



Theorising emergent public spheres: negotiating democracy, development, and dissent

Clive Barnett

Prof. C Barnett, Dept of Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences,
University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, UK, EX4 4RJ;
E-mail: c.barnett@exeter.ac.uk

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This article outlines an analytical framework for investigating the variable formation of public life. It suggests that theoretical accounts of the public sphere and related ideas should be thought of less as normative models to be applied to new contexts, and more as providing questions as to how different values of publicness emerge in new situations. It is suggested that the South African experience of public formation since the 1990s can inform the development of this type of framework, insofar as it challenges some of the normative assumptions built into academic, activist and policy understandings of the form and context of public life. The plurality of values associated with ideas of publicness is elaborated through a discussion of the grammars of public value; the specifically public content of publicness is shown to revolve around ideas of sharing as partaking, and three paradigms of public action are identified. The article concludes by identifying three dimensions around which the investigation and evaluation of emergent public formations might be organised.

Academic concepts such as 'civil society', 'governance', 'social capital', and 'citizenship' have had a distinctive social life¹ since the 1980s, as they have been deployed in various geopolitical contexts to inform policy initiatives to support and sustain 'democratisation'.² South Africa is one of the places in which the social life of theories has been hosted, and among the concepts invited along, 'the public sphere' and its close associates have been among the more prominent. The concept of the public sphere has been used normatively in public policy, academic debates, and constitutional design in South Africa since the early 1990s, as both a tool of critical evaluation and to inform experimental institutional design (Friedman & Reitzes 1996, Gillwald 1993, Bystrom & Nuttall 2013). This deployment is always couched with appropriate caveats about the degree to which the Western contexts from which ideas about democracy and the public sphere are often derived are not identical to those one finds in South Africa at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this respect, it appears that the public sphere is a little like 'civil society' – only ever partially instantiated in post-colonial contexts (see Mamdami 1996, Chatterjee 2011). Indeed, the idea of 'the public' might always have been a divided, fragmented field in the African context (see Ekeh 1975, Mustafa 2012). Nevertheless, the criteria of equality, openness and accessibility, as well as freedom to express opinions that the idea of the public sphere invokes are routinely invoked to evaluate and criticise the performance of institutions.

There is an ambivalence in the way in which the notion of the public sphere is approached in deeply divided societies: on the one hand, there is a sense that ethnic divisions and socio-economic inequality mean that an idealised model of open and inclusive debate is not feasible in post-apartheid South Africa, or indeed in post-colonial contexts more broadly; on the other hand, there is a sense that this model still serves as an ideal of how democracy can and should function. Creative refinements of the public sphere concept and its relevance to South Africa, for example, oscillate between pointing out the empirical limitations of theoretical frameworks sourced from Western contexts, and stronger objections over whether the norms implicit in those frameworks are at all appropriate in non-Western contexts. These issues are part of larger debates on 'travelling theory', and on the need or possibility of what has been variously dubbed 'southern

theory' (Connell 2007), 'theory from the south' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2011) or 'epistemologies of the south' (de Sousa Santos 2012). In one view, it is argued that there is no need for the use of Western concepts, however critical, in the global South. On the other hand, 'the public sphere' might be one of those concepts that has no proper home *per se*, and that has been formed and refined in the process of being grafted into new contexts. This understanding is exemplified perhaps by the journal *Public Culture*, wherein notions of publicness are explored in all their historical and geographical variability in ways that put a premium on the sense that critical practices are formed in circuits of translation and comparative application.³

