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Africa's Emergent Public Sphere

EBENEZER OBADARE

A common lament among scholars of the global digital revolution concerns the relatively low penetration rate of the Internet in Africa. This is cited as proof of the continent's continued exclusion from the benefits of economic globalization, and as the chief constraint on the mobilization of civic agency and the emergence of an effective public sphere. Shallow Internet diffusion across Africa is an

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incontrovertible fact, and the worry is certainly understandable. But such criticism of “digital inequality” and its likely impact on the character of the public sphere is often misguided. For one thing, it rests on an unproven correlation between Internet access and effective civic engagement, reducing the quality of engagement to the breadth and density of digital diffusion. More to the point, it discounts the continued power of “offline” modes of engagement, and ignores the desire and creativity without which no social mobilization has any chance of success.

To understand the nature of the emerging public sphere in Africa requires more than simply bemoaning a digital void; it means coming to terms with the Internet as one dimension of the communicative architecture in a rapidly changing and increasingly ebullient social terrain. We must learn to appreciate the ongoing struggle and sacrifices necessary to construct and validate the very idea of a public space of open, critical deliberation in societies that only recently threw off the yoke of martial rule.

While classic liberal theorizing on the public sphere postulates that it is the bedrock of a democratic order, arguably the chief characteristic of

the emerging public sphere in Africa—perhaps because of the immediate historical backdrop of prolonged military rule—is the inherent tension between its “liberal” and “conservative” spirits. On the one hand, this tension encapsulates unresolved questions and debates over the meaning of citizenship and culture in Africa, the private-public boundary, the legacy of colonialism, and African identity in the shadow of globalization. On the other hand, it puts an asterisk on the progressive bona fides of this nascent sphere and its presumed capacity to secure a discursive foundation for liberal democracy in Africa.

In what follows, I will discuss two examples of public mobilization that exemplify the ambiguous temper of the emergent African public sphere and the difficulties involved in creating a society that is democratic in more than nomenclature. But first, some brief historical context will help put these problems in perspective.

A NEW PLURALISM

For several decades, the single most important political problem in Africa was how to free societies from the clutches of military dictatorship. The long-term deleterious impact of military and one-party rule was most readily seen in the normalization of violence as a currency of political contestation and in the dissipation of the energies necessary to build a firewall against the intrusions of state power in the civic space. As a result, for a long time, the very idea of creating and nurturing a dynamic public sphere—in which notionally equal citizens are free to hold authority to account, imagine an alternative political community, and discuss other matters of common concern—was moot.

The cue for change was the global third wave of democratization. Starting with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the crumbling of the Soviet empire, this wave buffeted the ramparts of

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military and one-party rule in Africa and seemed to be clearing the way for a new dawn of popular participation. Very rapidly, in response to a social impetus that was global as much as it was local, Africans welcomed a new era of pluralism characterized by multiparty politics, regular elections, and freedom of the press. Today, genuine popular influence on the conduct and outcomes of politics might still be out of reach, and, almost across the board, the withdrawal of the army to the barracks has not necessarily translated into removal of the military from politics; yet it is hard to deny that this period of democratization has produced some tangible social goods.

One such benefit is what appears to be a generally more assertive public sphere, with an ebullience strikingly in excess of the technological resources at its disposal. There are two immediate explanations for this. The first is the emergence of the Internet as the pivot of a new era of interactive media. The sociological jury may be out on what the Internet really means for sociality; what cannot be disputed is its role in expanding the scope of public participation by making new demographic trends socially visible, particularly the continent's youth bulge. Africa has the world's fastest-growing share of 15-to-25-year-olds.

Young people in Africa who have come of age during the digital revolution, and have developed skills in technologically mediated social networking, are a crucial component of the emerging public sphere's dynamism. Moves by a growing number of African presidents to designate a "new media" government portfolio are an acknowledgment of this generation's growing power. They also signal a momentous sociological shift: the passage of social power from traditional media moguls to a nascent Twitterati comfortable with the participative possibilities and still-unfolding mores of the digital age.

Second, the energy of this public sphere is partly accounted for by its transnational character. One way to understand this is to think of the emergent public sphere in Africa as a product of its place in today's global reality of an almost ceaseless circulation of discourses, images, and forms. In this "globality," it is extremely easy for ideas emanating from one part of the world to be

adopted and re-imagined in the articulation of strictly local grievances. Something of this logic of discursive appropriation was arguably at work in the process through which the Occupy Wall Street movement, triggered locally in the United States in 2011 by the alleged malfeasance of too-big-to-fail American banks, transformed into a worldwide explosion of anti-capitalist and anti-big business demonstrations.

