Rethinking the publics, rethinking politics

This issue of Acta Academica originates in a two-day seminar held at the University of the Free State in October 2012. The purpose of the seminar was twofold. On the one hand, the seminar was conceptualised as part of a broader university-level initiative to contribute to the revitalisation of the humanities through intellectual engagement across disciplines and institutions. On the other hand, the purpose of the seminar was more pointed; it wanted to focus attention on research and perspectives on the public and "publicness".

The invitation to the seminar pointed out that the more than decade-long growing interest in studying the public and the concept of "publicness" had been prompted by substantive changes in the manner in which people engage with public issues as well as in the definition of what constitutes a public issue.

Even a superficial view of what was being written about the public suggested a variety of preoccupations and points of entry into the topic. A few examples of the issues capturing the attention of researchers, political analysts and public commentators included: the concern of the state and the private sector with 'public opinion' and the identification of 'opinion makers' as market and political trend setters; the constitution of 'virtual publics' through the pervasive use of social media and its application to political mobilisation, whether in the context of political campaigns or as a tool for political mobilisation in repressive political contexts; and the constitution of global/cosmopolitan publics gathered around issues such as climate change or the social limits of capitalism.

In South Africa, the preoccupation with the immediacy of the political life of the state and the government seemed to have obscured the need for careful research and reflection on the public. By October 2012 there had been scores of examples of popular (public?) mobilisation to protest against different aspects of lack of service delivery, and the Marikana massacre had put in high relief the difficult relationship between the state, as holding the monopoly of force in a democratic system, and popular (public?) mobilisation as a democratic right.[1] Much less bloody

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1   A series of important publications dealing with these issues have appeared between 2011 and 2013: SWOP and CSVR (2011), *The Smoke that Calls. Insurgent citizenship, collective violence and the struggle for a place in the New South Africa,* Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation | Society, Work and Development Institute; Peter Alexander et al (2012), *Marikana. A View from the mountain and a case to answer,* Johannesburg, Jacana; Michael Burawoy and Karl von Holdt (2012), *Conversations with Bourdieu. The Johannesburg moment,* Johannesburg, Wits University Press; and Gillian Hart (2013) *Rethinking the South African Crisis. Nationalism, populism, hegemony,* Scotsville: UKZN Press.

but not less jarring and deserving of analysis was the 2012 public opinion steering and mobilisation against Brett Murray's painting of President Zuma, The Spear, for being allegedly racist and insulting of the presidential dignity, and the debate that ensued in the media. How were these events to be interpreted and what did they say about the state of democracy in South Africa?

The broad questions that the seminar participants were asked to discuss were: What is the role of the public today? How do publics emerge and from where do they derive their legitimacy? How does the idea of public good affect the conduct of individual people in the social, cultural and political spheres? Who decides what is a "public good" and how is the relative importance of a public value determined? Does the public have a role in allocating value to policies or services? How has the notion and membership of the public changed in South Africa? Who are the public(s) in contemporary South Africa?

The intention was to combine wide-ranging theoretical reflection and research done in other contexts with discipline/field specific approaches to the notion of the public, and, of course, a reflection about the South African polity.

To the six original seminar papers (Barnett, Duncan, Kirsten, Lalu,[2] Posel and Vale) we have added two other pieces (Higgins and Singh) that fit well with the overall intention of this special issue of *Acta Academica.*

Twenty-five years after the publication in English of Jurgen Habermas's (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (half a century since its publication in German) and 22 years after the publication of Craig Calhoun's (1992) edited collection, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, both books still constitute an inevitable point of entry in any discussion of the public and the public sphere. Most papers gathered in this issue engaged with one or both of these texts in their exploration of particular aspects of the public(s).

