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

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, Africa has been involved in a process of re-democratization. This process has been shaped by the way previously marginalized groups have entered or re-entered public life, interacting with each other and with those in positions of authority, thereby redefining politics through the generation of a ‘contentious pluralism’ in the public sphere.¹ This period has also been characterized by an increasing emphasis on civil society organizations, with important implications for the constitution of public life and public policy. Yet, scholars and activists have not paid sufficient attention to the public sphere as the important background for both re-democratization and civil society. In this paper, I look at the nature of the African public sphere as a significant factor in politics and public policy.

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 organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion ...that principle of public information which ...has made possible the democratic control of state activities.’² Habermas’ conception of the public sphere locates it outside the state and the market and conceives of it as an institutionalized 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 political practice. While Habermas’ conception has had a profound impact on social and political ideas and practices, it has nevertheless been criticised as being ‘not wholly satisfactory’.³ 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 globalization. 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 Africa. Section four interprets contemporary democratization 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 African democratization.

2. 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’.⁴ It was in the 18th Century that the concepts of public sphere and public opinion arose through the development of the bourgeoisie in Europe. 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

¹ Guidry, John A. and Mark Q. Sawyer, 2003, ‘Contentious Pluralism: The Public Sphere and Democracy’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 1, 2.

² Habermas, Jurgen, 2006, ‘The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article’, in Meenakshi, G. and Douglas Kellner, eds., *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, Blackwell, Oxford, 73-4.

³ Fraser, Nancy, 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.

⁴ *ibid.*

the monarch. Supporting this monarchical ‘representative publicity’ were ordinary opinions – cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values – which persisted as sedimentation of history.⁵ These opinions allowed the monopolization 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.’⁶ 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.’⁷ 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. 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.’⁸ Through the public sphere, these private citizens ‘assembled into a public body’ transmitted ‘the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order, ideally, to transform political into “rational” authority.’⁹ 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.’¹⁰ 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 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 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 and the domain of common concern is discursively established by the participants themselves.

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.’¹¹ The rise of social democracy and the welfare state also meant that the public sphere expanded beyond the bourgeoisie. The public body lost its social exclusivity, its coherence, and its relatively high

⁵ Habermas, 2006, 74.

⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁷ Ibid, 74.

⁸ Ibid, 76.

⁹ Ibid, 76.

¹⁰ Bolton, Roger, 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.

¹¹ Habermas, 2006, 76.

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.’¹² The dialogic and rationalist character of the public sphere is lost due to the pressures of the commercialization 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-colonize the public sphere.

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.¹³ Other critics like Fraser point out that Habermas’ conception includes ‘a number of significant exclusions’¹⁴ – 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’,¹⁵ Habermas privileges the white, male, bourgeois individual over all others. Habermas failed to examine the ‘nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres’ which Fraser called *counterpublics*. She agreed 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.’¹⁶ Furthermore, Fraser argues that the idealistic suspension of class and status hierarchies might itself be a strategy for distinction, while deliberation itself 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 globalization and the internet have also re-shaped our understanding of the public sphere. Opinions vary as to the effect of the internet and media globalization 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. The characteristics of costless reproduction, instantaneous dissemination, and radical decentralization have profound political implications. The internet with its ‘virtual communities’, ‘electronic cafes’, bulletin boards, e-mail lists, and computer 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.’¹⁷ Arguing along this line, some have suggested that globalization is

¹² Ibid, 77.

¹³ Bolton, 2005, 21.

¹⁴ Fraser, 1992, 113.

¹⁵ Bolton, 2005, 24.

¹⁶ Fraser, 1995, 116.

