

## Rethinking Public Engagement

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In 2002 Charles Taylor identified the public sphere as one of three social imaginaries that constitute modernity. The idea of the public sphere, he argued, knits together discussions in a range of locations – a newspaper report, a discussion in a coffee shop, a radio debate – through the understanding of the participants that they are involved in a greater, collective discussion.<sup>1</sup> Discussion in a notional public sphere is seen as a key process through which a society can mediate collective life.

Such public engagement is the focus of this book. However, we approach the public sphere not as a theory about how public deliberation takes place, but as an established, normative concept and ideal in society, a value-laden organising principle: how people imagine public debate works, thus shaping ‘actual’ discussion. The notion of the public sphere is closely tied to ideas of democratic practice – in particular, the conception of deliberative democracy, which ‘revolves around the idea that ... problems concerning the organization of life in common can be resolved through the force of the better argument: through people coming together and deliberating upon the best way to resolve particular disputes.’<sup>2</sup> Seen in that way, public engagement is more than the cut and thrust of myriad interactions in society; it is crucial to the operations of democracy.

This leads us to ask, in the first section of this chapter, what work the idea of the public sphere and related notions (public, public opinion and counterpublic) do in the world. Approaching the public sphere as an idea that animates social processes and institutions allows us to flag some of the forums that, taken together, present *as if*

they are a unitary public space for discussion. They perform a sort of front-of-stage set of public engagements that appear to fulfil the ideal of the public sphere and, indeed, important debates happen in these forums with consequences for society. However, how these debates happen is subject to all sorts of constraints. We set out the ways in which this assemblage of public engagements – what we have called the ‘convened public sphere’ – is shaped in particular ways by the operations of power.<sup>3</sup>

What is widely referred to as the public sphere is a domain of interaction that is *convened* in particular ways that shape deliberative outcomes. The convening of a nominal main arena for deliberation marginalises a variety of other engagements. In certain circumstances, this prompts the emergence of alternative discussion communities. We see organisations, processes and operations positioning, or being positioned, as if they are outside the convened public sphere but with an eye on the public sphere. Some of these take the form of counterpublic spheres of the kind identified by theorists such as Nancy Fraser.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even when taken together, these two ways of positioning for public engagement – public sphere and counterpublic sphere – occlude a wider and more heterogeneous set of interactions.

Beyond the idea of a central public sphere and its facing counterpublics are the public spaces that are not readily recognised as arenas of engagement and appear to be operating separately from both mainstream forums and one another. These include the subaltern publics that Fraser points to, which are unable to access the main arena because of their disenfranchised position in societies, and sequestered publics – discussed below – which have historically been conceived of as beyond the imagined public sphere. In addition, theorists of the media and the Internet have identified the existence of online enclaves that appear connected only to their participants and noted what they call the ‘fragmentation’ of the public sphere.

However, even these refinements of the notion of the public sphere rely on metaphors of fixed space. They miss the shifting and moving nature of public engagements over time and space. To understand the sprawling, uneven and sometimes explosive interactions that appear to take place offstage, we conceptualise publicness as a capillaried network in which ideas are constantly circulating, sometimes within closed circuits, sometimes coalescing in sequestered spaces or forms, sometimes gathering enough potency to burst into wider significance and sometimes part of media that themselves constitute publics. The circulation described is not simply the shuttling of ideas along already laid-down tracks, but the movement of forms that *create* networks as they act in the social world.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of circulation allows the complex processes of various public engagements to be tracked well beyond conventional public sphere spaces. It shows how publicness is, by its very nature, moving and dispersed, circulating through

networks that criss-cross fields and media, fragmenting into ‘capillaries’ and sometimes thickening into nodes of public engagement. We examine how convened public spheres, counterpublic positioning, isolated publics and capillaried networks operate in intersecting ways, as well as the dynamics among them. In so doing, we generate a clutch of concepts and methodologies that enable us to grasp how public matters come under discussion both in relation to and outside of the classical mode of rational, critical debate that is the cornerstone of democratic processes.

