initiated local government reforms which sought to transform the Native Authority system into a modern local government system. This reform package included the democratisation of local governments to allow for the inclusion of educated elements, and the representatives of various ethnic and interest groups, including women, in the township administrative system. The reforms culminated in the establishment of a new local government known as the Mankon Subordinate Native Authority Council or the Mankon Urban Council in 1954 as the governing body of the township.[8] The membership of the urban council was all-embracing and comprised the women palm wine sellers, Prince Ndefru, the Sarikin Hausawa, and other representatives of interest groups in the township. The Councillors were divided into committees responsible for various domains including health, sanitation, education, finance, customary affairs and land issues. Women of the palm wine joints now had a voice under the local government reforms as their representatives could also sit on the council. Perhaps the greatest victim of the reforms was the Sarikin Hausawa. His influence was considerably neutralised since the Hausa immigrants were a minority in the council and decisions had to be taken democratically. The dream of stamping out palm wine joints in Abakpa Bamenda township died a natural death, as the Muslim minority could not take any decision against the majority indigenous and cosmopolitan non-Muslims of the township.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the emergence of the public sphere in colonial Bamenda township. Dovetailing into Habermas' theory of public sphere which used European salons and cafes as discursive arenas, this study has revealed how the palm wine leisure joints in colonial Bamenda were equally public spheres *par excellence* where men and women regularly congregated. These public spheres were leisure joints performing multiple functions and were part and parcel of the urbanisation process in twentieth century Cameroon. The palm wine leisure joints as public spheres were accessible to everybody irrespective of class. Men drank palm wine and shared kolanuts at the palm wine leisure joints regularly as a normal way of life in the urban context, which was a reproduction of similar practices in the villages. But in town the company at the palm wine joints was usually a mixed bag of ethnicities and native liquor in the joints had to be bought and not a free offer as often happened in the countryside. These leisure joints were not only centres for drinking, but also for entertainment, news, rumours, politicking and dating. The leisure joints were also places where highlife music was transformed into bottle dance music which served not only entertainment purposes but was also an instrument of political propaganda and a critique of society. At the penultimate stage of British Cameroon's independence, when a merger with either Francophone Cameroon or Nigeria was hotly contested, the palm wine joints became the centre stage of politics.

The palm wine joints actually gave the township colour and vibrancy, epitomising a new colonial urban modernity that was evolving. They also developed governance structures which were germane to late colonial efforts at democratisation. The palm wine joints as public spheres were subjected to changes in terms of location and importance in the postcolony. The leisure joints were initially located exclusively at the northeast crossroads area of the town and palm wines supplies came almost exclusively from the native Mankon people. The forces of change broke this monopoly. As Bamenda township expanded, swallowing neighbouring towns like Nkwen and Mendakwe through the process of conurbation, the northeast crossroads leisure joint was challenged by the mushrooming of other rival joints, which continued to operate in the same way.

The changing economic fortunes of Cameroon in the 1970s, reflected in the boom in the prices of agricultural exports and the advent of petrol rents, witnessed the popularisation of beer drinking in bars, on-licenses and off-licenses (*les ventes emportés*) by the emerging middle class. In other words, alternative public spheres emerged with a completely different culture that competed effectively with palm wine drinking joints. Palm wine drinking

joints, as public spheres, might not now enjoy their old monopoly but they have come to stay as permanent places in the township with a special clientele who find fulfilment in them. The ordinary folk remain its faithful clientele and continue to give it colour by the stories they continue to tell of yesteryears. If the ordinary folk cannot afford beer from the modern breweries, they can still get 'high' in the palm wine joints.

Notes

1. Cf. Awasom, Nicodemus Fru, "The British Invention of Tradition and the Fai Ndzenzef Affair", Occasional Paper, University of The Gambia, 2006.
2. Cf. Cantome, Cleo, 'The contemporary mosque phenomenon as lieux de sociabilité: gender, identity and space', Fancello, Sandra, 'Du village au temple: les assemblée pentacôtiste comme espace de sociabilité en milieu urbain africain', Benjelid, Abed, 'Le stade de football: un formidable lieu de sociabilité et integration des jeunes de la périphérie pauvre de l'Oran, Algerie'.
3. For interesting sidelines on drinking and music venues in urban centre in Africa see Fourchard, Laurent, Sheben, sociabilité et pouvoir en Afrique du Sud au XXe siècle, Collins, John, 'A century of changing locations of Ghanaian commercial Popular Entertainment Venues'.
4. National Archives Buea/Cameroon, Annual Report for the year ending 31 December 1935.
5. Interviews with five key informants: Bayong, John, 55, a businessman and the son of a title holder from Mankon who told old stories about the palm wine joints of his traditional Mankon. (Buea/Cameroon January 3-5, 2000); Awasom Stephen Anye, 75, father of the author and a stylish bottle dancer. His memory about palm wine joints was always fresh. Stories collected from him between 1980-1985 and 1998-2000 in Mankon-Bamenda; Monikang, Alexander, 74, a native of Mankon and an excellent oral historian. A genuine lover of palm wine joints who tells his story in a musical fashion, particularly about the bottle dance and the red street queens. Stories were collected from him between 1980-1985 and 1998-2000; Ndenge, Alphonse, 78, a notable from Mankon and a retired educationist. Interviewed between 1980 and 1985 and during Summer holidays of 1999; Alhadji Usman Bah, 60, Hausa trader in Mankon town, and son of the Sarikin Hausawa . He was interviewed with six other Hausa people in February 1984.
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Ambivalence and Activism: Netizens, Social Transformation and African Virtual Publics

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Africa is the least connected continent on the internet, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is becoming pervasive and deeply embedded in social and political relations. They are impacting on the way citizens live their lives and relate to both the state and other actors in the society. In this process, some citizens are becoming 'netizens'. Cyber networking, which has been facilitated by access to ICTs, has given rise to a public sphere that is virtual. This paper explores some of the key issues relating to the development of ICTs in Africa and the social and political processes they have spawned in their wake. It is argued that while the virtual public is not unique to Africa, its manifestations, organisational modes, and concerns in Africa are informed by African conditions, both in terms of the specific issues addressed and the wider context of technological deficit that the continent faces.

Résumé

En Afrique, l'utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la communication devient de plus en plus répandue et s'ancre davantage dans les relations sociales et politiques malgré le fait qu'elle est le continent le moins connecté sur internet. Les TIC ont affecté la façon dont les citoyens mènent leur vie, mais aussi comment ils interagissent avec l'Etat et les autres acteurs de la société. C'est ainsi que certains citoyens sont devenus des 'netoyens'. L'accès aux TIC a facilité le réseautage à travers le cyber ; ce qui a donné naissance à un espace public virtuel. Cet article explore des questions essentielles par rapport au développement des TIC en Afrique aussi bien que les processus sociaux et politiques qu'elles ont engendré. Selon l'article, même si l'espace public virtuel n'est pas propre à l'Afrique, ses manifestations, ses

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modes d'organisation et ses préoccupations dans ce continent sont plutôt déterminés pas les conditions, les questions spécifiques abordées et le contexte général de déficit technologique auxquels le continent est confronté.

Introduction

Africa is the least connected continent on the internet, with low information technology penetration ratios. Still, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is becoming pervasive on the continent. ICTs are becoming deeply embedded in social relations and in associational life. They are impacting on the way citizens live their lives and relate to both the state and other actors in the society. In this process, some citizens are becoming 'netizens'. Cyber networking, which has been facilitated by access to ICTs, has given rise to a public sphere that is virtual. While the virtual public is not unique to Africa, its manifestations, organisational modes, and concerns in Africa are informed by African conditions, both in terms of the specific issues addressed and the wider context of technological deficit that the continent faces. How do we understand the virtual public in Africa? How does it relate to the state? How can we situate the virtual public within the context of globalisation? What are its democratic/authoritarian impulses? How does it relate to broad social struggles and causes across the continent? Is a gendered reading of the virtual space possible? It would seem that the virtual public in Africa is a site of ambivalences. It is simultaneously a 'we', 'us' and 'them' space, depending on what the issues are. It is both globally and locally rooted. What are the circumstances that make this differentiation possible and in what situation do these different manifestations of sub-virtual publics arise? Like the physical world, the virtual space is inhabited by various cultures, sub-cultures and counter cultures. Cyber citizens are subject to contradictory impulses which pool them along specific social, economic, political and cultural engagements. How does a virtual public relate to a geospatial one? How can we theorise the virtual public in Africa?