¹⁷ Poster, Mark, 1995, ‘CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere’.

leading to the gradual deterritorialization 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.¹⁸

Others have challenged the view that globalization and the communication revolution have had beneficial effects on the public sphere. We recall that Habermas himself lamented the effects of the commercialization of the media and the conversion of public opinion into publicity and public relations, when he argued that '[t]he world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only.'¹⁹ 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.'²⁰ 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.'²¹ 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.'²² The disadvantages that women suffer in society are often carried over into the 'virtual communities' where women are generally underrepresented and are often subjected to harassment and abuse.²³ 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 *egovernance* facilities allow governments and politicians to sell their positions directly to the public without debate. Only in a few instances does the internet create the rational, critical, and open discourse necessary for the public sphere and democracy.²⁴

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 appropriate 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. Arguing that 'television soaps are the most reliable documents of our era'²⁵, he suggests that mass obsession with celebrity scandals and such gossip actually mask serious cultural concerns. 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

¹⁸ Boeder, Pieter, 2000, 'Habermas' heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society', *Firstmonday: Peer-Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, Issue 10, 9.

¹⁹ Cited in Boeder, *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Poster, *op cit.*

²⁴ Dahlberg, Lincoln, 2001, 'The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere', *Information, Communication & Society*, 4, 4.

²⁵ McGuigan, Jim, 2005, 'The Cultural Public Sphere', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8, p. 430.

knowing). Yet, they teach the audience ‘a lesson, everyday’, and 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 ...²⁶

In Africa with its orality and musical traditions, the notions of the cultural public sphere and ‘infotainment’ are of particular importance.

3. Africa and Multiple Publics

How have these debates about the public sphere been reflected in African political and academic life? 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 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 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.²⁷ For Ekeh, the public realm is made up of the collective interests of the citizenry. Ekeh argues that colonialism is to Africa, what feudalism was to Europe, that is, the historical context for the advance to modernity. Western Europe 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, 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. The western educated African is seen as key for this construction. While the ethnic primordial public is the sector of moral obligations and nurturing, the westernized civic sector based on the colonial state is seen as the zone of amoral conduct with undue emphasis on rights and overblown de-emphasis on duties. Due to the psychological stresses of modernization, 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.’²⁸ The result of these conflicting notions of citizenship is the promotion of ‘tribalism’, nepotism and corruption. This is, of course, an over-simplified argument. Contrary to Ekeh’s assertions,

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 435.

²⁷ Ekeh, Peter, 1975, ‘Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17, 1, p.91.

²⁸ *ibid*. p. 108.

the western educated African elite cannot be blame as the sole inventor of ethnicity or 'tribalism.' And his argument ignores the reality of cleavages, inequalities, and ethnic hierarchies which pervaded colonial and post-colonial Africa, shaping peoples' life chances and making ethnic mobilization an attractive proposition for many elites and non-elites. In the contemporary period, African civil society has been accused of ethnic fragmentation and primordial attachments on the strength of. Ekeh's argument.²⁹

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 democratization process in post-apartheid South Africa. In canvassing the importance of 'a participating public' to South Africa's democratization process, the Parliament drew attention to the importance of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. However, attention is drawn to the fact that there are 'two South Africas', one well resourced and the other poor and marginalized. It was implied that this had implications for the South African public sphere(s).³⁰ This theme of the connection between the heritage of racial inequality, the public sphere, and democratization has been taken up by a group of local academics.³¹ It is pointed out that 61 percent of the black population is poor, compared to only 1 percent of the white population; in the top income quintile are to be found 65 percent of white households, 45 percent of Indian, 17 percent of Coloured, and only 10 percent of African. It is in this context 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 South African society. As Fraser pointed in her critique of Habermas, the public sphere is the site for the constitution of multiple identities. Identities are an important part of contemporary South African society and politics, for 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 ...'³² These processes have had differential effects on notions of citizenship. While the middle class has 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.³³ It would seem that the public sphere in post-apartheid South Africa is simultaneously generating an all embracing 'South Africanism' amongst some classes and a more restrictive notion of citizenship amongst others.

The role of information technologies has featured prominently in the South African discourse. In a recent publication, Daniel Drache suggests that modern communication technologies have led to an unprecedented expansion in 'public spaces'. This 'democratization of communication' is expected to shift power 'downwards and toward the margins of society'. In Africa, internet and mobile phone technologies are said to represent 'the closing of the last

²⁹ Osaghae, Eghosa, 2006, 'Colonialism and Civil Society in Africa: The Perspective of Ekeh's Two Publics', *Voluntas*, 17.