## THE IDEAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere idea of a space between the people and the state is neatly characterised by Shireen Hassim as a ‘virtuous’ space in which citizens contest among themselves according to the ‘rules of the game.’<sup>6</sup> Normative ideas of the public sphere draw on Enlightenment conceptions of public opinion and publics, particularly Immanuel Kant’s public use of reason and Jeremy Bentham’s ideas of public opinion as a check on the state.<sup>7</sup> What Jürgen Habermas called *öffentlichkeit*, translated from the German as the ‘public sphere’, but more properly ‘publicness’ or ‘publicity’, articulates a compelling ideal for democratic discussion and debate in society.<sup>8</sup>

Habermas notes that *öffentlichkeit* first appeared in the eighteenth century, but was little used until the nineteenth century. He argues that ‘if the public sphere did not require a name of its own before this period, we may assume that this sphere first emerged and took on its function only at that time, at least in Germany.’<sup>9</sup> Put another way, if there is no word for it, there is no concept of it, and if there is no concept, it does not exist in the material processes and spaces of society.<sup>10</sup> Habermas’s account shows how the meanings of concepts of publicness, publics and public opinion shift over time and suggests the ways in which concepts and social practices co-create one another. It is important to hold this fluidity in mind when examining contemporary forms of publicness. Habermas sets up a relationship between concept and practice that indicates that notions of the public are inextricably woven into the actual functions of society.

## THE PUBLIC AS SOCIAL IMAGINARY

The upsurge of democratic movements across the world in the 1980s, and attempts to account for their emergence, prompted researchers at the Chicago-based Center

for Transcultural Studies to explore the idea of imaginative ‘world-making’ power. They conceptualised this process as a ‘social imaginary’, ‘an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as a world-making collective.’<sup>11</sup> Social imaginaries are ‘ways of understanding the social that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life.’<sup>12</sup> These entities include people’s self-understandings, the ‘first-person subjectivities that build upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices.’ As Taylor elaborates: ‘The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.’<sup>13</sup> The public sphere is a key social imaginary for society.

For Taylor, the way in which society is imagined is based on an assumed moral order; in contemporary times, built on ‘mutual benefit ... whose members are fundamentally equal.’<sup>14</sup> This is different from previous eras, in which it was accepted that social arrangements were structured according to hierarchies, as in the feudal era.<sup>15</sup> Taylor argues that the modern moral order has produced three major mutations: the market economy, the public sphere and self-governing people.<sup>16</sup> He notes that a ‘public sphere can exist only if it is imagined as such. Unless all the dispersed discussions are seen by their participants as linked in one great exchange, there can be no sense of a resultant “public opinion”.’<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he argues, breakdown occurs in society when people’s collective practices cannot connect to a viable social imaginary.<sup>18</sup>

Taylor’s critical conception of the public sphere is different from the notion in its everyday usage, which implies a stable and pre-existing arena consisting of institutions, forums and debates. Rather, as a social imaginary, the public sphere propels and animates vital societal processes and institutions. The idea of publicness is powerful, then, because of the work it does in the world. However, the core literature on the public sphere has relatively little to say about the actual operations of power in public engagement. The literature does not tackle the question of *how* the outcomes of public sphere deliberations come to influence the state and other forces in society and how powerful forces may influence (or even capture) public discussion. It also fails to come to grips with the nature of public engagement in situations where global markets are driving social inequality, despite equality being laid out as the underlying moral order of democratic societies.

## THE CONVENED PUBLIC SPHERE

In established democracies, the notion of informed public deliberation is fundamentally affirmed and overtly performed in all sorts of ways. Indeed, it is modelled

at the heart of the formal arrangements of democracy. The range of forms of the institutional enabling of public deliberation is often held up as a mark of a successful democracy. However, the forms that are vaunted as enabling discussion simultaneously convene public deliberation in circumscribed ways, sometimes to the point of corralling and constraining deliberation.

Parliaments are conceived of as debating spaces at the heart of a democracy, with codes of conduct, rules of procedure, question and answer, which ensure that the elected representatives of the people all get a turn to speak on matters of concern. Debates on government policy, proposed laws and topical issues are designed to assist members in reaching an informed decision on a particular subject. The debates are captured in a variety of forms of public record, such as the Hansard official record in the United Kingdom or the Parliamentary Monitoring Group in South Africa, set up in 1995 by three advocacy organisations because there is no official record publicly available of the more than 50 South African parliamentary committees. In some countries, parliamentary debates are televised live. They are widely reported on in the media and subjected to public commentary and review by outside experts.

Many democracies also have institutional arrangements for the entry into parliamentary discussion of the views of non-elected members whose experience and knowledge is specially valorised, such as the House of Lords in the United Kingdom (which consists of bishops, hereditary peers and those appointed for life as a reward for public service) or the House of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (consisting of three traditional leaders per province, appointed for five years). In this way, the formal arrangements give additional weight in the spaces of national debate to special interests and sectors. The issues debated by these houses are likewise much reported and commented on.

In addition, the organisation of government departments and ministerial portfolios has an impact on the framing of public discussion and on who is licensed to intervene. For example, when Cannes and other French towns banned the burkini swimwear worn by some Muslim women, the minister for women's rights weighed in. Laurence Rossignol said the swimwear was 'hostile to diversity and women's emancipation'.<sup>19</sup> This intervention may have been very different had she been a minister of minority rights. The existence of particular ministries for special issues actively positions them to intervene in controversies they see as falling into their area of attention.