A starting point for such theorisation would be to unearth the manifestations of the virtual public sphere in Africa. This paper will attempt such an unearthing, concentrating on developing a topology of the virtual space in Africa both in terms of its concerns, mode of substantiation and its multiple levels of inclusions and exclusions. It will draw from existing cyber networks, examining the myriad ways they negotiate space and use of technology as a tool for social organising as well as the kinds of politics that such negotiation and uses impose on the African virtual sphere. In this process, the paper seeks to shade light on the impacts and implications of ICTs on the public sphere in Africa.

The Public Sphere and ICTs

Central to the concept of the public sphere is the existence of a social space that is not necessarily spatial, where citizens can engage in rational debate and discussion on social issues. This space, although subject to government policy making is independent of government. As a communicative realm, the size and reach of the public sphere is mediated by the means of communication. Because debate and discussion pre-figure dialogue, the public sphere is best facilitated through interactivity. Yet in its drive for reach and inclusivity, the public sphere has to embrace non-interactive communication platforms. A tension, therefore, exists within the public sphere between interactive (one-on-one) media such as the telephone and the mass (few-to-many) media such as television and newspaper; while the latter may be lacking in interactivity, it has a greater reach. The increasing dominance of the mass media over the interactive ones, along with its increasing subordination to the imperatives of profit was decried by public sphere theorists like Habermas who saw such a trend as undermining the quality of the public sphere.

However, the convergence of interactive and mass media, arising from the advent of the digital revolution, has resulted in the spectrum that is now referred to as information and communication technologies (ICTs). These have transformed the public sphere through a number of ways. First, although ICTs are part of the rubrics of media technologies, they have their own unique characteristics that make their engagement with citizens qualitatively different. They have greater speed of dissemination, have global reach and entail little costs. As Patelis (2000) notes, 'in the world of bits, there is no packaging, there is no distribution (they are automatic). Marginal costs are abolished, the consequence of which economic scale no longer yield a competitive advantage'. This is largely true, although the case about the economy of scale is overstated, since the Internet itself tends to favour the very big.

Second, ICTs have integrated older forms of media technologies with new ones, leading to capabilities that were hitherto impossible. The Internet, which is the core of the ICTs, supports all forms of media content from text and video to audio and graphics. A website can engage in newspaper publishing and radio and television broadcasting simultaneously. In addition, the process of doing so has been de-mystified through the reduction of the skill content required on the part of the producer. Non-professionals can today produce good quality television or radio programmes and other media products. ICTs have led to what MacFarlene (1993) calls the 'de-institutionalisation of the process of information dissemination', in that news production and dissemination are no longer the preserve of media organisations and professionals.

Third, while traditional mass media technologies impose a dichotomy between producers and users, with ICTs, all users are producers simultaneously. Everyone can set up a website allowing him/her to disseminate information while receiving same from others. Moreover, the cost of doing so is extremely low compared to the cost of setting up a traditional media outfit. Furthermore, this one-person media outfit has global reach, which the traditional forms of media technologies do not often provide. Fourth, ICTs have allowed interactivity to a great extent in the use of the communication space. Even reading a mail on the internet involves the making of a new text of the mail. Users of virtual spaces are therefore not just mere passive recipients of texts but are simultaneously involved in the process of producing and disseminating their own sub-texts. The interactivity of ICTs has unleashed a torrent of creativity on the part of their users.

Habermas' conception of the public sphere places emphasis on three key issues: participation is open to all (there is a principle of inclusivity); all participants are considered equal (social status or rank is disregarded); and any issue can be raised for rational debate. Cyberspace is potentially open to all, even though in practice there are a number of barriers, but so it has always been with other forms of communication platforms. In so far as the cyberspace is concerned, all are also potentially considered equal, though here again practical exigencies put some limit to this equality. Theoretically, all forms of rational debate can take place in cyberspace, though in practice even irrational ones, such as websites which preach racial hatred for example, also make an appearance. Censorship is also placing limits to the debates that can take place, at least in some countries, if not globally.

How do we then conceptualise the virtual public against the background of these tensions between expectations and reality? Is the virtual public the same as the virtual space? Can it be reduced to its constitutive online communities? Like the traditional public sphere, the virtual public sphere can only be imagined as a social space for citizens' engagements with socio-political issues – the abode of netizens. While the virtual space provides the context and contours for the emergence of the virtual public, the two cannot be conflated for the virtual space contains within it also private and government controlled spaces. In the same vein, online communities cannot be conflated with the virtual public sphere. There are online governance structures, some of a commercial corporate nature, which are also part of the online communities. Since the public sphere should be an unfettered communicative discursive phenomenon, the virtual space should be the articulation of online communicative discursive practices of citizens as they engage freely on political and social issues. They should be platforms for citizens' articulation of issues free from the exigency of profit and

government control and direction. While they tend to mirror civil society, the virtual public spheres are not reduced to organised associational platforms.

In reality therefore, such virtual spaces that constitute the virtual public sphere should include portals that provide spaces for free public discourses, discussion platforms, citizens' mailing lists, chat platforms, wikis, blogs and online open publications. Yet even within this category of virtual spaces there is a problem: portals such as yahoo and google that are set up and driven by profit motive are providing substantial spaces for citizens engagement in the virtual space through the many discussion groups, mailing lists, blogs and other online publications they host, and therefore cannot be dissociated from the virtual public sphere. One implication of ICTs in the making of the virtual public is that they not only de-territorialised the public sphere but they also create a variety of public spaces that are disconnected from the national space. This gives rise to specific features of the virtual sphere, such as the fact that they cut across countries and not do necessary organise on the basis of nationalities. The need for both interactivity and simultaneity, required for a public sphere, has been intensely facilitated by ICTs, especially through the internet with its global reach and instantaneous networking. The virtual public sphere that has emerged through the uptake of ICTs is centred around the use of internet-based tools and resources. These include the sharing of views using emails, mail groups, blogging, chats rooms, and other online publications and webcast.

Working with various cyber platforms and tools, there have emerged both national and global virtual public spheres, providing opportunity for citizens – netizens – to network and articulate their visions on different public issues. They have been exerting influence on many global issues. At the global level, many such virtual spheres have risen to contest dominant paradigms. The influence of cyber networking can be seen, for example, in the way citizens from diverse countries and continents, coordinating through the internet, mobilised for the now famous Seattle Protest against the WTO Ministerial of 2002. There has even been what is referred to as 'cyber protest', with activists jamming the website of the World Economic Summit during its 2002 summit, causing it to crash (Shatchtman 2002, quoted in Wiltse 2003).

There have been many other less dramatic, but nonetheless, important episodes of cyber mobilisation to articulate and campaign for specific public issues. For example, O'Neill (1999) has documented how citizens and civil society organisations have used cyber networking to place corporate social responsibility on the spotlight. The World Social Forum (www.wsf.org), which has become the major platform for anti-globalisation struggles across the world, works largely online, with activists in different countries having

only email contacts and interacting through discussion groups and online publications spaces. Even in social and political struggles of a physical type, for instance by groups such as the Zapatistas and Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, the cultivation of a virtual public sphere is a prominent feature. Ed Wiltse (2003) has also drawn attention to what he calls 'fandom', the rise of virtual communities of affection, that not only mobilise on specific social issues, but also offer online solidarity and affection to each other across the globe on the basis of shared concerns and views. Closer home in Africa we cannot fail to note the role that social networks such as facebook and twitter have played in the pro-democracy struggles in both Algeria and Egypt. The activities of wikileaks in 2010 have also led to the emergence of 'hacktivists' who attack websites of institutions and organisations that are hostile to wikileaks. Netizens, hacktivists, and fandom are different manifestation of the grip of ICTs on contemporary global society. How are these phenomena manifested in Africa?