³⁰ Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 'A People's Government, The People's Voice: Section 1 Framework and Context. The Public and the Public Sphere', www.parliament.gov.za/live/content.php?Item_ID=297.

³¹ Zegeye, Ababe and Richard Harris, eds., 2003, *Media, Identity and the Public Sphere in Post-apartheid South Africa*, Brill. Leiden.

³² Zegeye, Ababe and Richard Harris, 2003, 'Media, Identity and the Public Sphere in Post-apartheid South Africa: An Introduction', in Zegeye, Abebe and Richard Harris, eds., *Media, Identity and the Public Sphere in Post-apartheid South Africa*, Brill. Leiden, p. 4.

³³ *Ibid*, 9.

great intellectual divide' between Africa and the rest of the world.³⁴ Evidence from South Africa suggests that this 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 has 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.'³⁵

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 ethnicity and 'tribalism'. In South Africa, it is a concern with racial inequality. What has not featured with sufficient prominence in these discourses is Habermas' central concern, that is, the promotion of a deliberative democracy. I argue that the importance of the public sphere in contemporary Africa lies in its ability to broaden the democratization process.

4. Weberian Rationalization and Deliberative Democracy

Since the late 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 on the grounds of the TINA ideology which stipulated that 'There Is No Alternative.' Similarly, Good Governance programmes and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) were formulated along rationalistic and technicist lines which sought to maximize efficiency at the expense of genuine consultation and participation.³⁶ In short, despite democratization, economic and political governance in Africa over the last two decades have been guided by a Weberian rationalistic logic which undermined social deliberation and consensus building. This emphasis on rationalism has tended to narrow discourses on policy to elite circles. 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.³⁷

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 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'

³⁴ Cited in Kent, Gregory, 2008, Review of Daniel Drache's *Defiant Public: The Unprecedented Reach of the Global Citizen*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 23rd October 2008, www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=404046&c=2.

³⁵ Zegeye and Harris, *op cit*, p. 13.

³⁶ Cf. Whitfield, Lindsay, 2005, 'Trustees of development from conditionality to governance: poverty reduction strategy papers in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43, 4; Brown, David, 2004, 'Participation in Poverty Reduction Strategies: Democracy Strengthen or Democracy Undermined?' in Hickey, Samuel and Giles Mohan, eds., *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?* Zed Books, London.

³⁷ Zegeye and Harris, *op cit*, p. 17.

which exists parallel to the elite dominated public sphere. It is in this cultural public sphere that notions of HIV/AIDS and sexuality are contested, deposited and withdrawn, outside the gaze of the elite dominated public sphere.³⁸ In much of Africa, the rationalistic and elitist tilt to the contemporary 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 rationalizing political domination by rendering states accountable to [only] (some of) the citizenry.'³⁹

Habermas provides some of the concepts we can use to overcome the rationalistic, elitist, and techno tilt in the public sphere in most 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.⁴⁰ 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 realize 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. 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.⁴¹

What are crucial in these four forms of social action are the mechanisms for societal *coordination*. 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. In normatively regulated action, on the other hand, coordination is based on 'socially integrating agreement about values and norms instilled through cultural tradition and socialization.' 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.⁴² Paraphrasing Steven White, Bolton argues that the central concern for Habermas is to show that:

the historical process of increasing Weberian rationalization is a threat to the full potential of human beings to bring reason to bear on the problems of their social and political existence.⁴³

³⁸ Lwanda, John, 2003, 'The [in]visibility of HIV/AIDS in the Malawi public sphere', *African Journal of AIDS Research*, 2, 2.

³⁹ Fraser, 1992, p. 112.

⁴⁰ Bolton, 2005, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 8-10.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 18.

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 Weberian rationalization 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.

5. Conclusion: Deliberation, Mutual Recognition & Tolerance

In the 21st century, Africa must move beyond Weberian rationalizations and their associated concepts of good governance, ‘participation’, and stylized civil society. As Boeder argues, the quality of a society depends on its ability and capacity to communicate within itself in a reasoned way.⁴⁴ 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. 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’⁴⁵ must be guided by mutual recognition and tolerance.

⁴⁴ Boeder, *op cit.*

⁴⁵ Fraser, 1992, 128.