Beyond the formal arenas of government, a plethora of policies and institutional arrangements seek to foster public deliberation and shape public opinion. For example, many public museums are funded by government, but operate at arm's

length from government, charged with preserving and presenting various materials in the public interest. Once the final authorities on what they presented, museums in contemporary society increasingly play a role in facilitating public discussion, assuming the functions of a forum.<sup>20</sup> Museum practitioners routinely anticipate controversy, actively reaching out to marginalised communities and hosting discussions.

Universities are another kind of institution understood to have a special responsibility to foster discussion, in the first instance within the academic community, but also in public life. Universities regularly host public lectures, panel discussions and other public events concerned with topical matters. Participation in public life is often built into the government funding they receive. In South Africa, community engagement is identified as a core responsibility of the universities, alongside research and teaching, and is a measure of success.<sup>21</sup> In the United Kingdom, the national Research Excellence Framework is designed specifically to assess the impact of research outside of academia. 'Impact' is defined in the Research Excellence Framework as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.'<sup>22</sup> These forms of public responsibility refer to the dissemination of expert knowledge, based on solid research, into public life; the process also entails engagement in policy debates and offering views on controversial matters. More difficult to explicate is the way in which the university as the home of philosophy accepts a special responsibility to think through the most fundamental issues involved in what it is to be human together, to have knowledge, to employ reason and to assert values.

A host of entities, such as public broadcasters, communication regulators, media freedom watchdog bodies, conflict resolution and mediation organisations, and special interest bodies, have mandates to participate in policy discussions and to lobby on issues in the public interest. The news media are thought to have a particular responsibility to inform publics and facilitate debate, a privileged position that is entrenched in the operations of many democracies. Media organisations, collectively, are a site for public discussion and for reporting on debates in society. The media's role is complicated by their being charged with facilitating debates while simultaneously reporting on them. The media also occupy a double position of being privileged observers of the operations of government as well as positioning themselves as 'watchdogs' that hold the state accountable on behalf of the people. In some societies, the media's responsibilities to facilitate debate are regulated in the sense that there can be sanctions by regulatory bodies for speech considered to be beyond the pale. In cases where there is little regulation, pressure from audiences and advertisers can push media into line.

The notion of the importance of appropriate public debate is underscored by the existence of institutes and centres designed to foster public deliberation and to train citizens in reasoned public engagement, notably in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Debating societies flourish in schools, where they are regarded as important training grounds that empower people to participate in public and political life.<sup>24</sup> The United Nations and many states fund global debating contests between students from countries across the world. The existence and activities of all of these bodies persuade citizens of the robustness of the public sphere as the enabling space of democratic opinion-making and choice. What is less recognised is how such policies, organisations and institutions do not merely enable but also shape, weight or even corral public debate in certain ways.

We find it useful to speak of the *convened* public sphere as a way of recognising these multiple interventions, compromises, constraints, exclusions and their effects. The term ‘convened’ draws attention to what is being brought together into the space of the public sphere and in what forms. By implication, this opens up the question of what is not drawn in, or is sidelined. The notion of a convened public sphere thus encourages scrutiny of the systems and institutions responsible for the convening and analysis of how they operate.

The centres that aim to foster public deliberation and train citizens in reasoned public debate explicitly set out rules, conventions and principles to which debate should adhere. The media present a more complex case, at once operating with clear guidelines (such as giving equal space to both sides of an issue) and taken-for-granted professional norms that produce debates in certain forms, as chapter three in this volume shows. Chapter 3 – titled ‘Media Orchestration in the Production of Public Debate’ – introduces a range of other concepts, among them ‘orchestration’ and ‘babelisation’, that usefully help us to grasp how debate and discussion are shaped by the processes of media production.

Not all the outcomes of public sphere engagements are the result of reasoned consensus. In practice, the valorising of diversity often leads to the guaranteeing of specific cultural rights against the thrust of rational public deliberation. Such outcomes are often the result of compromises negotiated among parties, special interest groups and public administrators, with the public included only sporadically in this circuit of power. The establishment in South Africa of the House of Traditional Leaders, mentioned above, is one such compromise. In such situations, variant cultural values may prevail, some of which are not readily reconcilable with the values of a constitutional democracy. The persistence of arranged marriage, child brides or female genital mutilation in parts of Africa and Asia is at odds with protections for women and children in democratic bills of rights, but such practices

are allowed as an expression of traditional culture. The collective understanding on which much thinking around the public sphere is built, in practice, proves elusive.