Studying the Virtual Public in African: Methodological Problems

Unearthing the manifestations of the virtual public sphere in Africa is fraught with many methodological problems. For one, virtual publics are not continent specific. In fact the very nature of border porosity of ICTs (Ya'u 2004) makes such locational virtual publics difficult to imagine. Virtual networks are by their nature transcontinental. As argued by Guobin Yang (nd), online publics are less visible and less bound to physical locations and thus more de-territorialised. They elaborate discourses and practices whose consumption is beyond national boundaries. In this sense, speaking of an African virtual sphere as distinct from a generic (global) virtual public sphere may seem to be theorising an unsubstantiated subject. Secondly, most virtual networks are open-ended with no clear cut attributes for membership. Anyone sufficiently interested on any issues for which a group exist is free to join. Thus, in a given cyber group it is possible to find an array of organisational types: civil society organisations, government agencies, private individuals, government or political personalities, and African and non-Africans actors. How is such a virtual public to be named? What makes it African, if such a label is to be attached? Is it because it is constituted predominantly by Africans or is it because of the issues it concerns itself with, or perhaps, both? How can any of these attributes be empirically established?

Third, virtual publics, by virtue of being virtual, are difficult to substantially observe beyond what is reported or retrieved in the virtual places. But reporting/retrieving is time bound since cyber content is dynamic. Content keeps changing by the minutes. Even with the best of archiving, it is difficult to keep track of online production. Add to this problem the fact that many

sites are for a number of reasons not visible to common search engines, and are, therefore, very likely to be missed. This is becoming more serious with the attempt to commercialise search engines listings. There is also internet censorship in which countries block access to specific sites for their citizens, usually for political reasons. There is even preemptive blocking of traffics from 'suspect' countries, such as from Nigeria, by a number of international organisations who regard communication from such a country as suspect. Furthermore commercial pressures are making web companies to block unprofitable countries from their networks (Stone and Helft 2009).

Fourth, how does one distinguish between the African Diaspora which operates on the basis of two publics (one in their natal country, and a second in their country of abode) and those members of virtual networks that are based in Africa? Because of the better facilities in their diasporic locations, diasporan Africans attend to produce more online content and discourse about Africa than is produced locally on the continent. While such diasporan cyber spaces are available to Africans on the mainland, they would most likely be listed as European or American spaces. Fifth, many cyber discussion groups and many mailing lists in Africa are personalised, with many hosted by websites that are not visible to many search engines. Many create their personal mailing lists which facilitate discussion among the lists members but these lists would appear only as email traffic and not be registered as public discussion lists. There is also the fact that mailing lists using gsm text messaging which is a very widespread phenomenon in Africa would not appear on listings of virtual public spaces.

While this paper does not intend to address these and many other methodological problems in studying the virtual public sphere in Africa and how such an African virtual sphere (and its sub-sets) can be isolated and mapped, it assumes, rather problematically, that the notion of the African virtual sphere can be conceptualised and rationalised, and is, therefore, a legitimate subject of intellectual and policy inquiry. Without specifically answering the many questions raised above, the paper assumes that the African virtual public sphere can be conceptualised as the way Africans and African interests appropriate and engage with ICTs to create spaces and discourses on issues and problems that may be local, national, continental or global. In creating and using these spaces and discourses, it must be admitted that they are open to citizens of other continents just as Africans could engage with virtual spheres that purport to be specific to some other continents. Finally, this paper does not seek to study specific instances of African virtual spheres, but draws generalisations from specific manifestations of the African virtual sphere such that its contours, practices and substantiation can be broadly outlined.

Towards a Typology of the Virtual Space in Africa

The African virtual public can be studied by locating several virtual spaces both as free discussion spaces as well as electronic/online publishing platforms that are devoted to social issues on Africa and its countries. These spaces include portals such as *Pambazuka* (www.pambazuka.org), several discuss groups on the yahoo, google and several other portals and the several mailing lists that have been set up by various organisations including both state and non-state actors. Most of these listserves, electronic publications and mailing lists are open to the public and can be accessed by signing up for membership. Membership allows one the privilege of receiving and making postings to these spaces. The websites on the other hand have places for interactivity to articulate and share positions with other visitors.

The major tools that are used by African virtual public sphere are emails, chat rooms, yahoo groups, wikis, social networking tools (facebook, twitter, etc), and limited online publications. There is also extensive use of mobile phone technology, especially through the use of short text messaging (stm) technology. Blogs are open spaces for people to share their views with the wide online public. They are, in a sense personal journals, maintained by individuals and groups. Blogging by Africans within Africa is still at its infancy. This is largely related to both cost and the limitations of infrastructure. Table 1 gives the relative position of Africa with respect to the number of blogs from a blog listing survey. As can be seen, Africa has the least number of blogs.

Table 1: Number of Blogs by Continent

Continent	Google
Africa	964
South America	1,850
Australasia	2,251
Asia	8,065
Europe	12,911
North America	38,017

Source: http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=location, accessed last on 8th September, 2008

The small size of the African virtual space can also be seen by looking at statistics relating to online discussion groups. This is shown in Table 2. While Europe and Asia have 31,184 and 30,124 google groups respectively

Africa has only 3187, just about 10 per cent of the European total. The situation is similar with the yahoo specialised groups. The implication of this is that there are few African online platforms that engage people in social discourse.

Table 2: Distribution of Discussion Groups

Region	Google	Yahoo specialised groups
Europe	31,184	1,840
Asia	30,124	6,166
Latin America	12,510	215
Middle East	3,778	1,279
Africa	3,187	776

Source: from http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=location&region=1 and http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

In addition to portals, many African newspapers are now online. Some of them allow for online discussion while others keep blogs for their columnists only. This has created sub virtual spaces around them. The significance of this is that the newspapers have improved their reach and accessibility, since most of the online editions are freely accessible. Through these online newspapers diasporan Africans also keep in close touch with developments in their home countries.

What the continent misses in terms of dense internet penetration, it seems to make up for in terms of the spread of gsm technology. Africa is the fastest growing market for gsm technology. While its penetration is yet to match that of the technologically advanced countries, it is possible to bridge that gap in a few years on the basis of current growth rates. Access to gsm phones has spread a culture of text messaging that is used for social activism in three ways. First, it provides a social network and numerous public spheres for the sharing of ideas and the articulation of positions by citizens. Second, it is used as a means of organisational coordination by civil society organisations as well as for general mobilisation of citizens behind specific causes. This particular use is best illustrated by the use of the gsm text messaging by civil society during the build up to the September 2003 consumer boycott of gsm service providers in Nigeria. People were mobilised using text messaging, resulting in a fairly successful one-day protest (Obadare 2004). Thirdly, text messaging is also used as a tool for advocacy to lobby state actors to support a cause or protest their support of unpopular causes.

Again to draw from a Nigerian example, during the campaign to get the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information Bill, the Freedom of Information Coalition initiated a text-based mobilisation in which members of the coalition sent text messages to members of the National Assembly urging them to support the passage of the bill. Similarly during the debate on the attempt to amend the constitution to allow the president a third term in 2006, civil society activists used text messaging to send protest messages to legislators who were known to be supporting the proposed amendment.

The African virtual public articulates personal, local and international problems. It allows individuals and groups to work together towards a common public goal. It is also a mechanism for political mobilisation, as different political actors use cyberspace to mobilise around their agendas. African virtual publics, like other virtual publics show diversity both in terms of the issues they engage with and their membership. This diversity is understandable as online subjects of interests to people tend to reflect their traditional issues of concern. The issues range from human rights, good governance, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, to human trafficking. The diversity of issues can be seen in the topics of concern to African discussion groups hosted by yahoo.

Table 3: Subject Distribution of African Online Discussion Groups

Issue	Number
Society	576
Business and finance	382
Schools and universities	360
Recreation	298
Computers	284
People	236
Arts and entertainment	193
Science and Technology	184
News	147
Health	134
Others	96
Home	39

Source: http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

Because of this diversity, there is also segmentation, and even fragmentation, as virtual spaces can be based on national, sub-national, ethnic-based, or religious memberships. For example there is a *Naija* group devoted to discussing politics in Nigeria just as there is a sub-national Igbo group devoted to the political engagements of the Pan Igbo ethnic community. There are also cultural platforms such as ethnic Yoruba www.yoruba.org. It is this fragmentation that reveals a tendency towards an 'us and them' framework of discourse. Sub-national groupings tend to consider the 'we' in terms of very specific cultural, religious, or ethnic markers which exclude as much as they unify. However, this correspondence between cultural group and the virtual public is only notional since participants needs not be limited to citizens of a given geo-cultural space. For example, *gamji* (www.gamiji.com), is widely seen as the virtual space for the articulation of political perspectives from northern Nigeria. This is based on the ethno-regional symbolism of its name. Yet postings are not limited to either those from northern Nigeria or even Nigeria. In general, the 'we' in the African virtual public becomes more inclusive when discourse borders on global issues such as imperialism and the environment; Western countries are usually seen as the 'them' against a collective African 'we'.

