



PARADOXES OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE,
SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY AT THE CROSSROADS
A Research Conference and linked Public Program
28 - 31 Jan 2008

Using South Africa as a starting point, the conference explores the contradictory possibilities of the public sphere in post-repressive, postcolonial contexts.

Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: South African Democracy at the Crossroads



Using South Africa as a starting point, this conference seeks to explore the contradictory possibilities of the public sphere in post-repressive, postcolonial contexts. It calls for papers on South Africa but also seeks comparative investigations of the relationship of public deliberation and democracy. While the focus is on contemporary public spheres, the conference is interested in processes of transition and the significance of the legacies of former repressive conditions.



Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: South African Democracy at the Crossroads

Conference Invitation

28 JAN 31 2008

PARADOXES OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE: SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY AT THE CROSSROADS

Conference Announcement

A Research Conference and Linked Public Programme
University of the Witwatersrand in association with the Platform for Public Deliberation

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For more information visit:
www.public-conversations.org.za
or contact Denise on +27 11 717 4674

Emerging from the dictatorial terror of apartheid, the new South African order conspicuously committed itself to public deliberation and dialogue. The South African constitution made public consultation mandatory in a number of domains. State-established institutions like the Gender Commission and Human Rights Commission sought to defend the rights of citizens to participate in public life. The South African Broadcasting Commission set itself apparently rigorous standards of public accountability. However, a decade after the political transition, these state-convened components of the public sphere are orchestrating public deliberation in particular ways, promoting certain ideas, dampening others and muting critical voices. At the same time deliberation and critique continues outside the officialised public sphere in a host of alternative sites.

South Africa's transition was both a movement to democracy and a shift into a rapidly globalizing world, marked by highly consumerized and mediatised forms of public debate. Radio talk shows, sit coms, soap operas, celebrity magazines, and soccer fandom are sites of animated public engagement. In what senses are they public, and can such forums offer quality engagement? Are these forums in fact sites of

political interpretation as much popular cultural analysis suggests? In the news media, where the facilitation of public debate is understood to be a professional responsibility, who gains access to the media as commentators, columnists and public intellectuals, and who is excluded and silenced?

South Africa is nominally a secular society. In reality, however, a significant part of its public life is dominated by religious organisation and practice. How do such religious forms of debate intersect with broader forms of political activity? How do constitutional guarantees of secular democracy interact with religious and other forms of cultural interpretation, notably those termed "traditional"?

These contradictions of the public sphere are by no means unique to South Africa. Post-repressive regimes – both old and new – across Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and South Asia illustrate equivalent processes of the state capturing its citizens through officializing public debate. Cross cutting these processes are the forces of consumerism, mediatisation and religious and cultural organization. Under such circumstances, questions of the role of deliberation in democracy and in relation

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The Research Conference

Papers are invited which address one or more of the following themes:

Domains of the South African Public Sphere such as parliament, institutions outside the state: public broadcasting; state sponsored public debate; postcolonial public science; institutions of public culture, and the universities;

Counter Public Spheres and Alternative Spaces of Public Deliberation, for example, those constituted by social movements, as well as through cultural practices – film, music, performance, art, and literature – and in the electronic, media, and the conditions under which such spaces emerge and flourish or founder and collapse

Mediatized public spheres as themselves sites, or means, of political struggle; the role of new communication technologies involving what John Thompson terms mediated visibility and mediated interaction; the role of talk shows, on-line forums and newsletters, columns, opinion pages, commentary and editorial; the effects of the need for commercial viability.

Religious and Cultural Public Spheres giving particular attention to the complex ways in which the terms of "morality, belief and tradition" are negotiated.

Comparative perspectives particularly on other post-repressive regimes: there we are especially concerned to invite papers which consider the relationship between public deliberation, the operation of democracy, human rights and citizenship, as well as the role of public intellectuals in post-apartheid regimes.

The Public Programme

The Public Programme, broadly focused around these same themes, will comprise a series of panel discussions involving local and international public commentators, media and cultural practitioners, and social movement activists, as well as exhibitors and performances. It will run alongside the Research Conference.