The sheer range of entities that self-consciously assume responsibility for issues of public concern – from freedom of information organisations to sex worker lobby groups – crowd the space between the people and the state that is the imagined public sphere. Their presence appears to guarantee that the people are having their say. In the congestion, however, public deliberation is constrained in multiple ways, giving rise to effects that are these entities' ostensible purpose to mitigate. These include how established bodies develop an expertise, and media savvy, far greater than that of ordinary members of the public, thus weighting debate in their favour. Their presence and adeptness also paradoxically enables, even licenses, public apathy, conveying a sense that the issues are being taken care of beyond the reach of politicians. All these entities are actively promoted and funded by interest groups of one kind or another, and there are powerful forces at work in establishing a presence in the space conceived of and operationalised as the public sphere, which ensure that debate happens in the way preferred by the interest groups.

Entering the convened public sphere already filled with enabled throngs of expert and savvy entities is not a matter of course. The formally educated, learned intelligentsia, well versed in the rules and conventions of the public sphere and often drawn from the ranks of political and financial elites, may readily engage in a debate or offer a critique of a position. Social inequality, however, excludes many from participation in the formal public sphere, while organic intellectuals are often involved in processes of deliberation and critique that take place outside of the circles of an established intelligentsia. The idea of the convened public sphere helps us to understand the widespread loss of faith in the effectiveness of public deliberation, particularly when the public sphere is seen to be actively corralled.

In new democracies emerging out of previously authoritarian arrangements, the moral order to which Taylor refers is not taken for granted, as it is in many established democracies, but is the object of direct attention. In such situations, the front-of-stage public sphere has to be inaugurated. This requires an overt process of internalising rules and conventions, rather than the unquestioned following of them, and the cultivation of relevant normative values. In such situations, the rules and exclusions are more likely to be queried; the terms of debate are themselves contested, as student protests in South Africa have demonstrated in recent years. The critical scrutiny of democracy that takes place in new democracies allows convening and corraling to be clearly seen more readily than in established democracies.

Fault lines in the operations of democracy are not confined to the Global South. They have also begun to appear in the world's oldest democracies, as the



bitter post-2016 election polarisation in the United States, repeated protests at the G7 and the World Economic forums and the Occupy movement show. In these contestations, the rules and conventions that envisage public discussion as rational critical debate, and that facilitate the operations of the convened public sphere, are identified as operations of power and there are multiple forms of rebellion. In the process these breakaway forms themselves shape the dynamics and conventions of public engagement.

## **BEYOND THE CONVENEED PUBLIC SPHERE**

In the public sphere literature, questions of power are often addressed through the concepts of counterpublics and, more specifically, subaltern counterpublics. Fraser argues that the notion of a unitary public sphere does not capture the complexity of 'actually existing democracies', which have systemic inequalities and, in some cases, heterogeneous collections of peoples.<sup>25</sup> This means that there may be many competing interests that cannot be resolved. Instead of a multiplicity of competing voices operating on terms of equality in a unitary public sphere, there are always, she argues, subaltern counterpublics struggling to be heard and powerful publics that dominate the deliberative space.<sup>26</sup> In Fraser's conceptualisation, there are always multiple publics in relations of domination, subordination and contestation.

Fraser suggests that counterpublics are desirable because they provide spaces for participants to express themselves, to formulate and try out counter-discourses and to avoid being appropriated into consensus. The notion of subaltern counterpublics helps us to understand how, under certain circumstances, marginalised groups in society position themselves in relation to a mainstream public sphere – being at once, as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge suggest, oppositional and public.<sup>27</sup> Positioning as counterpublics, the participants engage among themselves, often within global networks, physically and virtually, in public meetings, on electronic mailing lists, in research institutes and policy forums. The last decade has seen the rise of global protest groups that operate through social media, such as Avaaz, 350.org and Change.org, actively working to position themselves as global opposition to global powers, such as Monsanto, and nation states in global forums. Some of them take the opportunity to focus within their own ranks, confining themselves to discussions with like-minded individuals and, in the course of that counterpublic positioning, building up momentum that later propels them into mainstream debates or enables them to engage in these debates. Such groups are significant

participants in public deliberation. However, prevailing arrangements seek to draw them into the convened public sphere that pushes continually for consensus.

Fraser highlights the point that the official public sphere not only rests upon but is also constituted by significant exclusions. For the most part, commentators and theorists have focused on the exclusions of women, LGBTQIAP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, pansexual, plus) communities, sex workers, and so on. These groups constitute counterpublics with an eye on how to enter their concerns into the discussions of what is understood to be the public sphere – that is, with the aim, at some point, of discursive contestation in relation to the operations of democratic politics.