Fragmentation and differentiation in the African virtual public are also informed by the historic experiences of different discourses around nationality, ethnicity, citizenship and territorial claims in different parts of continent. These experiences – and their related unresolved discourses – have only found additional outlets for articulation in the virtual sphere. There is also evidence of unevenness in both the size and engagements of the virtual public across African countries. This unevenness is understandable as some countries have relatively better cyber capabilities than others.

Gender issues have received attention in the African virtual sphere. There is evidence of a number of virtual spaces for the articulation of gender discourses and the promotion of gender equality. The E-Network of National Gender Equality Monitoring in Africa (MGMnet-Africa Information Portal) of UNECA (http://www.uneca.org/daweca/gender_networks_in_africa.asp) provides a listing of some these spaces.

While there is yet no empirical mapping of the political impact of the African virtual sphere, there are indications that it exerts influence on politics and governance on the continent. It exerts influence on the political system in four complementary ways. First, it provides platforms for direct political mobilisation. When civil society groups uses e-posting to canvass support for legislation or to protest a policy, they are mobilising political opinion. Secondly, it provides avenues for civil society organisations to coordinate and work together on a common agenda. Third, it provides spaces for the

articulation of new social issues and problems, inserting them into local, national, regional and even global agendas. One of the successful uses of cyber platforms to insert specific issues onto policy agenda was the use of e-platforms by the African Youth Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) Network (AYISN). It campaigned to have the right to represent youth voices in national, continental and global policy making on ICT. Networking over poor ICT infrastructure in their respective countries, the youths have featured prominently in such development forums as NEPAD, the AU, and the African Development Forum, the last of which focused on youths. This networking has thrown African youths unto the centre stage of policy making on ICTs within the African continent (Segan 2004 Ya'u 2004). Another sub-virtual public sphere that has exerted influence is the online community cultivated by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in South Africa. It was able to use electronic networking to mobilise public opinion around the issue of treatment for HIV patients in South Africa (Wasserman, 2005). Fourth, government and government functionaries are reached directly via the virtual space. They are reached indirectly when traditional media appropriate the products of online deliberations.

Nevertheless, survey results suggest that there is no particular relationship between the state and the virtual spaces in Africa. This is partly the result of the open-ended nature of virtual space and the fact that it is variegated. The inability to fix its boundaries or define its distinguishing characteristics means that states find it difficult to relate to. At one level, a virtual network could be intensely opposed to the state. This is most noticed where the issues at stake are human rights and democratisation. Examples of such oppositional stance include the opposition to Mugabe's election in Zimbabwe, campaign against the manipulation of the election in Kenya, and the mobilisation of support against the state-sanctioned murders in Darfur. However, on some global issues, such as those surrounding the WTO, there have been instances when the views expressed by African states have coincided with those expressed on some cyber platforms. Despite this ambiguous relationship between the state and the African virtual public, what is certain is that most governments in Africa tend to fear the freedom the virtual public sphere offers to citizens and their organisations.

The great majority of global cyber networks have their origins in the West. Few have their origins in Africa. One possible implication of this is that these networks may serve as conduits for projecting Euro-centric perspectives on global issues. But counter hegemonic views, such as in the anti-globalisation movement, have also spread from the West. In general, the pluralism of the virtual public in Africa informs its overall ambivalence toward issues of globalisation and politics. While some virtual spheres are

created to enhance counter hegemonic discourses, others are there to reinforce these discourses. Still others approach the discourses from either religious or ethno-cultural standpoints.

Limitation of the Virtual Sphere in Africa

Certain limitations are common to all virtual publics. These include the increasing pressure for the commercialisation of cyberspace, the phenomenon of information overload, and the growing global trend towards censorship by governments in the wake of the September 11 attacks. However, there are some limitations that are specific to Africa. First, there is limited access to ICTs on the continent, making the virtual sphere a small island of the privileged who can overcome the barriers of cost and poor infrastructure. Access is both a function of available infrastructure as well as the cost of immediate access. Access to internet, like access to other ICTs, is more costly in Africa than in other continents. Using conventional tele-penetration indicators, we can see that in spite of the progress of the last few years, Africa still remains the least connected continent in terms of access to ICTs. While its share of world population is about 12 per cent, its total share of internet subscribers is less than 2 per cent. Similarly its share of internet users is just about 3.6 per cent of global users. Table 4 gives the relevant internet penetration indicators for different countries and continents.

Table 4: Internet Penetration Figures for the Year 2007

Continent/ country	Internet Subscribers (in 1000)	Subscribers Density	Internet Users (in 1000)	Users Density
Africa	9,674.0	1.15	49,682.3	5.19
Asia	265,761.0	6.85	569,798.0	14.34
Europe	137,446.0	20.71	331,799.4	41.22
USA	72,721.0	23.78	220,000.0	71.94
Canada	8,700.0	26.72	28,000.0	85.17

Source: From ITU website

Second, the dominance of foreign languages in ICT traffic in Africa excludes the majority of African citizens. Most of the discussions are conducted in European languages such as English, French and Portuguese which are the colonially imposed languages of formal learning in most African countries. Indigenous African languages are only beginning to establish their presence

in the cyberspace. The languages of discourse of various African discussion groups reflect this foreign linguistic dominance. A count from yahoo shows that out of the 34 African groups only one uses Swahili. All the others use any of English, French, or Portuguese. Third, Africa suffers from limited hosting capacity. Cyber networking is web-based. It means that there must be space for hosting the networks. Most African countries have only rudimentary capacity for hosting websites. This means most African cyber platforms are hosted outside the continent. In fact many African platforms are even cyber squatting on other continental systems. The reality is that without local hosting capacity, the necessary proliferation of platforms that will democratise access to the internet cannot take place.

Fourth, every technology comes with its specific skills demand. The use of ICTs requires not just functional literary but also digital literacy. Yet in many African countries, basic literacy and numeracy are still limited to a proportion of the population. For some of the countries, adult literacy is as low as 50 per cent. For such countries, therefore the mass of illiterate citizens are excluded from the use of most ICTs. Skills and knowledge on ICTs are not only unevenly distributed across Africa, they are also extremely low in comparison to other continents. A survey from google, shown in Table 5, suggests that most African discussion groups have membership sizes of less than 100 people. This however is not peculiar to African as the same trend can be observed for the other continents. One of the Africa discussion groups, *NaijaPolitics* (NaijaPolitics@yahoogroups.com, a group that started in 2006 and is devoted to the discussion of Nigerian politics, has a fairly large membership at 5,525. On the other hand *Africa Politics*, founded in 2002, has 1,311 members and *AfricanaPerspectives*, founded in 2000, has just about 146 members. It seems that some of the groups hardly expand with time.

Fifth, the often very slow speed of internet in Africa makes participation in the virtual sphere a time consuming proposition. It is difficult to provide an empirical correlation between the slow speed of internet access and its limited use. But an indirect indicator can be the frequency with which members make postings to their discussion groups. About 2,423 of the African groups on google did not register a single posting in a month, while about 376 had postings of less than 10 messages per month. These figures indicate low participation levels. They also suggest that many of the members of the groups are only passive recipients rather than active senders and recipients. A slightly different measure is the last time a group had a posting. As shown in Table 6, the majority of the African groups had their last post in the interval between 100-9,999 days. For nearly three months, the groups appear inactive. That goes to show that some of the groups are barely active.