The critical questions concerning the application of the concept of the public sphere to a context such as post-apartheid South Africa are, fundamentally, internal to the trajectory of critical theory from which that concept emerges. Jürgen Habermas's (1989) *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, the key reference point for discussions of this concept across the social sciences and humanities for over the past two decades, told a tragic story, in which the historical conditions which laid the ground for the emergence of a classic model of a liberal public sphere in the eighteenth century end up in the twentieth century undermining the norms of that public sphere. Habermas's original account bequeaths critical academic analysis two central problems. The first of these is the problem of how to make use of concepts such as the public sphere, which are at once descriptive and evaluative: When one finds that a state of affairs does not accord with the model, is that an occasion for questioning the precepts of the model? Or is this a moment in which the model can be deployed as intended, as a diagnostic tool of critical analysis, to identify fundamental points of criticism in a state of affairs? To address this first problem, one needs to consider more carefully how to derive criteria of evaluation from historically specific processes, which might be applied critically to other contexts. This first issue is, then, related to a second aspect of Habermas's original formulation. One of the contributions of that original account was to emphasise that public spheres are, indeed, historically variable. Once freed from the tragic interpretation to which Habermas originally subjected this insight, a narrative that contained the emphasis on variability within a singular teleology of decline, the public sphere can be understood as a concept of critical analysis that might well be sufficiently flexible for a wide array of contexts.

If one combines these two issues, namely the sense of the public sphere as a critical, evaluative concept with the sense of the variable forms through which

1 By suggesting that theories can have social lives, I am picking up on a stream of thought on 'the social life of methods'. See Savage 2010. See also the Social Life of Methods programme (<http://www.cresca.ac.uk/our-research/social-life-of-methods>) and the Public Lives of Ideas programme (<http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/connections/public-life-of-ideas-network/>).

2 Most of the thinking behind the argument made in this instance developed as part of the Emergent Publics project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, 2008–2010. <<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/lemergentpublics1>>

3 See <<http://publicculture.org>>

the values for which it stands might be enacted, one might arrive at an alternative to considering the idea of the public sphere as a framework to be applied. Rather, one might regard this idea more modestly as raising a cluster of questions to guide critical analysis. I will now elaborate on some of these questions.

The concept of public sphere and various associated notions direct one's attention to the challenge of considering critical evaluation in light of historical and geographical variability, and to do so without lapsing into a straightforward affirmation of the multiplicity and plurality of public forms. To retain its edge as a critical concept, the acknowledgement of variability must remain focused on issues of evaluation that are necessarily associated with disputes about the idea of the public sphere. From this perspective, one would approach the question of the public sphere in contemporary South Africa less as a problem of application of an external norm to a specific local context, and instead as one location from which to appreciate some of the exemplary features of contemporary public formation. That is, to regard this place as a place to learn from, not merely to use it as a test-bed for assessing a theoretical framework (see Slater 1992). In this spirit, I will elaborate on an analytical approach to investigating the emergent qualities of contemporary public life which is able to keep in tension the empirical acknowledgement that what is at stake in talk of 'public' matters are normative questions of evaluation, on the other. This approach seeks to be attentive to the question of what values are enacted and contested in public practices (see Mahony et al. 2010). My elaboration of this argument is structured as follows: the next section discusses the idea of attending to the grammars of public value; in the third section, the argument focuses on the degree to which the plurality of values associated with ideas of publicness might cluster around a certain sense of sharing, and, in the fourth section, I examine the ways in which particular organisational or social configurations have served as paradigms for the critical evaluation of public life. In the final, concluding section, I identify three aspects of analysis around which the investigation and evaluation of emergent public formations might be organised.

1. Grammars of public value

Before any discussion of the public sphere, or public space, the public sector, or associated notions, one is immediately faced with the problem of definition. What is a public? Or is that even the right question? Could a better question be: What is public? (see Barnett 2008). Once one asks that second question, a whole series of supplementary questions arise: is public a name given to particular spaces, by virtue of their openness? Is public a name given to certain institutions, by virtue of

their function or degree of accessibility? Is the public a collective subject of some sort, and if so, who are its members? Is public a name we give to certain kinds of action done from particular motivations, for example, in the public interest or publicly spirited? Or is public a name given to actions undertaken in particular patterns of interaction: collectively, as a public, as distinct from privately? Or is it better to regard public: as more like a medium into, and out of which one can move, by going public, making things known, exposing oneself or others to scrutiny of an indeterminate yet attentive audience?