Where a counterpublic is a domain for the formulation of narratives that position as alternative or oppositional to the convened public sphere, there are also publics that are separated from both the convened and counterpublic spheres. For example, in societies where sectors of the population have distinct historical and cultural experiences, or religious experiences, matters related to these experiences and their legacies may be the subject of deep interest, active discussion and even heated debate within that sector, but not in others. Their concerns might be deemed irrelevant to contemporary democratic politics, atavistic or retrogressive. We find it helpful to think of these groups as ‘sequestered publics’. Unlike counterpublics, sequestered publics do not imagine themselves as building up momentum in order to be able to engage in the unitary public sphere, but as self-contained domains of discussion. A case in point would be active discussions about historical clan identities and connections and ancestral matters that have long enjoyed attention in areas such as KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, largely outside any formal historical debates, historical studies, heritage initiatives or political arrangements.

It is productive to pay attention to the circumstances under which sequestered publics may begin to position as counterpublics – that is, entering their concerns into the convened public sphere. In the KwaZulu-Natal case mentioned above, clan histories have become important in challenges to the dominance of the Zulu royal house and its land claims. Their logics and concerns constitute a challenge to a forensic approach by the courts to land and chiefship claims and have become important in the way in which the South African democracy seeks to mediate collective life.

The concerns of sequestered publics may be mobilised opportunistically by populist politicians seeking to build support by tapping into such concerns, even if retrogressive. Or they might contribute to discussions of possible values and practices inspired by historical precedents or religious beliefs as part of the critique of the failure of liberal democracy.<sup>28</sup>

People who participate in sequestered public discussions may find it problematic that they do not see their concerns reflected in what goes as the mainstream public sphere. Under such conditions, a sequestered public sphere may begin to operate as a counterpublic, providing opportunities for the participants to build up momentum and seek ways of entering their concerns into the convened public sphere, often through dramatic public interventions.

In South Africa, student protests, beginning with the 2015 campaign for the removal of the statue of the arch-colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, drew attention to the way the university education system was rooted in a limited Western archive. This operated to negate values of social and cultural life rooted in historically African ideas, values and forms of knowledge that still govern many communities across the country. The dramatic student protests created an opening for public discussion about inherited African values of listening to and learning from others, accommodating strangers and finding the consensus needed to hold society together. The protests provoked reflection on how to mediate collective life in South Africa. The student protests demonstrate how discussions that have taken place for centuries in sequestered publics may burst into the mainstream at certain moments, propelled by changing circumstances. Just because discussions are taking place offstage, it does not mean that they may not find their way into wider public discourse.

Media theorists have recently noted that the growth of the Internet seems to have created many publics separate from mainstream discussion (in some cases by choice) and from one another. Todd Gitlin noted in 1998 that the Internet ‘enriches the possibilities for a plurality of publics – for the development of distinct groups organized around affinity and interests’, which he called ‘public spherules’.<sup>29</sup> However, he asked whether this ‘scatter’ of publics increases the likelihood of divides that cannot be breached, of citizens unable to reach across social and ideological differences to solve social problems. Others have subsequently researched online publics that operate in enclaves and noted that the technologies of the Internet turn the spaces of discussion into ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’, where no dissenting views can enter.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas sequestered publics operate offstage, the entities positioned as counterpublic implicitly accept the normative protocols of the public sphere while seeking to influence or oppose its dominant concerns. Certain activities of these kinds of (potential or actual) counterpublic spheres lead to direct engagements in the central arena. In other cases, counterpublic sphere concerns are marginalised and are not taken up in the convened public sphere. In the pursuit of political and public purchase, participants in marginalised public spheres may turn to strikes and other forms of direct action. There is evidence, then, of both viable and compromised counterpublic sphere activity.

Despite all this variation, the concepts of public and counterpublic spheres are not sufficient to describe the manifold ways in which ideas are debated. For one thing, these spheres are described in spatial terms: rounded and inclusive, or scattered into separate globules or as spaces for communication.<sup>31</sup> However, we would argue that it is not possible to grasp fully publicness and its effects without understanding how fluid public engagements are and how they move beyond the boundaries of any static deliberative space and change over time.

## CAPILLARIES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The idea of the public sphere thus excludes a multitude of interactions that do not fit the conventions of how public discussion should take place or the designated arenas for such discussion. These interactions fall outside the very definition of public sphere, or even of a counterpublic sphere, which operates in terms of the imaginary of the public sphere. Tracking ideas and forms that begin life offstage and seeing the ways they sometimes burst into wider significance, and how they may eventually enter the convened public sphere, leads us to reconfigure publicness as a capillaried network. In this shifting web of connections, ideas are constantly circulating.