Table 5: Membership Size of Sampled Discussion Groups

Continent	No	1-9 Member	10-99 Members	100-999 Member	1,000-9,9999 Members	10,000-99,999 Members	100,000 and above Members
Africa	3	1,823	961	216	41	1	0
Asia	303	17,309	9,231	2,189	292	33	2
Europe	1,360	15,501	9,462	2,328	212	17	1
USA (country)	38	18,595	7,170	1,470	153	11	0

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

Table 6: Days Since Last Post

Continent	Zero day	1-9 days	10-99 days	100-999 days	1000 and above days
Africa	118	678	520	907	80
Asia	1,080	7,503	4,204	9,693	1,561
Europe	1,624	7,635	6,177	1,703	0
USA (country)	681	12,356	2,613	6,974	746

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

Conclusion

A virtual public sphere has emerged in Africa but it is limited in size and influence, especially in relation to issues within the continent. It provides space for intense discussions on various social issues of concern among its privileged members. It is not an autonomous sphere, independent of the traditional public sphere but rather a specialised sub-sphere of the African public sphere. The African virtual public sphere is variegated both in terms of its concerns and composition. It includes and excludes depending on the issue at stake. Mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion include, for example, age (as in the case of youth networks), gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Because it tends to be anonymous, state agents and non-state actors can occupy the same virtual public and work on common issues only to later confront each other as adversaries in other forums. The African virtual public sphere is populated by elites for obvious reasons. While cost is a barrier to participation, literacy is the key inhibitor of the growth of the size of the sphere. In this sense, it sits problematically with Habermas' concept of the public sphere which must be inclusive. For this reason, its actual utilisation for political engagement and mobilisation is limited. But it most be noted that quite often cyberspace is used alongside the traditional public sphere. Thus the virtual sphere is best seen as an extension of, and compliment to, the non-virtual public sphere. It is not a distinct alternative.

Much of cyber networking in Africa is done by youths and professionals who are often academics, journalists, civil society activists, development workers, or government officials. This means that social status is critical to participation in the virtual public of Africa. This is contrary to Habermas' conception of the public sphere as an arena open to all. However, one salutary

consequence of the occupation of the virtual public by youth in Africa is the demystification of gerontocracy; youths who are more adept in the use of ICTs are getting more space for the articulation of their viewpoints and visions than the traditional public sphere would normally allow.

While in most African countries there has been no conscious attempt at censoring the internet, the fact remains that not all subjects can be freely discussed. Censorship is an attempt to control the virtual public sphere. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Egypt, Zambia, Tunisia and Algeria have already attempted censorship of the internet. While Tunisia attempted censorship in the built up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and Algeria places a censor on Facebook. Access to the social networking website Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) was blocked without explanation from 24 August 2008 in Tunisia. One of possible reasons for this action is the creation of personal webpages by dissidents on Facebook, launching debates about Tunisian society (Balancing Act, 2008). In fact many countries in Africa would have loved to censor the internet but for their lack of the requisite technological capacity to do so.

African virtual public sphere is small, but it is expanding, and has great potential to contribute to the expansion and consolidation of democracy on the continent. Many civil society organisations, pro-democracy activists, and journalists are using the e-platform to reach out to virtual communities, and mobilising such communities in the struggles for democratisation. The African virtual public sphere can also promote African integration, with online communities working together across countries, sharing experiences and learning from each other. The availability of instantaneous online language translation capabilities has bridged part of the communication gap between different components of the public sphere in Africa. It also allows for a much more open and inclusive exchange of ideas.

There is a growing knowledge divide in the world, despite the decreasing digital divide. It is important to draw a distinction between the digital divide which is seen in terms of differential access to ICTs and the knowledge divide which is the differential that exists in terms of the production and use of knowledge. In an unequal world, Africa faces the problem of diminishing knowledge production and increasing marginalisation. The struggle against globalisation in this context often takes the form of a struggle against implicit re-colonisation. The information age, that is facilitated by the use of ICTs is knowledge driven and Africa has to overcome its deficit in the area of knowledge production, to make its participation in the global virtual sphere more meaningful.

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The Internet as Public Sphere: A Zimbabwean Case Study (1999-2008)

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Abstract

The appearance of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on Zimbabwe's political landscape in 1999 and the publication of independent newspapers provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres to the government controlled media. Through these counter-publics Zimbabweans articulated their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. However, legislations like the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) have since 2002 enabled the government to exert a stranglehold over the free flow of information. This has subsequently forced Zimbabweans to resort to the Internet to articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the state. This paper addresses the key features, problems, and prospects of this cyber public sphere.

Résumé

L'émergence du Mouvement pour le changement démocratique (MDC) sur l'arène politique du Zimbabwe en 1999 et des journaux indépendants ont fourni aux Zimbabwéens des espaces publics comme une alternative aux médias contrôlés par l'Etat. Grâce à ce nouveau phénomène, les populations ont un moyen d'articuler leurs protestations contre la détérioration de la situation économique et politique du pays. Cependant, depuis 2002, les lois sur l'Accès à l'information, la Loi sur la Protection de l'information privée (AIPPA) et la Loi sur l'Ordre public et la sécurité (POSA) ont permis au gouvernement d'exercer son emprise sur la libre circulation des informations. Ceci a contraint les Zimbabwéens à recourir à Internet pour véhiculer leurs opinions politiques sans crainte de représailles de la part de l'Etat. Cet article met en lumière les traits principaux, les problèmes, et les perspectives de cet espace public du cyber.

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Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has undergone significant transformation since its popularisation by the writings of Jurgen Habermas. The form and *modus operandi* of the public sphere are arguably informed by the prevailing media of communication in a given society. The modern public sphere is therefore based on radio, television, newspapers, books, magazines and the Internet as well as the informal or alternative media. In view of the above, this paper examines the usefulness of the Internet as an alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe. It argues that the appearance of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on Zimbabwe's political landscape in 1999 and the publication of the *Daily News* and *Daily News on Sunday* provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres and counter-publics to articulate their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. However, legislations like Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) have enabled the government to exert a stranglehold over the media, media houses, and the free flow of information since 2002. In addition, faced with increasing political opposition at home, international isolation abroad, and an unprecedented economic crisis since 1999, the government has been trying to articulate and sustain a 'grand' and 'dominant' narrative resulting in the shrinking of the democratic space. This has subsequently forced Zimbabweans to resort to the Internet to articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the authoritarian state.

This paper argues that contemporary Internet capabilities like electronic mailing lists, wikis, forums, and blogs are potential counter-publics for citizens in countries where there is limited press freedom, freedom of expression and association. Consequently, the Internet offers the possibility for the development of a virtual counter-public sphere. The Internet has great potential for the development of civil society and democracy in situations like those in Zimbabwe. However, the limitations of the Internet as public sphere must also be recognised. The capacity for technology to revolutionise political participation and civil life is not a given. Discussion on the political impact of the Internet has also focused on issues like access, ownership, reliability, authenticity, technological determinism, encryption, commodification, intellectual property, identity and vandalism. In addition, cyber democracy tends to be elitist and an alternative voice for the educated urban citizens who have access to telecommunication infrastructure and electricity.

Zimbabwean Politics and the Media (1980-2008)

A free and open media enhances a democratic political culture and dissemination of political information. In Zimbabwe, the media has historically not been playing its role in promoting democratic participation by the citizens. The media has witnessed varying degrees of control by successive governments, especially between 1965 and 2008. At independence from Britain in 1980, the country inherited a dualistic and contradictory legacy of democracy for the white minority, and authoritarianism for the black majority. During the regime of the minority government led by Ian Smith (1965-1979), the country's 'mediascape' was characterised by state censorship and the banning of media publications and literary works deemed subversive to the racist colonial regime. Restrictive laws included the Official Secrets Act, the Law and Order Maintenance Act (LOMA) and the Emergency Powers Act. However, within white Rhodesian society, the media served as a public sphere and exercised a degree of freedom as long as it avoided issues of national security (Alexander 2006:47).

Between 1980 and 2008, the Zimbabwean media developed in three transitional phases. The period 1980-1990 witnessed an unprecedented expansion of media coverage throughout the country. Government opened up the public sphere by training and employing black journalists in mainstream media, introducing more local language programmes on radio and television, and introducing community and rural newspapers under the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT). However, by 1990, 'the state had already started usurping editorial autonomy at ZMMT, threatened a critical private press, and the under-developed rural market had failed to sustain a vibrant community press' (Alexander 2006:47). Between 1990 and 1998, contradictory developments were evident within the media. The implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) opened up the economy to market forces leading to the mushrooming and expansion of mainstream and urban-based independent media. The period saw the launch of the *Daily Gazette, Sunday Times, Sunday Gazette, Horizon Magazine* and *High Density Mirror*. However, by 1995 most of these publications had collapsed and new ones had emerged, notably *The Zimbabwe Independent, The Standard* and the *Zimbabwe Mirror* (Saunders 1997). In addition, most of the newspapers were urban-based with limited circulation.