By raising this cascade of questions, I mean to draw attention to the fact that, if one attends to the grammar of 'the public' and its variations, one begins to notice some of the difficulty in trying to nail down a clear and concise definition. By 'grammar', I mean the way in which the term is used and, more specifically, the sense of what is at stake in any particular usage, of what values are circulating around this usage. Attending to the grammar of usages of 'publicness' will help to glean what types of attributes are thought to be public, and why publicness matters to people.⁴

If one attends to the grammar of 'public' and its variants in this way, one is likely to notice the following:

First, 'public' is at once a noun and an adjective, something one can be in as well as something one can move into (by going public). In this latter sense, 'public' is also used as a verb, as something one does – for example, as in publicising, to publish. Secondly, 'public' is a name given to certain types of agents (the public, the public sector, public universities), as well as the name for certain types of action (ones distinguished perhaps by their location and/or their motivation). Thirdly, public actions are not necessarily restricted to public agents. All kinds of private agents can undertake actions that individually or collectively serve the public interest.

It thus turns out that 'public' can be a name, an action, or an attribute. Public values are embodied sometimes in patterns of motivation; sometimes in particular institutional actors, and sometimes, perhaps most often in fact, public values are distributed over whole fields of practices and relationships.

It might seem that one is entering a thicket of impossible definitional complexity. Or does 'public' simply have many different meanings? It is possible,

4 In referring to 'publicness' in this instance and in what follows, I am flagging the sense that there are plural uses and issues at stake in respect of this family of terms. In addition, it is worth noting that this problematisation of publicness might also capture something of the animating spirit of Habermas's original account of the historical variability of 'the public sphere' (see Schmidt 2013).

across this variation, to identify a family of recurring themes, broadly derived from the three senses of 'public' as an adjective, a noun, and a verb (see Schudson 2009).

First, the adjectival sense of public is defined against things private; in this instance, 'publicness' primarily signifies the value of openness. This might be a spatial sense, where public is related to exposure, to being on show or available to others. However, this sense also resonates across a political-economic terrain of definitions of the market and the public sector.

Secondly, in the nominal sense, the public is a name for a certain type of collective, a synonym perhaps for the community, or the nation, or sometimes offset against these more embodied, substantive collectives. In this instance, there is an implied value placed on a community of equals. Depending on which field of analysis one examines, one finds markedly different senses of what kind of existence this collective view of the public can and should have. In certain strands of strongly republican political theory, for example, the public as a collective entity exists only in, and through the reflexive medium of its own openness. Hannah Arendt develops this idea most famously. This opinion invites one to view publics as self-organising collectives, gathered together in a 'space of appearances' to consider matters of shared concern.

Thirdly, there is a strongly instrumental value associated with the ideas of publicness, in which the nominal sense of the public is understood with reference to certain actions that are undertaken by collective actors. This third sense emphasises an institutional view of the public as a concentrated, sovereign actor.⁵ In this instance, public refers to certain functions that authorise some actors to act on behalf of others in a particular way, and in the name of an abstract sense of the public, the public good, public health, or the public interest. It is this sense that is captured by the ideas of public service and the work of public servants, who act for, represent, act on behalf of, or care for members of the public; sometimes up close and personal, sometimes in the most general of senses. What makes these kinds of delegated agency and trusteeship qualify as 'public' is that they are enacted in the name of values of equality and impartiality that loop back to the first sense of openness. This sense of public value is evident not least when it is most obviously violated or flouted, as in cases where access to public office or funds is used for egregious personal gain or sectional preferment.

It is obvious that there are various dimensions to the grammar of publicness: it refers to intrinsic values of acting in a collective manner, for example, and to

instrumental values of performing competently or delivering certain outcomes on behalf of others. Having outlined this plurality of values associated with ideas of publicness, one needs to specify more precisely what is specifically public about public values. In the next section, I will outline how a particular understanding of sharing might be what various accounts of public value have in common, as it were.