Michael Warner's notion of circulation of texts that create networks as they move in the social world gives impetus to this reconfiguration. Crucially, he describes publics as imaginative relationships between strangers, created in relation to a text or discourse.<sup>32</sup> Warner's critical conception of publics is different from the concept in its everyday usage, in which 'the public' is imagined as an established body. Warner's public only comes into being in relation to a text (broadly defined as anything from an actual piece of writing to a performance or a media talk show). But where Warner is concerned with the constitution of publics, we place the spotlight on processes of consideration, assessment, engagement and debate, the wide set of dynamics that produce public engagements.

Our conceptualisation of capillaried networks of public engagement is also informed by Michel Foucault's theorisation of power and his configuration of a social totality that is not made of massive structures (state/people) pushing against each other, but is articulated through much more fragmentary 'spidery' webs and constituted by discourse and by social practice. For Foucault, power is not simply 'repressive', but is 'productive'. He says: 'What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs

through the whole social body.<sup>33</sup> In other words, where there is the power to take things away, there are also mechanisms bent on ‘generating forces, making them grow and ordering them.’<sup>34</sup> One of these is ‘the power of the norm,’ which does not punish infractions so much as require individuals to ‘measure up’ to certain standards, which are internalised, embodied in the modern subject.<sup>35</sup> The idea of productive power resonates with the concept of the social imaginary as a concept that propels collective world-making. Both can be seen in the enactment of the convened public sphere, which by its existence makes certain kinds of discussion possible, while simultaneously occluding or discrediting others.

Foucault’s vision of discourse as multilayered, and as shifting and moving texts and practices, focuses our attention on what are often small operations of power, which can gather potency in society. Observing practice up close can deliver insights into how this happens. Although not all public engagements are about power in the political sense, they are always potentially important sites of power, however micro, because of their connections to the social imaginary of the public sphere and its potential to produce effects.

A discussion between two mothers about the reactions of their children to a vaccine may be simply the sharing of their maternal experiences. However, combined with a medical article proposing that vaccines cause autism, a broader distrust of science and the pharmaceutical industry, and a popular campaign against vaccines by a celebrity, such debates can scale up into wider significance that eventually requires policy interventions on a global scale. This issue is currently debated in health ministries, has been taken up by the World Health Organization and may become the subject of legislation – it has emerged into the convened public sphere. The offstage engagement that began life as a private discussion in the intimate domain of the family – a domestic recess, as it were – becomes public, in the lay understanding of the term, and has sufficient impetus to command wide attention in society.

The convened and counterpublic arenas are therefore not separate spaces from the mass of public interactions that appear to operate outside their domain and according to different rules. But how engagements seemingly outside begin to move in capillaried networks, stack up and eventually emerge as issues of public significance is a complex process. Approaches such as Foucault’s theory of systems of thought, Warner’s concept of circulation, and social imaginary theory provide useful insights into theorising publicness, but in order to track it in operation, we need to describe the processes we have identified and develop conceptual tools capable of elucidating them.

The example of the vaccine controversy points to a thorny conceptual issue that shows up in any scholarship on publics and public discussion. In the convened

public sphere, publicness is understood to be pre-existing and served through the creation of institutions and policies. Similarly, counterpublic engagements, by virtue of their positioning in relation to the convened public sphere, instantiate publicness. However, outside of these arenas, the multiple conversations and interventions that go on in society all the time can only be recognised as ‘public’ when they gather a certain weight and momentum, what Litheko Modisane terms ‘public critical potency’.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of public critical potency allows for an important distinction in analysing public engagement and publics. It permits us to hold on to the social significance that attaches to discussion in the convened public sphere, while allowing for the messy world of interactions out of which important public engagements may emerge. The notion of public critical potency enables us to identify engagements when they have moved out of relatively sequestered circulation to wider social significance.<sup>37</sup>

The matter of *how* public engagements gather public critical potency – how they move through capillaries into wider significance – is theorised and discussed in detail in chapter 2. Public events can be a key trigger, whether in the form of carefully curated exhibitions or incendiary protests, but what chapter 2 shows is that how ideas travel, crossing mediums and fields of practice, turns out to be central, as does media take-up in multiple forms. What start out as ideas expressed in, say, artworks, or concerned mothers’ discussions about vaccines, may not adhere to any of the convened public sphere expectations of reasoned discussion on significant questions. They may deal with issues that are not readily accommodated in the convened public sphere, being too radical, subversive, reactionary, subjective, emotional or threatening.

