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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

* Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. E-mail: wendy.willems@wits.ac.za

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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