2. From public participation to partaking in public life

One of the recurring themes of discussions of the public sphere in South Africa is the idea of there being a tension between the proliferation of participatory and consultative forums, of what are sometimes called 'invited spaces' of public participation, and 'invented spaces' of dissent and opposition which stand somewhat askew the legitimate functions that define the former.⁶ In certain respects, the idea that there are competing or paradoxical imperatives of more or less consensual public spheres and more or less contentious public action is a variant of wider debates in critical theory. One can find this idea, for example, in arguments about weak and strong public spheres, counter publics, and debates between agonistic and deliberative theories of democracy. In the South African context, this theme is perhaps most visible in discussions of the role of non-governmental organisations and social movement organisations, often conflated into a single entity called 'civil society'. 'Civil society' is often perceived as a source of partners in inclusive governance of a putative developmental state and as the site for resistance to hegemonic 'neoliberalism' (see Mueller-Hirt 2009, Ballard et al. 2006, Robins 2008). Recognising the different functions ascribed to public action, as I sketched in the previous section, challenges the idea that the relationships at stake, in this instance, are simply ones of 'paradox' or 'contradiction'. Thinking of the options in this way means that one is liable to always end up interpreting engagement between oppositional or 'dissensual' styles of action and more institutionalised fields of public action in terms of co-optation or 'coralling' (Hassim 2009b). Rather than remain caught in the terms of this either/or choice of interpretation, in which participatory practices are either idealised as vibrant, inclusive forums for democratisation, or dismissed as always already compromised mediums for the extension of new forms of rule, the reason to attend to the grammar of publicness, as suggested earlier, is that it opens the door to considering varieties of influence that might be ascribed to public action (see Barnett & Scott 2007, Oryzek 2005).

⁵ The republican approach mentioned earlier views this sense with great suspicion.

⁶ See Friedman & Reitzes 1996, Hamilton 2009, 2010, Hassim 2009a.

In order to better situate this problem of how different public values are related, this section focuses on the idea that public action revolves around a complex sense of sharing. It is a sense of sharing that folds together both the idea of inclusive participation, which underwrites the optimistic view of public life, and the idea of conflict, which underscores the importance of dissent and opposition in public life. I will argue below that the challenge of understanding the relationship between public action oriented towards the legitimisation of more-or-less inclusive governance arrangements and public action as a way of expressing dissent and opposition is best served by drawing into view the idea of public action as a medium for partaking in collective life.

In order to give some substance to the idea of public action as folding together imperatives of unity and legitimacy with those of conflict and opposition, it is helpful to parse the plurality of meanings of 'public' a little further. Calhoun (2009) distinguishes between four distinct, but overlapping aspects of public life: first, 'public' might refer to the collective creation of institutions and the sharing of collective life; secondly, it might refer to a sense that some goods are inherently public goods, in the sense derived from economics, where one can only enjoy some things if one shares them; thirdly, there is a sense of 'a public' as the joining together of strangers, and, finally, there is a sense of public life referring to the active participation in discussions and decisions about what is held to be good. In fact, this fourfold distinction breaks down into two pairs of practices and associated values. In fields such as public policy or public health, the operative sense of public is a combination of the first two strongly institutional senses identified by Calhoun. In political philosophy, or, for example, a great deal of cultural studies, as well as in activist and advocacy fields, it is the latter two senses that are emphasised. These fields are more concerned with patterns of interaction and sociability, processes of mobilisation, and the quality of discourse.

The first two senses of publicness, emphasising the idea of the collective provision of public goods, is central to modern understandings of social democracy, the welfare state, and the public sector, as well as to models of the developmental state that are central to post-apartheid South African politics. These first two senses give one a view of public action which emphasises the proper performance of public agencies – of the public sector, the government, the state – in the delivery of resources for the collective sharing in the life of a political community.

At first sight, this emphasis on the instrumental features of the public realm seems somewhat at odds with the strong emphasis on performative self-organisation that is picked out by the latter two of Calhoun's aspects of publicness: the emphasis on open interaction with strangers, and participation in deliberative

reflection on the public good. A great deal of literature on the public sphere and public space focuses primarily on the strongly communicative idea that public life is a realm that stands at some distance from institutional configurations of service delivery or production. This more intrinsic sense of public action is often understood by reference to ideas of the public sphere as a kind of legitimating forum; it is often understood in a more explicitly agonistic sense, so that the public sphere is understood as a contentious field for oppositional politics.