The period between 1999 and the formation of the 'all-inclusive government' in 2009, under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) signed between the MDC and ZANU PF in September 2008, witnessed increasing challenge to state hegemony by socio-political and economic interests in and out of the country. The period also witnessed the implosion of

Zimbabwe's economy, which was engendered by a complex synergy of factors including the country's military involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) conflict from the late 1990s, corruption, the effects of ESAP and the farm occupations, and the implementation of the controversial Fast Tract Land Reform Programme (2000-2003) which disrupted agriculture. The period also witnessed the enactment of repressive media laws like AIPPA (which replaced Ian Smith's LOMA), POSA, and the Broadcasting Services Act (BSA) of 2001. It should, however, be noted that Constitutional Amendment No. 18 and 19 have seen substantial revisions of AIPPA, BSA, POSA and other restrictive legislations following inter-party dialogue, the Global Political Agreement, and the subsequent formation of the inclusive government in 2009.

Nonetheless, the importance of the Internet as public sphere in Zimbabwe can be better appreciated if situated within the country's increasingly hostile and dangerous public sphere and a restrictive 'mediascape' since the formation of the MDC in 1999. The emergence of the MDC was a milestone in the development of opposition politics in the country. Between 1980 and the signing of the Unity Accord of 1987 by the Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) to form ZANU PF, opposition politics was dominated by PF-ZAPU. Between 1987 and 1999 the political opposition was fragmented, though the Edgar Tekere-led Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) 'made a powerful showing for a while' (Masunungure 2004:153). According to Waldahl (2004), ZUM and the Democratic Party (DP) remained political unknowns largely due to lack of media publicity, which remained dominated by the ruling ZANU PF party.

The post-1999 opposition was dominated by the MDC, which like PF-ZAPU showed potential to challenge ZANU PF's dominance over Zimbabwean politics. In fact, Labuschagne (2003:15) notes that the emergence of Tsvangirai as leader of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) 'supplied the peasants, working class and the petty bourgeoisie with a vehicle to articulate their protest on the weakening economic situation and their alienation from a real political voice'. The registration of the MDC as a political party and its respectable performance in the 2000 election demonstrated the level of opposition against the policies of the Mugabe government (*Daily News* 14 March 2000). After successfully campaigning for the 'no' vote in the February 2000 referendum, the MDC also performed fairly well during the 2000 parliamentary election despite the methodical and systematic repression, violence and intimidation supposedly orchestrated by ZANU PF against MDC supporters and leaders. More so,

despite the violence and the fact that the MDC had been in existence for only nine months, the MDC won 57 seats (46 per cent of the vote) as opposed to ZANU PF's 62 seats (48 per cent of the total vote), with a third party, ZANU Ndonga, getting one seat (ZESN 2000; Raftopoulos 2004:13). The MDC election result was a substantial achievement for opposition politics in Zimbabwe. In fact, Sachikonye, (2000b:5) describes the 2000 elections as a turning point in Zimbabwe's political landscape as the MDC emerged a significant opposition party in parliament. However, repression, intimidation and alleged vote rigging marred the 2002 presidential poll pitting the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai against Robert Mugabe of ZANU PF. According to the Preliminary Report of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Election Observer Mission (2002), there was lack of access to the political media by political parties other than the ruling ZANU PF party. In addition to this were attacks on independent media houses and journalists.

The appearance of the MDC on Zimbabwe's political landscape, and the publication of the pro-MDC *Daily News* and *Daily News on Sunday* by the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) provided Zimbabweans with alternative public spheres to articulate their protests against the deteriorating economic and political situation in the country. The private media challenged the official version of the Zimbabwe crisis, which essentially reduced it to a bilateral dispute between Harare and London over the land question and its internationalisation which sucked in Washington, the European Union (EU), white countries of the Commonwealth, and other supposedly African and local adjuncts of the 'regime change agenda'. The local independent media gave expression to a counter-hegemonic narrative which challenged this government line. It also kept the country's citizens and the international community aware of the alleged rampant state – sponsored human rights violations especially during the 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections. However, the above role by the independent media ignited reprisals from the government through legal and extra-legal responses. These included the enactment of repressive media laws like AIPPA (2002) and POSA (2002), the bombing of the *Daily News* printing press in 2001, a few days after government had declared that the paper posed a threat to national security. Other measures include the arrest of journalists, and the banning of the *Daily News* and other critical independent newspapers.

The enactment of the AIPPA and POSA restricted the holding of political meetings and rallies by the political opposition, crippled press freedom and gagged the independent media. Alexander (2006:10) observes that the resulting closure of space for alternative information:

> Has dramatically hindered democratic advancement, particularly in rural areas. The existence of POSA means that to hold simple discussions under a tree, for example, is an illegal act… The closure of the *Daily News*, the only independent daily source of events and opinions, has been a major blow to urban populations.

POSA and its amendments criminalised the distribution of political posters, pamphlets or other such material in public places and private homes without permission from the police. A breach of the law attracted a jail sentence of up to five years. Consequently, POSA stifled public political engagement, debate and dialogue both in the urban and rural areas necessitating the need for counter-publics. The AIPPA provided for the regulation of the mass media and the establishment of a Media and Information Commission (MIC) (AIPPA 2002). A ZANU PF apologist and lecturer at the Harare Polytechnic, Tafataona Mahoso was appointed chairman of the MIC. According to Masunungure (2004:184), government's objective in enacting such restrictive media laws was to completely cut out the MDC from its constituency and the public. However, despite the uneven political playing field, Tsvangirai got 42 per cent of the votes as opposed to Mugabe's 56 per cent in the 2002 presidential poll, an election that was declared not free and fair by the EU and the Commonwealth but endorsed by many African countries and the developing world.

In the run-up to the March 2008 harmonised elections, state run (pro-government) newspapers included the *Herald*, the *Chronicle*, the *Sunday Mail* and the *Sunday Times*. The Government and ZANU-PF had monopoly over radio broadcasts and the country's only television station, ZTV. In addition, since 2003, government had monopoly on daily newspapers. In fact, Alexander (2006:46) observes that 'in Zimbabwe, the authoritarian state is the principal player in media policy and regulation. Because of its undemocratic nature, the state has in the past… curtailed the watchdog function of the press through legal and extra-legal means'. Public media became important tools for maintaining and extending government authority.

The MDC was denied space in state controlled media and it resorted to independent (pro-MDC) newspapers, online publications, foreign radio stations and regional and Western media to articulate and disseminate political messages. Along the same vein, Mugari (2008:3) observes that, 'in Zimbabwe, there is a long tradition of resistance media dating back to the liberation struggle that provided alternative public spaces with a counter hegemonic script'. Local independent newspapers included *The Standard*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Gazette*, all of which are published in Harare. The first two are owned by Trevor Ncube, a Zimbabwean business

tycoon based in South Africa, while the *Financial Gazette* is owned by local businesspeople linked to the ZANU-PF government. Media density remains in favour of urban and peri-urban areas. In addition, before the March 2008 elections, Zimbabweans were also increasingly resorting to 'pirate radio stations' for alternative political views. These radio stations operating outside the country included Short Wave Radio Africa (UK) and Studio 7 (America). Others also made use of satellite television, the Internet, mobile telephony and other alternative media to subvert state censorship and articulate and share political ideas.

However, both the state-controlled and 'independent' media have failed to transcend the bifurcated terrain of the discourse about the Zimbabwean crisis. In general, media reports since 1999 have assumed a polemical outlook endorsing or legitimising the ZANU-PF government on the one hand, or the oppositional stance of the MDC on the other. *The Herald* and ZTV uncritically accept and reproduce every aspect of ZANU-PF's policies while the pro-MDC papers and online publications attack government positions without giving reasoned alternatives (Waldahl 2004). This 'attack journalism' limited the media's capacity to provide insightful and educative political information to the electorate. Raftopoulos (2005) observes that the Zimbabwean crisis has been constructed through a dichotomy: on the one hand, a radical nationalist redistributive project carried out as historical redress in the face of neo-liberal orthodoxy, or on the other, a breakdown of the norms of liberal governance through the machinations of an authoritarian political figure. The state managed to reduce the public media to cheerleaders of the ZANU-PF government. In addition, public media failed to claim its editorial autonomy as established through the ZMMT, which was dissolved and replaced by New Ziana in 2001. The state-controlled media, like the independent press and online publications, became increasingly partisan (Alexander 2006:48; *The Herald* 09/05/2000).

