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.
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.
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 mediatized 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, mediatization and religious and cultural organization. Under such circumstances, questions of the role of deliberation in democracy and in relation to the exertion of citizenship are thrown into sharp relief. Equally questions of counter-public sphere are problematized. Can these exist or are they romantic illusions, at times upheld and used by the postcolonial state itself to capture its citizenry? Investigation of the paradoxes of the South African public sphere invite global contextualization and comparison.
‘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’

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

‘There have been chilling signs across the last decade of substantial silencing, self-silencing and evasion’
Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Public Sphere: South African Democracy at the Crossroads

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

Night of the Columnists
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

Tuesday 29 January 2008

Civil Society and the Constitution of Counter Public Spheres
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
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
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
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.
WEDNESDAY 30 JANUARY 2008

UNCHARTED SPACES OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION
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
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
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
When: 6pm
Where: Upstairs Gallery, followed by Tapestry room/south verandah, lower level
What: Alex Dodd explores the edgy raison d’être of a panel of cross-media mavericks. Snacks and drinks afterwards on the south verandah. French/SA DJ Ben Montésor to mix the music.

THURSDAY 31 JANUARY 2008

INDIAN OCEAN PUBLIC SPHERES
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

NOTES:
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: www.public-conversations.org.za