In the South African context, the view of public action that refers to the provision of material resources or services has considerable influence: this view underwrites policies concerning access to water, health care, and housing. At the same time, the view of public action as an agonistic practice is also well established, with links to older traditions of anti-apartheid activism, but being revived and reconfigured in the post-apartheid period. Of course, the two sides of this problem are not unrelated: a great deal of the agonistic public action of the past two decades arises in relation to perceived failures in the performance of public agencies charged with transforming the delivery of material benefits. Furthermore, highly contentious activism has been generated in respect of issues such as HIV and AIDS, with the aim of addressing more formal agencies of public action as well as private actors as well (Robins & Von Lienes 2004). In this and other instances, the two sides of public action – the instrumental and the intrinsic, the legitimate and the contentious – are intimately related.

What, if anything, connects these two aspects of public action? What might connect the concentrated, instrumental and strategic dimensions of concerted public action with a sense of the intrinsic, self-organising aspects of publicness in a particular understanding of sharing. Not all forms of sharing necessarily count as public, of course. However, publicness might be defined by a very distinctive style of sharing that is more than merely 'social' togetherness. If there is a connection between the grand-sounding ideal of the public sphere, most often theorised in terms of the intrinsic values of agonistic deliberation and debate among virtuous citizens, and the nitty-gritty of delivering health care services or improving education standards, then the connection lies in the degree to which these very different configurations of practice can enact forms of sharing in the collective life of a community of strangers on more or less equal footing.

Sharing sounds like a positive value. However, to share something (like a meal, or an orange), even to share in something (like a pastime), also involves dividing, appropriating, and making use of things. In the vocabulary of contemporary 'French theory', any sharing also presupposes division. This is an idea captured in the notion of *partage* (of sharing as well as separating, participating and partitioning) used for example by Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques

Ranciere, Chabal (2009) develops a similar idea in his account of the formation of political life in contemporary Africa. He uses the idea of partaking to capture the degree to which collective life combines an aspect of taking part in activities with others with an aspect of making use of shared resources.

My suggestion is that the specifically public content of the values associated with ideas of publicness, across their variety, turns on a certain mode of partaking with others, one in which sharing always involves relations with anonymous strangers. It is a form of sharing that necessarily involves making use of resources of different kinds, and is therefore also always likely to generate conflicts and disagreements. The idea of sharing as involving relationships between strangers is best captured in both classical literary accounts of the modern public and recent literary-theoretical and philosophical accounts of the public sphere, in which a key feature of a public is this idea of a community of strangers (Warner 2002). Both reading publics, as well as the modern city, are often invoked as figures for this type of collective, in which the value of openness of a public space or medium is specifically related to being exposed to 'the initiation of communication by others'. Briefly, the value of openness associated with the idea of publicness necessarily implies this emphasis on relations with strangers.

Public life can, therefore, be thought of as a family of practices of anonymous sharing with others of various risks, rewards, and responsibilities. This might take the form of sharing goods and services, or of sharing in the political discourse and cultural life of a community. This understanding helps us to see that publics are not simply formed by individuals finding themselves thrown together in the same community of fate as other people (see Calhoun 2002). Public action emerges through the assembly of communities of affected interest that extend beyond those immediately and functionally implicated in a system of actions and consequences (see Barnett & Bridge 2012). In other words, publics are mobilised, convened, and assembled; they are not merely found; nor is a public best conceptualised on the model of a collectively becoming aware of its identity 'for itself' by recognising its functional constitution as a community of interest 'in itself'. In fact, it might not be a good idea to view public action as necessarily correlating with an embodied public subject at all. The Public (see Barnett 2004a). Public action has various modes of existence; the next section will explore this variability a little further.

3. Paradigmatic publics

It was noted earlier that there is an overlapping cluster of values concerning the vocabulary of publicness: values that include openness, sharing, living together, accountability, and legitimacy. My suggestion is that a good way of proceeding

with the analysis of public formation is to focus on how these different public values are combined in particular ways in specific contexts. There is no single value ascribed to the idea of the public; rather, there is a cluster of values associated with publicness that can be enacted in different combinations. It is also important to remember that these various meanings of the public emerge not least in contrast to other values – values associated for example with 'privacy' or 'the market'. To elaborate on this idea that public values are combined and re-combined in specific contexts, I will discuss three configurations of public life that have been considered paradigms of public value. The purpose in drawing out these three paradigm cases is to underscore the argument that there is no single, simple scheme of evaluation that allows one to calculate the health of public life; rather, public life is subject to ongoing transformations as different values are combined in new ways.