If one way of explaining the dynamism of the new African public sphere is to focus on its insertion into a globality of information flows, another, related approach is to account for the role of a growing African diaspora in the framing of African issues and debates. With its increasing professional diversity, this diaspora compensates for the apparent drawbacks of expatriatism by leveraging its connections to the business, intellectual, and political elites in major Western countries. It is due in part to the activities of this diaspora that a vibrant corridor of communications ceaselessly

links Africans and African issues at home and abroad, forging a transnational public whose imagination is simultaneously cosmopolitan and local.

It is also no accident that some of the most dynamic new media outlets for

reportage on African issues were started or are currently headed by members of this diaspora. The two most prominent examples are the New York-based websites Sahara Reporters, established by former Nigerian student leader Omoyele Sowore, and Africa Is a Country, the brainchild of South Africa-born New School University professor Sean Jacobs. While Sahara Reporters' reputation is built on a foundation of hard-nosed investigative reporting and revelations of official corruption in Nigeria, Africa Is a Country appeals strongly to the African diasporic intelligentsia by providing a home for debates and ideas about African history, politics, and culture.

TOPPLING RHODES

In April 2015, the University of Cape Town's Senate voted overwhelmingly in favor of removing the brooding statue of Cecil John Rhodes—businessman, prime minister of the Cape Colony between 1890 and 1896, and prominent imperialist—from where it stood in a dominant position on the grounds of the campus. The decision fol-

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lowed a weeks-long student campaign that generated considerable international interest

Even before Rhodes “fell,” ripples from the protests had spread to other parts of South Africa. There were pockets of protest at Rhodes University in Grahamstown over the name of the institution, and in Durban, where a statue of King George V was repeatedly vandalized by a group of University of KwaZulu-Natal students. Most significantly, the “Rhodes Must Fall” protests spread to Oxford University, where a “Take it down!” campaign has failed so far to dislodge a statue of Rhodes from its current position outside Oriel College, though the administration pledged to provide historical context for the statue’s presence.

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign encompasses several layers of the onion that is the African public sphere. For its sheer mechanics alone, it is the modern public debate par excellence. The protests were conducted using the entire technological arsenal available to the digital media generation—Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, YouTube—in short, the full array of ways to go viral offered by Internet connectivity. But Rhodes Must Fall was always about much more than the technical virtuosity of the protesters.

At issue, first and foremost, was what to do with the statue of Rhodes in Cape Town and similar monuments that serve as constant reminders of South Africa’s apartheid past. What gave Rhodes Must Fall its particular resonance was the fact that it also marked the coming-of-age of a new generation of students who inevitably must confront lingering questions about their country’s historical and cultural legacy, along with the not particularly reassuring economic prospects of its fledgling rainbow democracy.

Since Rhodes Must Fall was primarily student-driven, one does not have to look too closely to see in it the spillover from larger issues centering on the perceived alienation of young people from South Africa’s “post-racial” democracy. Slogans such as “black consciousness,” “imperialism,” “institutional racism,” and “white privilege” were constant refrains, even as the protesters’ eyes seemed firmly fixed on the immediate prize which for them symbolized all these issues—toppling the offensive statue of Rhodes.

The sociologist Charles Taylor has said that the idea of the modern public sphere “transcends topical spaces.” He adds, “We might say that it knits together a plurality of such spaces into one larger space of nonassembly.” Rhodes Must Fall checks both boxes. As a broad space of nonassembly (or virtual assembly), it provided a thematic gathering point for a diverse spectrum of participants, both physically present and otherwise. In the same way, it seized the attention of people both within and outside Africa, furnishing in one stroke a running commentary on the political mood in the country and a live-streamed laboratory for the analysis of the public sphere in action.

Yet if Rhodes Must Fall was notable because of the transnational debate the movement provoked, we should not fail to recognize that it stood right in the middle of two-way traffic. Though clearly instigated by a local grievance, it was also undeniably a response to events far away in the United States, in particular the aftermath of the acquittal of George Zimmerman

for the shooting death of the black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida, and the explosion of Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the controversial deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands

of the police in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, respectively.

The vocabulary and performances of Rhodes Must Fall protesters were often eerily similar to those of Black Lives Matter activists, owing to the transnational circulation of images and ideas. For instance, it was common to see Rhodes Must Fall protesters with banners proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” (sometimes both slogans jostled for space on the same sign); their references to anti-black animus and “white privilege” may very well have also come out of the playbook of the Black Lives Matter protesters in Ferguson. Sometimes the transnational ethos of the public sphere is so strong that it renders sociological particulars almost irrelevant.