The circulation of ideas into other fields – an artwork into a book of literary essays or the domestic vaccine concerns into pharmaceutical controversies – may cause the ideas to be picked up more widely and in different ways by others. Chapter 2 calls this process ‘take-up’. The accumulation of numerous interactions – a concatenation of engagements – contributes to their public critical potency. Through intersection with debates in other fields, or through media take-up, such ideas are transformed into forms of active public deliberation in which rational-critical discussion can occur, though it might not always be decisive. In some cases the core ideas continue to occupy a central place, while in other instances the debate turns on the operations of power involved in or underpinning the core ideas – that is, the debate takes an explicitly political turn and may erupt into the public sphere.

Sometimes public engagements build up and course in the capillaries of discussion, sometimes quite explicitly avoiding, or explicitly rejecting, the convened public sphere or even a counterpublic positioning. This resistance to the convened

public sphere, we suggest, happens most dramatically in moments of social and political rupture when the participants no longer accept that they are part of a greater, collective discussion and a shared moral order is no longer assumed to exist. This is a feature of a great deal of contemporary discussion that happens, at least at first, in relatively closed discussion circuits, facilitated by self-reinforcing internally referential social media webs. To make this point is not to claim that capillaries of debate have replaced the public sphere. It is to argue that capillaries of debate have always been a feature of what is understood to be the public sphere, as well as of counterpublic positioning, but they emerge more squarely into view when the social imaginary of the public sphere falters.

In the current era of global tectonic change, many of the institutions traditionally charged with facilitating public debate in democratic societies have lost their dominance. New platforms now orchestrate different forms and modes of public discussion. Yet certain legacies of engagement in the public sphere persist. What this may mean for public life is not yet clear. A close focus on the organisations and sectors charged with conducting and facilitating public discussion, as well as the myriad alternative modes of public discussion, is necessary in order to understand the implications for how societies face and discuss the challenges of mediating collective life. Recognition of the convened nature of what is understood as the public sphere, as well as of the existence of capillaried and constantly shifting networks of public discussion, requires us to approach issues of public engagement with a new set of analytical concepts and new methodologies. The two chapters that follow introduce a series of concepts that help us to get to grips with how convening takes place, as well as with the dynamics of the circulation of ideas well beyond the imagined public sphere.

Our approach of looking, up close, at how discussions are taking place reveals a conundrum for contemporary times: in the face of these kinds of changes, what happens to the ideal of a central space in which the citizens of a country can debate and decide on the way forward? Will the engagements in the capillaried network ever stack up sufficiently to draw wide public attention to the concerns being expressed there so as to allow the debate to take place in the mode of the ideal – a society debating its issues with a view to moving forward? The increasing balkanisation, polarisation and babelisation of public discussion visibly playing out in the United States is a cautionary tale. It suggests that there is a need to hold on to some forms of the convening of public discussion, while being alert to any tendency to exclude or obscure certain engagements. These questions are further complicated by the growth of global publics and public engagements. The extent of global crises around certain issues – climate change, trade and migration – is so great that being able to speak and hear each other across national boundaries becomes paramount,

requiring much more than a resort to reasoned debate in international forums. However, if normative ideas of public discussion expect dialogue to contribute in some way to the solving of joint problems, or the mediation of collective challenges, the enormous expansion of the imagined public sphere simultaneous with the proliferation of public engagements presents as much risk as opportunity.

Many commentators have decried the decline of public discourse and worry about the fragmentation of the public sphere.<sup>38</sup> The contributions to this volume invite us to examine not only whether the processes and operations of the convened public sphere are collapsing, but whether the social imaginary itself is disappearing. The evidence for the convening and, some would say, capture of public discussion by established interests seems to be increasing everywhere. In response, people are no longer convinced of the robustness of the public sphere; thus, its effectiveness as a powerful imaginary enabling the practices of a society – in particular, the mediations of collective life – collapses. However, deliberative activity, distributed or dispersed, continues, sometimes in new forms, but also in long-established forms previously consigned to the margins. If, as Taylor argues, the public sphere has been foundational to the imagined order of modern society, the question is whether new forms of public engagement will come to occupy the imagined space of public discussion, or whether the changes in the imaginary inevitably reshape the ways in which democratic societies mediate collective life.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002): 113.
- <sup>2</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, 'Introduction: Tracing Radical Democracy and the Internet', in *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, ed. Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.
- <sup>3</sup> See discussion of 'convening' in Carolyn Hamilton, 'Uncertain Citizenship and Public Deliberation in Post-apartheid South Africa', *Social Dynamics* 35, 2 (2009): 355–374.
- <sup>4</sup> See Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109–142.
- <sup>5</sup> See Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Circulation and Public Spheres', *Social Dynamics* 36, 1 (2010): 135–138.
- <sup>6</sup> Shireen Hassim, 'Framing Essay', *Social Dynamics* 35, 2 (2009): 348.
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of Kant's and Bentham's ideas on publicness and the public sphere, see Slavko Splichal, 'In Search of a Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations on Conceptualizations of Publicness and the (European) Public Sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 28, 5 (2006): 699.
- <sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), xv.