The first paradigm of public value is that of public space. This is the focus of attention in spatial disciplines such as human geography, urban studies, architecture, and urban sociology. Public spaces are also a focus of attention in political-philosophical accounts of the public sphere, either as figures of the public or as empirical scenes for certain kinds of practices. This field of literature focuses on particular kinds of spaces – public parks, streets, shopping malls, cafes, the city – as exemplary of certain values of publicness. It is primarily concerned with a particular function of the public, namely the background conditions of a certain type of sociability that is taken to be crucial to more formal citizenly forms of participation. For example, considerable attention has been paid to reconfigurations of public space following the end of apartheid, in work on the privatisation of public space (Ballard & Jones 2011) or on ordinary spaces of xenophobia (Oodson 2010, Pillay 2013). At the same time, South Africa is also the site of new varieties of public action that scramble any simple division of public and private space. For example, activism in respect of HIV and AIDS has drawn into public space previously stigmatised identities that are highly personal, and involves a complex negotiation of secrecy, anonymity, and publicity (Robins 2005). Likewise, new forms of public action based on personal testimony or subjective professions of faith have been a feature of new public life in post-apartheid South Africa (Bystrom 2010, De Kock 2010, Ross 2003). Briefly, one might question the assumption that public action is necessarily action that takes place in formally constituted public spaces, thinking rather of the ways in which public action combines spaces, registers and repertoires that cross both a public/private and individual/collective boundary (see Parkinson 2012).

The second paradigm of public value emphasises a different function from the first paradigm. In this instance, the focus is primarily on the opinion-forming aspect of a vibrant public culture. This is, of course, also one aspect of the public

spaces discussed earlier, but a crucial dimension of the notion of the public sphere is the way in which such physical spaces of face-to-face interaction are embedded within mediated circuits of communication. The key institutions of public opinion-formation would thus include public and private broadcasters, newspapers, print cultures more generally (publishing, public libraries), museums, churches, schools and universities as well as social media and other internet-based spaces of interaction. Increasing attention is now paid to viewing these mediums of public culture in terms of circulatory infrastructures that make opinions, information, science and religion available to dispersed populations (see Hofmeyr 2010, Modisane 2013, Lipuma & Lee 2002).

In South Africa, a great deal of attention has been paid to the transformation of 'the public broadcaster', the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The SABC, always heavily dependent on advertising revenue, and now part of a wider media ecology, combines community-based, publicly subsidised, and commercially funded radio and television. South African radio and television, therefore, exemplify the degree to which vibrant public cultures are often dependent on, and sustained by different kinds of 'private' institutions, and not least, by the operations of markets (see Zegeye & Harris 2003). It is often difficult in a critical academic analysis of South African public culture to acknowledge this dimension of public life. The idea, for example, that consumer cultures can play an important role in public expression has only rarely been articulated (Barnett 2004b, Posel 2010). If the key public function of the field of public culture is that of keeping citizens informed and allowing them opportunities for free and unfettered expression, then the question of the source of funding or degree of selectivity of particular examples is strictly secondary to the evaluation of the contribution that 'private' institutions make to the development and circulation of a shared culture, of a world held in common by all citizens and available to all to engage with and appropriate as their own.

The institutionalised, mediated qualities of public culture have always generated a concern about the apparent paternalism involved in presuming to know what is good for audiences, listeners, readers, or viewers by the way of information, entertainment and education. This paternalist concern has, of course, underwritten a strong trend towards market populism across various fields of cultural policy and cultural economy. Markets in cultural goods are hardly 'perfect' in their responsiveness to the needs and preferences of members of the public. The combined impact of new technologies and privatised media lead some to be concerned about the fragmentation of a once unified public culture into myriad enclaves, in which people are only ever exposed to predetermined doses of their particular 'The Daily Me'. South Africa, of course, never had even an ideal of a unified public culture, so that this concern about the fragmentation of public

culture does not quite resonate in the same way. The example of South African cultural politics and cultural policy since the early 1990s indicates that there is no reason to suppose that the public value of a shared culture needs to be modelled on the ideal of a unified, single national culture (Green & Murray 2010). Returning to the idea of sharing as central to the value of public life, the South African case is indicative of innovative ways of approaching public culture which emphasises sharing as a process of exchange, interaction, encounter, and communication with, and across differences and diversity.