Developments in Zimbabwe between 1999 and 2008 seem to support Tomaselli's assertion that 'in Africa, typically, yesterday's resistance fighters become tomorrow's repressive elites. These groupings then tend to betray the democratic principles for which they claimed to have fought, by curtailing or controlling the nature of the public sphere, as did their autocratic predecessors whom they deposed' (Tomaselli 2009:15). In addition to the *Daily News* and the *Daily News on Sunday*, other banned newspapers included the *Tribune* and the *Weekly Times*. The ANZ newspapers were accused of failing to register with the state-run MIC as required by AIPPA. They refused to register on the basis that they regard AIPPA as unconstitutional. The ANZ has been fighting legal battles with the state but its papers remain banned.

The president of the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists (ZUJ), Matthew Takaona, in August 2008 observed that 'it is clear that the *Daily News* case is political and has very little to do with the laws governing the country's media. The tragedy is that Zimbabwe has been turned into a media desert' (*The Financial Gazette* 15-20 August 2008:3). Takaona echoed sentiments that had been raised by Brian Raftopoulos who posited that:

> Continuing its onslaught against civil society, the state sought to close off the spaces for the privately owned media to operate. Through restrictive legislation, threats, newspaper burning, the bombing of the alternative press, and the deportation of critical foreign correspondents, the Zimbabwean state followed, dishonourably, in the footsteps of its Rhodesian predecessor, and removed any doubts that it was still concerned about the legitimacy of its citizenry (Raftopoulos 2001:1).

The *Daily News* offered an alternative and competing narrative to Zimbabweans but was regarded by government as a subversive adjunct of the MDC and part of the 'regime change' agenda. In addition, the *Weekly Times*' operating license was cancelled by the MIC allegedly on the grounds that the paper had misled the regulator when seeking to register the paper. According to MIC chair Tafataona Mahoso the newspaper's owners, Mthwakazi Publishing House, had said that the *Weekly Times* aimed to inform, educate, spearhead development in the country, and uphold the rules of fair impartial reporting and journalistic integrity. The MIC claimed that the paper had not made any attempt at fulfilling this professional promise in its political commentary. One of the *Weekly Times*' leading stories was an interview with Mugabe's arch-critic and former Archbishop, Pius Ncube who accused Mugabe of remaining unrepentant following the army's (5th Brigade) massacre of mostly civilians in Matebeleland and Midlands provinces during the early 1980s dissident insurgency. The massacres are commonly referred to as *Gukurahundi*. It is not clear if the Mthwakazi Publishing House was linked to the 'Mthwakazi Project' starting from the early 2000s, when civic activists in Matebeleland and cyber activists in the Diaspora started calling for the establishment of the secessionist Mthwakazi Republic in Matebeleland and the Midlands provinces. The Mthwakazi Project is an example of secessionist ambitions propagated by a cyber community, complete with a map, flag and anthem of the so-called Mthwakazi Republic. However, the 'republic' or Mthwakazi community has no physical reality as it exists only on the Internet (*www.mthwakazionline.org*). Nonetheless, its existence on cyber space indicates the frustration of some people of Matebeleland and Midlands provinces' with the ZANU-PF government and their search for an alternative political space.

The efforts of the ZANU-PF government at controlling the critical press were part of a broader strategy of spreading its own version of the causes of the Zimbabwean crisis. Between 1999 and 2008, the government tried to articulate and sustain a 'grand' and 'dominant' narrative through the teaching of a 'nationalist' National Strategic Studies in colleges and the introduction of the National Youth Service programme. Other state-funded projects aimed at advancing government's 'grand narrative' included the Oral History Project: 'Capturing a Fading National Memory' that was launched in Tsholotsho by the then Information Minister Jonathan Moyo on 15 May 2004, and television programmes like '*Nhaka Yedu*' (Our Heritage), 'National Ethos' and 'Melting Pot'.

A New Alternative Public Sphere

Overall, the above developments resulted in the shrinking of the democratic space forcing citizens to resort to other counter-publics where they can have access to multiple and competing narratives and discourses. The Internet has emerged as an alternative public sphere for Zimbabweans within and outside the country. Zimbabwe has many websites, in and outside the country, ranging from news and media, money and shipping services and digital telephony services (Ndlovu 2009). Zimbabweans have resorted to cyberspace in order to share and articulate their political views without fear of reprisals from the state. In fact, electronic mailing lists, peer-to-peer networks, wikis, Internet forums, blogs and emails are increasingly becoming important sites for political intercourse and these are almost impossible for the Zimbabwe government control. A large corpus of online publications focusing on the Zimbabwe situation has sprouted since 1999. These include the *Zimbabwe Situation*, *Zimonline*, *talkzimbabwe*, *zimdaily*, *newzimbabwe*, *ZW News* and *zvakwana.org*. *ZW News* and *Zimonline* are produced in South Africa while *Zimbabwe Situation* is run by Zimbabweans in Australia who compile news items from different online sources. *New Zimbabwe.com*, which is published in Wales, features tabloid-style news items and commentary. In addition to these online publications and blogs are Internet radio stations like *Afro Sounds FM, SW Africa* and *Zimnetradio* (Alexander 2006:51; Witchell 2005).

Despite the Zimbabwean economic crisis, there has been a notable growth of Internet usage in the country. Internet use increased from 50 000 users or 0.3 per cent of the population in 2000, to 820 000 or 6.7 per cent of the population in 2005 and to 1 351 000 users or 10.9 per cent of the population in March 2008 (*internetworldstats* 2004). Similarly, the number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) grew from less than 6 in 2003 to 27 in 2008. However, while only 10 percent of Zimbabwe's estimated population of

12.4 million in 2008 had access to the Internet, the figure represented one of the highest Internet usage rates in Africa. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, in 2002 Zimbabwe was among the top 11 countries with relatively high Internet usage in Africa with more than 35 000 dial-up Internet subscribers who had accounts with the country's leading ISPs at the time, namely Africaonline, Ecoweb, Telconet, Zimbabwe Online, Zimweb and ComOne. In addition, of the 4 million Internet subscribers in Africa in 2002, over 60 per cent were reported to be from South Africa and Zimbabwe (*internetworldstats* 2004). It is apparent that Zimbabwe's telecommunications industry, especially the mobile telephony and Internet sectors have witnessed relative growth since 2000. To illustrate this point, in 1990 there were only 10 computer companies in the country but in 2004 the number had increased to 200. Internet use in business, education, media, politics, activism and other social activities have also grown in leaps and bounds. This led to the sprouting of Internet cafes especially in cities like Harare and Bulawayo (Zimbabwe ISPs Association, 25 October 2004). In fact, in 2004, Harare had over 30 Internet cafes up from less than 20 in 2002. These included Quick n' Easy, InTouch, DCAfrica, Telco, Digi Café, ChuWeb and the state operated ComOne.

Another interesting development over the past few years has been the government's computerisation programme. Mugabe has been donating computers to urban and rural schools ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections. However, most rural schools have limited access to telecommunication infrastructure and electricity. As a result, most of the computers are just lying idle, while others are reported to have been stolen. It remains to be seen how ZANU PF intends to use these computers for political gain apart from the apparent attempt to buy votes. Most Zimbabweans access the Internet at cyber cafes, colleges, schools and the workplace. A few access the Internet at their homes, on mobile phones, at their farms or other places. In addition, apart from email and Facebook, the Internet is still largely under-utilised in Zimbabwe. In addition to universities and colleges, most Internet users are corporate organisations, government agencies, commercial institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties. Internet use for *e*-Commerce has been limited, but foreign currency dealers in Harare, mostly the youth, have also been using the Internet to illegally 'burn money'. This refers to the abuse of e-banking by illegal forex dealers (*The Herald* 20 September 2008).

The Internet has also offered the possibility for the development of an electronic commons, a virtual public sphere. Internet websites allow individuals to subvert POSA and AIPPA and voice their political views.

Internet users can also receive regular email attachments (including documents, photographs and images) from human rights organisations, political activists and political parties. A number of individuals, bloggers and cyber-activists in Zimbabwe have been using the Internet as public sphere. A notable example is cyber activist Bev Clark who runs the *Kubatana.net* website. She has been using the website to post political messages, condemn human rights abuses by government and other political players and to inform viewers of forthcoming meetings by political parties and civic groups. These updates are often sent to emails of subscribers (see *Los Angeles Times* 16 September 2008). Together with her partner Brenda Burrell, Clark often organises protests and sends out newsletters and text messages to subscribers in their mailing list. In addition, Clark has used *Kubatana.net* to protest against the numerous arrests of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) leaders Magodonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams.