- <sup>9</sup> Habermas, *Public Sphere*, 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Lesley Cowling, 'Saving the *Sowetan*: The Public Interest and Commercial Imperatives in Journalism Practice' (PhD diss., Rhodes University, 2015), 44.
- <sup>11</sup> Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'Towards New Imaginaries: An Introduction', *Public Culture* 14, 1 (2002): 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Gaonkar, 'Towards New Imaginaries', 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 91.
- <sup>14</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 99.
- <sup>15</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 92.
- <sup>16</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 92.
- <sup>17</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 113.
- <sup>18</sup> Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', 99.
- <sup>19</sup> Aline Gerard, 'Interdiction du Burkini: Pour Rossignol, "Procéder par Amalgame n'est Jamais Utile"', *Le Parisien*, 16 August 2016, accessed 29 May 2018, <http://www.leparisien.fr/politique/proceder-par-amalgame-n-est-jamais-utile-16-08-2016-6043833.php>.
- <sup>20</sup> See Duncan Cameron, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14, 1 (1971): 11–24. See also Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine, eds, *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the American Association of Museums, 1992).
- <sup>21</sup> See debates about the meaning of this as a core responsibility in the South African Council on Higher Education publication *Kagisano* 6, January 2010, accessed 22 January 2020, [https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/Kagisano\\_No\\_6\\_January2010.pdf](https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/Kagisano_No_6_January2010.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> 'REF Impact', 19 February 2016, accessed 29 May 2018, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFImpact/>.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, the Center for Public Deliberation, University of Colorado (<http://cpd.colostate.edu/about-us/what-is-public-deliberation/>); the United States of America's National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (<http://ncdd.org>); the International Association for Public Participation (<http://www.iap2.org/?177>); the Center for Democratic Deliberation, Penn State University (<http://cdd.la.psu.edu>); the Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio (<https://www.kettering.org>); the New England Center for Civic Life, Franklin Pierce University (<https://franklinpierce.edu/institutes/neccl/>); and Public Agenda, New York (<https://www.publicagenda.org>); all accessed 29 December 2016.
- <sup>24</sup> On the public understanding of the value of debating training, see Alex Clark, 'Why Debating Still Matters', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2016, accessed 29 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/aug/06/why-debating-still-matters>.
- <sup>25</sup> Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 121.
- <sup>26</sup> Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', 123.
- <sup>27</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, the essays in Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan van Antwerpen, eds, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- <sup>29</sup> Todd Gitlin, 'Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?' in *Media, Ritual and Identity*, ed. Tamar Liebes and James Curran (New York: Routledge, 1998), 173.
- <sup>30</sup> See Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin, 2011); and Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel and Justin M. Rao, 'Filter Bubbles, Echo

- Chambers, and Online News Consumption,' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, S1 (2016): 298–320.
- <sup>31</sup> Gitlin, 'Public Sphere'; Peter Dahlgren, 'The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation,' *Political Communication* 22 (2005): 148–150.
- <sup>32</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 74–76.
- <sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 61. Our notion of capillaries of public discussion resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work on how new ideas emerge in the sciences. They conceptualise the multiple and non-hierarchical entry and exit points in the spread of ideas as 'rhizomatic', notably the nomadic way in which this happens (*A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi [London: Continuum, 2004]). Our project does not deal with the emergence of ideas per se, but with publicness and public discussion. However, the veined aspect of the capillary metaphor allows us to see what happens when aspects of what they would conceptualise as the rhizomatic spread of ideas accumulate publicness and begin to be channelled in particular ways. Recognising the contingent and sometimes opportunistic emergence of these capillaries allows us to understand that while they are not predetermined, what happens in the process is the development of a form of noticeable routing.
- <sup>34</sup> Foucault and Rabinow, *Foucault Reader*, 56.
- <sup>35</sup> Foucault and Rabinow, *Foucault Reader*, 94.
- <sup>36</sup> Litheko Modisane, *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centred Films* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 79.
- <sup>37</sup> Modisane demonstrates this in his analysis of a number of South African films in *Renegade Reels*.
- <sup>38</sup> See discussion in Frank Farmer, *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013), 5–6.

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