



## **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 reshaped 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 Habermasian 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 per cent 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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