



## Introduction

### The ‘Missing’ Concept: What is the ‘Public Sphere’ Good for?

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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’.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> This economic 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.<sup>5</sup> These critics raise important issues around the place of gender, class and race in Habermas' 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*,<sup>6</sup> 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...<sup>7</sup>

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'<sup>8</sup> 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'<sup>9</sup> 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>.