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WWW.PUBLIC-CONVERSATIONS.ORG.ZA

Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: South African Democracy at the Crossroads

Conference Program inserted into *The Weekender*
26.01.2008

'To engage in critique is to take risk as it almost always involves power, with critique coming from those who are less powerful, directed at those who are more powerful'



'There have been chilling signs across the last decade of substantial silencing, self-silencing and evasion'

'Every citizen bears a weighty ethical responsibility to engage in active deliberation'

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Conference Programme

PROGRAMME AT A GLANCE

PARADOXES OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE: SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY AT THE CROSSROADS

ORIGINS CENTRE, YALE ROAD, WITS UNIVERSITY
28 – 31 JANUARY 2008

MONDAY 28 JANUARY 2008

REGISTRATION

When: 3pm – 3.30pm
Where: Education centre, ground floor

TEA

When: 3.30pm – 4pm
Where: Education centre

ORCHESTRATING DEBATE: MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE 44

When: 4pm – 6pm
Where: Lecture room, first floor
What: Professor Tawane Kupe chairs a media panel.

NIGHT OF THE COLUMNISTS 5

When: 6.30pm
Where: Upstairs Gallery, followed by Tapestry room/south verandah, Museum south end, lower level
What: Introduction to the conference: Carolyn Hamilton
Panel discussion with four of South Africa's boldest columnists
Book Launch: Achille Mbembe introduces Xolela Mangcu's *To the Brink*
Drinks, jazz (with the Marcus Wyatt Trio) and snacks on the south verandah

GLANCE

PARADOXES OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE:

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TUESDAY 29 JANUARY 2008

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF COUNTER PUBLIC SPHERES 11

When: 8.30am
Where: Lecture room, first floor
What: Graeme Reid delivers a plenary address and Zachie Achmat chairs a panel on public debate within civil society

TEA

When: 11am
Where: Education centre

RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE 13

When: 11:30am
Where: Lecture room, first floor
What: Abdulkader Tayob chairs this session on the ways in which rationality, belief and tradition are negotiated in postcolonial settings.

LUNCH

When: 1pm
Where: Education centre, ground floor

PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND UNCERTAIN CITIZENSHIP 16

When: 2pm
Where: Lecture room, first floor
What: Shireen Hassim chairs a panel co-hosted with the HSRC on public deliberation and uncertain citizenship.

TEA

When: 3.30pm
Where: Education centre, ground floor

PUBLIC CULTURE, ARCHIVE AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE 18

When: 4pm
Where: Lecture room, first floor
What: Carolyn Hamilton chairs a panel that engages with the archive as an active resource with a constantly unfolding public life.

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WEDNESDAY 30 JANUARY 2008

UNCHARTED SPACES OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION (20)
 When: 8.30am
 Where: Lecture room, first floor
 What: Joyce Nyairo gives a plenary address on the capacity of forms of popular culture to engage in public deliberation, and Sarah Nuttall chairs a panel of cultural commentators who explore photography, exhibitions, books, independent publishing and art as sites of public deliberation.

TEA
 When: 11am
 Where: Education centre, ground floor

PUBLIC LIFE AND VISUAL DRAMATIC CULTURE (23)
 When: 11.30am
 Where: Lecture room, first floor
 What: Jyoti Mistry chairs a session on the contribution of cinema and theatre to public deliberation.

LUNCH
 When: 1pm
 Where: Education centre

PUBLIC PERFORMERS OF WISDOM AND AFFECT (24)
 When: 2pm
 Where: Lecture room, first floor
 What: Leon de Kock chairs a session on the writer as public intellectual.

TEA
 When: 3.30pm
 Where: Education centre

DISSIDENTS OF THE POPULAR REALM (26)
 When: 6pm
 Where: Upstairs Gallery, followed by Tapestry room/south verandah, lower level
 What: Alex Dodd explores the edgy raison d'etres of a panel of cross-media mavericks. Snacks and drinks afterwards on the south verandah, French/SA DJ Ben Montrésor to mix the music

THURSDAY 31 JANUARY 2008

INDIAN OCEAN PUBLIC SPHERES (29)
 When: 8.30am
 Where: Lecture room, first floor
 What: A plenary address by Mark Ravinder Frost on the possibilities and limits of transnational public discourse, followed by a panel discussion chaired by Isabel Hofmeyr on South African engagements with Indian public spheres

TEA
 When: 11am
 Where: Education centre, ground floor

CONFERENCE WRAP UP
 When: 11.30am
 Where: Lecture room, first floor
 What: Xolela Mangcu, Carolyn Hamilton and Isabel Hofmeyr close the conference

PUBLIC ATTENDANCE POLICY
 Members of the public who wish to attend the full conference or a particular day's events should register in advance with Jann Otto at: events@rca.co.za
 Tel: (011) 728-8134

Attendance to the *Night of the Columnists and Dissidents of the Public Realm* evening events is open to the public, but there is limited seating available, so please RSVP in advance to Jann at the aforementioned email address.

WEBSITE
 For possible programme changes and further details, please visit:
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GLANCE