Bloggers and cyber activists also include former Rhodesians, former white commercial farmers whose land was taken by government under the fast tract land reform programme, journalists, politicians, academics, students and security forces. They use the Internet to express paranoia, humour, rumour, frustration, stoicism, rage, anger and hope in view of the Zimbabwean crisis. A former white commercial farmer and victim of the farm seizures, Cathy Buckle, posts her angry protests on *Cathybuckle.com*. On his blog (*comradefatso.vox*.com) and website, (*www.comradefatso*.com), Comrade Fatso, a Zimbabwean poet and ZANU-PF critic whose real name is Samm Farai Monro, called Harare 'our comedy-of-errors town, a city full of lines snaking out of banks or supermarkets depending on the season'. After the 30th March 2008 presidential poll, Comrade Fatso wrote on his blog; 'we await the rigging. We await the victory. With a hesitant joy. And a bounce in our step'. The results of the election were released only after a month had elapsed, with allegedly no winner with over 50 per cent of the total vote as demanded by the constitution.

Some of the loudest of the cyber activists are in the Zimbabwean Diaspora (see *zireport.com*). The Internet has kept the Zimbabwean Diaspora informed about events at home. It has also facilitated their networking with each other. In fact, Internet-based political activism is largely associated with the Zimbabwean Diaspora community. The Internet has been a new front for the circulation of electronic petitions condemning the Zimbabwe government. Some of these are sent to the United Nations (UN), the Africa Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). However, it is difficult to quantify the actual impact of cyber activism. What is clear though is that it has enabled ideas to be discussed and linkages to be forged between

individuals and political movements at home and abroad (Alexander 2006:52). However, the Zimbabwean Diaspora has been criticised for its excessive reliance on the Internet at the expense of other forms of political activism. Consequently, its activism has been disparagingly described as 'desktop or keyboard activism' (Kwinjeh 2005). It has also been noted that:

> the overwhelming use of the Internet to spread information and advance debate, which is a major characteristic of the struggle in the Diaspora, has proved to be the greatest weakness of Diaspora activism. While opening up space for debate, cyber democracy has offered democracy to a minority and restricted the major political debates to those with access to computers and Internet (Alexander 2006:52).

The Internet is largely a preserve of the educated and professional Zimbabwean Diaspora community. In addition, an analysis of the content and nature of the political debate on the Internet indicates that it has been used to fan hate speech, regionalism and ethnicity.

At this juncture, it should be noted that the Zimbabwe government has been making efforts to censor cyberspace and online publications deemed hostile to it. This culminated in the enactment of the Interception of Communications Act (ICA) in August 2007. The Act seeks to legalise the interception and monitoring of communications in the course of their transmission in Zimbabwe. The Act also provides for the establishment of a monitoring centre and the granting of an interception warrant to the security establishment or the Commissioner General of Police or the Commissioner General of the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority by the Minister of Transport and Communications. In addition, the Act requires ISPs to install systems which are technically capable of interception at all times. The legislation violates the privacy of the citizens. However, government does not appear to have the technical or manpower capacities to fully implement the Act. The ICA was preceded by incessant and sustained, but fruitless, government threats to bug cyberspace. For example, in July 2004, media reports indicated that the government was planning to acquire 'high-tech' equipment from China, a country also known for repressive media laws and authoritarianism. The Chinese technology was supposed to enable the state to interfere with the flow of information and to monitor the operations of 'hostile' online publications. However, given the country's unprecedented economic crisis, coupled with a chronic foreign currency shortage, the government does not have the financial capacity to sustain this 'cyber war' against online publications and Internet users.

Nonetheless, the ZANU-PF government's mistrust of independent news and dissenting opinion is arguably well documented. The party's highest

decision making body, the Politburo, in 2007, reportedly blacklisted 41 online publications that were deemed to be part of the 'regime change' agenda. These included *Zimbabwe Situation, zimonline, zimdaily, newzimbabwe* and *zvakwana.org*. The Politburo meeting had been presented with sample downloads from some of these online publications. One of the downloads extracted from *Zimupdate Forums***,** gave seven reasons why Mugabe did not want to step down including that: 'he is afraid of being hanged like Saddam Hussein of Iraq; fear of being extradited like Charles Taylor of Liberia; he is afraid that his party would disintegrate; he is intoxicated with power; and he does not trust anyone in ZANU-PF who can succeed him'. In addition, the ZANU-PF Secretary for Science and Technology, Olivia Muchena, also underlined government's mistrust of online publications and Internet users. While presenting a report on the role and importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs), on 26 July 2007, Muchena claimed that ZANU-PF had no choice but embrace ICTs for it to remain politically relevant adding that:

> Comrades, we are all aware that ZANU-PF is at war from within and outside our borders. Contrary to the gun battles we are accustomed to, we now have cyber-warfare fought from one's comfort zone, be it bedroom, office, swimming pool, etc but with deadly effects.

Muchena further posited that ZANU-PF should identify the brains behind the hostile websites, their target market, their influence and impact on Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF's image. She added that the Internet and cell phones had become weapons used to fight ZANU-PF and that ICTs were now platforms that peddle 'virulent propaganda to de-legitimise our just struggle against Anglo-Saxons'.

It should however be noted that ZANU-PF's mistrust of online publications and the Internet is not totally unfounded. Journalists on some online publications have been accused of using hate speech which fuels political polarisation in the country. Like the government controlled public media, online publications have failed to deepen debate about the Zimbabwe crisis and have adopted uncritical endorsements of opposition politics and a confrontational negativism towards the ZANU-PF government (Alexander 2006). The private media and the Internet need to be more balanced and probing and should problematise the nature of the post-colonial state in Zimbabwe. Alexander (2006) thus urges the media to critique the political economy of globalisation and global trade with relation to Zimbabwe. Internet use has seen the erosion of the quality and depth of debate on the Zimbabwean crisis as anyone with Internet access can post any material online, regardless

of the quality (cf. Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese 2004:3). Other pertinent issues include authenticity, reliability, accountability and responsibility as well as misinformation and deliberate lies (see *The Sunday Mail* 22-28 March 2009:8). Along the same vein Habermas (1989:170) observes that the news is made to resemble a narrative from its format down to stylistic detail. The rigorous distinction between fact and fiction is ever more frequently abandoned. The Internet is a powerful political tool which can also be used to undermine national security and to propagate hate speech and the ethnicisation of politics. In fact, one of the dominant and most frequent topics on *Mthwakazi* website is the issue of *Gukurahundi*, an emotive and highly charged topic in Zimbabwean politics with the potential to fuel ethnic conflicts.

Conclusion: Electronic Discourse in a Period of Cholera

In view of the discussion above, a number of conclusions can be drawn. The concept of the public sphere has undergone a number of transformations since the 1960s when it was popularised by the writings of Jurgen Habermas. Despite the wide criticism that the concept has attracted, especially from feminist scholars and postmodernists, the theory remains pertinent to discussions of democratic participation, democratisation, governance and civil society in Africa. In addition, the basic level of interactive space has shifted from the coffee house to include mass media, newspapers, television and computer-based information systems. The Internet has subsequently emerged as an important counter-public for citizens under authoritarian governments where there is no freedom of association and expression. The Internet and cyber democracy are, however, associated with a plethora of challenges including technological determinism, access, gender, ethnicity, encryption, commodification, and intellectual property rights, among others. In most African countries, the Internet remains elitist and a luxury for grassroots communities facing chronic poverty, war and disease; an unaffordable luxury for rural and peri-urban communities ravaged by chronic poverty, starvation and diseases, including HIV/AIDS and cholera. Nonetheless, despite its apparent limitations, the Internet has been an important counter-public for Zimbabweans in the context of repressive media laws like AIPPA and POSA. It has also been a forum for political discussion and engagement between Zimbabweans at home and in the Diaspora without fear of reprisals from the state. Despite the threats, the government currently has no capacity to censor cyber space. Consequently, the Internet remains an important counter-public for an increasing section of Zimbabwean society.

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