The first two paradigms of public value, namely public spaces and institutions of public culture, emphasise that the public sphere concerns a great deal more than politics or citizenship narrowly conceived. They remind one that the relationship between a wide, dispersed public culture and the political functions ascribed to public deliberation and decision-making is not best thought of as identical or directly, causally connected (Wessler 2009).

The third paradigm of public value cleaves more closely to, what one might call, the public function of 'will-formation' than the first two, and includes various political formations of the state, including welfare agencies as well as procedures of election, legislation, and policymaking. In this instance, the public is understood to be a collective subject whose will is embodied in, and whose interests are protected by the institutions of the democratic state, the agencies of the public interest. In both instances, the function of institutions of will-formation is to filter dispersed opinion-formation into actionable decisions and to implement these by means of programmes of service provision and the distribution of material resources. The key value underwriting these configurations, in their idealised liberal democratic form as well as in their contemporary developmental forms, is that of equality, be it the equality of participation through electoral enfranchisement, or the equality of impartiality embodied in expansive systems of welfare provision.

This third paradigm of public value is, of course, perhaps best embodied in the South African Constitution. It is also, and somewhat differently, exemplified in the politics of public sector reform in South Africa, where questions relating to what institutional arrangements can best deliver public services is highly contested. South Africa also exemplifies a series of new fields in which this third aspect of public value is being re-imagined: in the crisis of policing, for example, in which public values of security and dissent are uneasily combined (Pillay 2008), or in the rolling-out of basic income grant schemes, which challenge the idea that 'neoliberal' reforms necessarily involve a retreat from public provision or an abandonment of state responsibilities towards those in need (Ferguson 2007, 2010). In this as in other fields, the South African experience indicates the need

for frameworks of investigation and analysis that can do justice to the emergent forms of action concerning which public issues arise, are debated, and generate concerted response.

These three different paradigms of public value combine, embody and enact particular values of publicness – interaction, common culture, equality, representation, transparency, and others. Each paradigm puts a different emphasis on the relation between ‘weak’ public actions such as chatting and strolling around parks, and ‘strong’ public actions such as electing a government or distributing the revenues from taxation. One can also notice, in each paradigm, how the means and ends of public action can be historically variable. They also illustrate that public action tends to emerge around specific issues or problems: it tends to be about something that matters to people (see Marres 2007, Barnett 2008). It follows that there are various roles that enable people to partake in public life: as citizens, certainly, but also as clients, perhaps, or customers, or patients or parents, as employees, as neighbours or victims, as viewers or as taxpayers.

I have suggested some of the ways in which the South African experience challenges the norms embedded in each of these three paradigms. For example, this helps one realise that agonistic public expression can always generate further segregation or degenerate into xenophobia; that the vibrancy and representativeness of public culture might require both institutional diversity and economic pluralism, and that the effective delivery of public goods might not be possible without mobilising non-governmental actors, private capital, powers of surveillance, and by drawing on the resources of informal social worlds. These features of public life in post-apartheid South Africa require one to consider more carefully the emergent qualities of public action than is allowed by adhering to straightforward distinctions between the public and the private or to consoling narratives of pervasive neoliberalisation.

4. Conclusion: investigating emergent publics

I have attempted to prize open a space in which it is possible to investigate and evaluate the variable formation of public life in ways that evade simplistic judgements of decline, capture, or paradox. I have suggested that three paradigms of public value can be identified, depending on the academic and institutional field in question. Public value is often embodied in spatial configurations of action; in institutional configurations of public culture, and in institutional configurations of state or ‘state-like’ power. I have suggested that, in each paradigm, the means of securing particular public values can be varied. I have also indicated some of the ways in which the South African experience of public formation in the past

two decades challenges some of the normative assumptions built into academic, activist and policy understandings of the form and context of public life. Above all, I have emphasised the degree to which publicness is an emergent quality, by which I mean that issues of public value ‘break out’ around problems, issues, and processes that are not easily anticipated in advance, and, in turn, that the re-configuration of practices, institutions and registers can generate new forms of public life.