SEXUAL VIGILANTISM

Because the public sphere is a space where agreement on the common good is sought via robust and often passionate contention, it is, by the same token, a place where discord is on full display. Although it is a space in principle

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outside the purview of state power, it is by no means immune to power struggles, abuses, even violence, of its own. In their hurry to anoint it as the cornerstone of a democratic order, scholars often downplay this negative aspect of the public sphere.

The ongoing contestation over homosexuality in Africa offers a cautionary tale about this typically neglected dark side of the emergent public sphere in Africa. Indeed, if there is one thing that the controversy surrounding the civic status of homosexuals across Africa shows clearly, it is that this public sphere is as much about its “software” (who is or is not allowed into decent society; who gets to participate; whose voice counts) as it is about the “hardware” of the physical public space (for instance, which historical figures are deemed deserving of public monuments). In this manner, the inclusionary tendency of the public sphere is paralleled by its no less formidable exclusionary tendency.

In contemporary Africa, anxieties about deviant sexualities have been kindled within a sociological matrix in which, thanks to the digital revolution, the expansion of the public sphere by the incorporation of a new cohort of agents has happened concurrently with the de-privatization of intimacy. The pornification of the public sphere courtesy of new digital devices means that questions are being raised as to the ethics of using this technology. Yet, perhaps because matters of sex are typically a subplot for matters of politics, debates over homosexuality in Africa have morphed into a medium through which various political, ethical, or ideological claims are continually refracted. The result is the sexual vigilantism that has become prevalent across Africa.

Underwriting such vigilantism is legal homophobia: the mobilization of the law to punish homosexuals and social movements working to defend them. At last count, 37 African countries had passed laws declaring homosexuality illegal. The Nigerian version, the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013, was signed into law in January 2014 by then-President Goodluck Jonathan. It criminalizes marriage or civil unions between persons of the same sex, and anyone who directly or indirectly violates the law may be sentenced to a prison term of up to 14 years. This includes “a person or group of persons who administers, witnesses, abets, or aids the solemnization of a same-sex marriage or civil union, or supports the registration, operation, and

sustenance of gay clubs, societies, organizations, processions, or meetings in Nigeria.”

If the aim of legal homophobia was to banish gay people from the public sphere, it has most certainly backfired. For one thing, by drafting and enacting laws that criminalize homosexuality, and by engaging in an aggressive demonization of “deviant” sexualities, African governments, at the crest of a wave of intense civic hostility and moral disgust, have unwittingly helped lift the lid on discussion of such ticklish subjects as sexuality, sexual identity, pleasure, eroticism, anal sex, and so forth. As a result, a new sensibility is slowly but steadily being created around sexual orientation and its implications for modern citizenship.

There is no doubt that this excavation of previously taboo subjects has foregrounded critical questions about what it means to be human, what it means to live in a democratic society, what it means for a society to have an autonomous public sphere, and what it means to be a free citizen, untrammelled in the pursuit of one’s individuality and aspirations. The most important effect of the controversy, however, may not necessarily be the excavation of homosexuality from the African unconscious, as momentous as that is. The controversy has also exposed a “counter-public” instinct in the emerging African public sphere. This impulse is reflected in the inflated rhetoric against aberrant sexualities and the constant drip of media reports about violent acts, including extrajudicial executions, against people suspected of being gay.

UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

The public sphere exists both as abstraction and reality. In its abstract sense, it captures the idea of a space where a self-organizing body of citizens seeks common understanding through rational debate and disagreement. This space exists outside the scope of power, a separation that ensures its autonomy and its eventual capacity to challenge the state and serve as the cornerstone of the democratic process.

The reality of the public sphere is often different. For one thing, the very language and practices of rationality can postulate patterns of exclusion, since they often imply that only people with a certain level of educational attainment can be included in such debates (and since education tends to be bound up with class, status, and so forth, the scope of exclusion may be wider). For another, despite the apparent “publicness”

of the public sphere and the presumed transparency of its operations, in reality we are often in the dark when it comes to the motives of the agents and institutions engaged in contestation. Furthermore, in the real public sphere, the state is hardly ever completely kept at bay. And as many scholars have rightly lamented, spectacle and kitsch tend to displace serious critical debate, and it is far too easy at times for the voices of a few to drown out the majority.

This gap between principle and experience shows through clearly in the emerging public

sphere in Africa. Forged in the furnace of an Internet-powered globality, this arena profits from the social openness of the post-military era, and revels in the new age's essence: overcoming distance via connectivity. But for all that, true to its philosophical fundamentals, it remains a terrain of struggle, of still-unresolved tensions between forces divided by class, space, education, political commitment, and moral sensibility. Whether the public sphere becomes the mainstay of Africa's fledgling democracies will depend on which combination of these forces ultimately prevails. ■