Clive Barnett's paper proposes a theorisation of emerging publics by engaging directly with the implications of Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere. According to Barnett, post-Apartheid South Africa is a particularly productive laboratory in which to test two elements of Habermas's characterisation of the public sphere: its descriptive and evaluative use to ascertain the state of democracy in a particular polity and its contextual-historical nature. Barnett proposes an

2   Unfortunately Premesh Lalu's paper, "The absent centre: homo œconomicus, nationalism and the subject of the humanities", could not be secured for this publication.

analytical approach to investigate the qualities of the contemporary public sphere that holds together contextual variability and normative/evaluative possibilities. He does this by turning to South Africa's post-Apartheid experience and providing a theorisation of the public through the development of three related themes: the first one is the notion of grammars of public value that allow for the exploration of the (rules of) usage of terms that designate public value; the second one is the notion of 'social partaking' as a conceptual device that overcomes the tension between (invited) public participation and (uninvited) public dissent; the third theme is the existence of three paradigms of public life: (i) public action; (ii) public culture and public will formation that are constituted around the predominant subjects and modes of participation (popular participation in open spaces); (iii) mediated participation through circuits of communication and political participation through legislation, policy making; etc. The manner in which these forms of publicness combine in South Africa as well as the outcomes that they produce are theoretically and practically important as they defy classical separations between public and private spheres and force researchers to take a fresh look at the manner in which publicness has emerged in different geographic and historical contexts.

Ulrike Kistner's examination of the popular public is triggered by the manner in which recent popular protest in South Africa has challenged the organised political establishment. Kistner draws on Carl Schmitt to explore how representation and identity have unfolded historically in the constitution of different forms of state and parliament, and with what theoretical and practical consequences for the development of the public sphere. In Kistner's analysis the 20th Century has been characterised by the delinking of popular sovereignty from state institutions thus confining popular sovereignty to the extra-legal space. Thus, Kistner calls for a re-look at the notion of populism by examining the relationship between popular sovereignty and constituted power in new democracies. She proposes that this examination, instead of being guided by the principle of the quantitative extension of democratic participation, must concentrate on the political-legislative power in relation to government and the state institutions bound to it, and on contestation leading to legislative changes.

Deborah Posel enters the problem of the constitution and functioning of the public sphere in post-Apartheid South Africa through the political career of Julius Malema. Posel aligns herself with a complex notion of the public sphere as being constituted together by reason and affect and therefore being characterised by plurality, fragmentation and dissonance. Posel argues that changes in the cultural

and commercial logic of the South African mass media post 1994, together with the ascendancy of a politics of spectacle, shaped Malema's political career and his impact within the post-Apartheid public sphere. In doing this, Posel advances an argument that is simultaneously theoretical and political. The theoretical argument is in line with the critique of the limits of Habermas's normative conceptualisation of the public sphere as constituted by rational argument. In particular, Posel argues that a productive analysis of the public sphere under contemporary conditions needs to include the importance of affect and spectacle and thus allow for the exploration of non-rational modes of expression and the inclusion in the public sphere of debates that take place in the margins of the "explicit" debate. The political argument centres on the construction of a parallel between Nelson Mandela and Julius Malema in the articulation of a post-Apartheid politics of spectacle that works in opposite ways in the public sphere: the former symbolising the reconciliation mode of a non-racial society and the consensus maker, and the latter symbolising the angry black man re-inscribing a politics of race and naming the limits of the post-1994 dispensation and therefore having a polarising effect. The evocative qualities and symbolic power of these two public personalities sustain Posel's reflection, following Gordon (2008), on the spectral character that the unsolved past has in the present of oppressors and oppressed in any society.

The next three articles are narrower in focus as they examine specific manifestation of the public and the public sphere. John Higgins's 'Rethinking Marx Rethinking the Public' functions as a bridge between the general and sector specific analyses of the public presented in this issue. Higgins focuses on Marx's "journalistic" writings in the Rhenish Gazette (1840-42), a period during which confronting censorship forced Marx to consider what the opposite of a censorship regime might be. According to Higgins's analysis, during this period Marx had to contend with two issues: the principle and right to legal representation in civil life and the form and style of that representation. In jostling with these issues under the "reactionary Romantic" spirit of Frederick William IV of Prussia, Marx developed his notion of critique, that is, the intellectual operation of identifying the "contradiction between reality and administrative principles". And, it is precisely in this contradiction, Higgins argues, that Marx locates the social and political need for a free press.