In closing, I suggest three themes that can guide the investigation of contemporary transformations of public life. These are analytically distinct dimensions of what, in any given situation, is always likely to be a more complex process of emergence.

4.1 The emergence of new objects of public action

The first focus is on the variety of issues around which public debate communities of affected interest are formed. We live in an age in which new objects of public contention are proliferating. For example, the proliferation of environmental concerns transforms the most mundane of everyday, domestic practices into activities with public significance. In South Africa, environmental issues are hardly new, but they have been politicised in distinctively new ways since the early 1990s (McDonald 2002). Distinctively new issues have arisen: most obviously, the HIV and AIDS pandemic has made access to health care, to affordable treatment, and to basic dignity central issues in the public life of post-apartheid South Africa.

4.2 The emergence of new subjects of public action

The second focus is on the processes that form the identities around which collective, participatory agency is mobilised. Again, the case of HIV and AOS exemplifies this process, giving rise to the emergence of a politics of ‘new life’, in which the subjects of public life combine one or more role as citizens, patients, witnesses, carers and activists (Robins 2005). This second dimension of the emergence of public life is closely related to the first aspect: new issues arise as objects of concern in no small part in response to the practices of identification and recognition that mobilise new subjects of public life. As suggested earlier, the relationship between these two dimensions is not one of social subjects simply coming to consciousness of pre-existing shared interests, but rather of the mutual co-production of issues and interests and identities.

4.3 The emergence of new mediums of public action

The third focus is on the mediums that give rise to issues as public concerns, that address demands for attention, and that institutionalise action in response to these concerns. I use the idea of mediums in a broad sense, to refer not only to media and communications practices, but also to the cultural registers of public expression, and to institutional technologies such as markets, auditing systems, or censuses as means of mediating public action. As indicated earlier, the changing media ecology of the South African public sphere has received a great deal of attention (Garman 2011, Jacobs & Wasserman 2003, Olorunnisola & Tomaselli 2001). South Africa has seen a proliferation of mediums of public action in the broader sense. These new mediums for public action include new layers of formal governance at local and regional scales, and the proliferation of new state-sponsored agencies and forums for deliberation, consultation, and participation. They also include shifts in the registers in which public issues are articulated. For example, South African public life is distinctively 'post-secular', one might suggest, insofar as public life is infused with religious and traditional identities, giving rise to specific public cultures of offense.⁷ While, on the one hand, violence remains a routine feature of the repertoires of public action in South Africa (see Meth 2010), the politics of memory in South Africa means that public life is likewise permeated by invocations of personal testimony and reconciliation (Brystrom 2010). As suggested earlier, South African public life is sustained in important ways by market-based practices, by the complex roles of non-governmental actors in the delivery of services, and in the mobilization of dissent. Each of these novel mediums of public life in South Africa – experimental designs in respect of participation, new registers of public expression, new modes of public subjectivity – illustrates the importance of developing analytical and evaluative frameworks that can do justice to the emergence of new combinations of issues, identities and institutional frameworks whereby new combinations of public values are enacted.

My account of the variability of public forms, meanings and values suggests that these three different dimensions along which publicness can emerge can be combined in different ways in specific situations. This implies that, when investigating transformations of public life, it is best to avoid idealisations in which public is offset against private, state against market, or collective virtues against self-interest. There is no single value of publicness, nor is there one single institutional model of how best to secure public values in all their variety. Since the early 1990s, South African experience stands as an example of a situation in

which new modalities of public action have emerged along all three dimensions identified above: new objects, subjects, and mediums. It is an example that challenges one to view received theories of the public sphere not as static frameworks to be applied, but as clusters of questions to be used in order to investigate and evaluate processes of formation and emergence.

7 Blichartz & Williams 2012, Kaarsholm 2011, Meyer & Moos 2006, Niehaus 2010, Hammel 2010.

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