Jane Duncan's paper explores the extent to which media transformation in post-Apartheid South Africa has resulted in the development of a public sphere that allows for serious deliberation about reality. Duncan argues that the democratic

political settlement that provided spaces for media transformation has fallen short of delivering a democratisation of the media, a situation that has hindered the media's ability to create common spaces for deliberative debate. She takes as the empirical base for her argument the reporting of the Marikana massacre by different media. The fact that out of 153 journalistic articles analysed only one journalist obtained a worker's version of the events, shows the constraints under which the media operates to create active and democratically productive public deliberation. Based on this Duncan warns that media transformation projects which are technical and depoliticised sustain a political project that requires a highly unequal media system to succeed.

Mala Singh traces the debate about the public value of higher education in the context of the increasing number of purposes and functions attributed to the university as a social institution. She shows how the difficulty of determining the content of the notion of the public good outside specific socio-political struggles and the need to situate notions of public and publicness contextually and historically, makes the definition of higher education *for* and *as* a public good particularly complex. Singh argues that while the ideological and operational difficulties of moving higher education towards a public good regime make the potential of the notion itself precarious, resistance to and mediation of neo-liberal "public bads" remains a necessary and valuable task for higher education.

Finally, Peter Vale's article is concerned with the historical constitution of the public in the discipline of international relations conceptually and politically. Vale offers both a critique of international relations as a discipline marked by "tempocentric ahistoricism" and of its notion of the public. At the origin of the creation of the discipline of international relations in 1919, Vale argues, was the intention of bringing reflection on a social issue, the consequences of war, into the public sphere. Yet this public, originally defined as the "rightful membership of polities", requires examination not only to understand how publics are mobilised and registered in the terrain of international relations but also how publics emerge and exist given that the world is socially constituted. In doing this Vale finds that the public of international relations as a discipline has been reduced to an epistemic community that operates separate from civil society, a situation which invites further reflection about international relations as a discipline.

Read together the seven articles published in this issue pose questions about the political that were present in Habermas's interpretation of the public sphere but that also resonate with more recent preoccupations with the possibilities and

limits of democratic regimes and the constitution of the political subject in the 21st Century.

According to Calhoun (1993:5-6), Habermas replaced the notion of a (failed) historical subject and therefore a philosophy and politics of the subject for an account of intersubjective communication. From this perspective the public sphere is also a mode of societal integration that depends on a common interest in truth and rational argument. That presupposed (in its original bourgeois manifestation) a strict separation between the public and the private realms (Calhoun, 1993: 6-7; 9). Half a century later, Habermas's conceptualisation of the transformation of the public sphere through expansion and consumption has reached such intensity and such levels of complexity that not only the notion of the public sphere but the notion and possibility of politics itself need to be re-examined.

Interesting and productive aspects of this re-examination have been raised by the authors gathered in this issue. What are the political consequences of the privatisation of the state experienced in South Africa (Kistner) for the operationalisation of a public that exists both outside the state and is marginal to the market? How can the notion of rational deliberation and common interest in the truth as constitutive of the public sphere be re-examined to make way to a complex notion of the public sphere that allows for the role of affect and non-rational expression to be part of politics? How are we to understand debate and collective political participation in a politics dominated by celebrity and spectacle (Posel)? How can the public be productively reconceptualised when the ambit of the private and, especially, the private self, exists and is defined more and more in a newly constituted public cyberspace? What does this say for those who do not have access to ICT-based identities (Barnett)?

What kind of politics nurtures notions of social partaking as a mode of existence of the public and how can this be interpreted taking into account the differences between Western socio-political regimes and the contextual specificities of the global South (Barnett)? What is the role that democratic media and media freedom have in the constitution of critical publics (Higgins and Duncan) and in producing the conditions of possibility for a space of social consciousness? What is the role of the media in the constitution of the politics of spectacle (Posel)? How should the tensions and contradictions between private and public interest and the conceptualisation of the public as the space for the staging of the private be interpreted politically? How do institutions like universities and academic

disciplines respond organisationally and epistemologically to the challenges of the definition and the constitution of the public and the public good (Singh and Vale)?

These are some of the key issues raised by this collection of papers. It is our hope that this issue of *Acta Academica* will elicit further deliberation and critique on a topic that is as important as it is urgent.

Lis Lange

Editor: Acta Academica

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