

Habermas in the African Street: Popular Assemblies, Citizenship and Public Space in Africa

Richard Banegas¹

¹·CEMAf - Université Paris 1 , Paris, France

richard.banegas@noos.fr

« Ebimeeza » public talk shows in Kampala, « tea grins » in Bamako, « standing MP's » in Kinshasa, « People's Parliaments » in Nairobi and Eldoret, « Baraza » in Dar es Salaam, Sorbonne and other Patriotic Agoras in Abidjan... In a lot of African cities, we can observe a multiplication of popular spaces of deliberation and social debate, gathering different public according political lines or social affinities. How can we account for this global phenomenon? One could argue that it is a local byproduct of “Third Wave” democratization processes entangled with State informalization and/or an urban reproduction of rural “traditional” palavers, exemplifying common imaginaries of local public debate and decision-making in Africa. But this double assumption is far from telling the whole story: how democratic are these spaces of debate remains an open question ; how can we relate sociologically popular urban assemblies to village palavers is still also an issue. One could also assume that these popular political gatherings are related to other spaces and practices of sociability: party meetings, trade unions activities, religious ceremonies, funerals or weddings, local councils, reconciliation workshops, participatory development projects, etc. The new international doxa of deliberation and participation can appear here as a major impetus for gathering. We will argue that it is important to stress the historicity of each popular assembly by investigating the circulation of know how, of vocabulary, habits, procedures and representations of the value of oratory between different spaces of social gathering. But we will try to go beyond this genealogic approach. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of popular political assemblies, we will raise other questions about citizenship practices in urban and rural areas: what do these assemblies reveal on the distribution of space and power in a city or in a village? On the distinction between what is public or private? What do they tell us about the distribution of political competence? How are they influenced by national political competition and by the State? How these assembly practices relate to dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and domination? How far popular discourses that are produced in these spaces can sustain a political subjectivation “from below” and (re)shape the moral imagined community at the local and national level? Confronting African data to (post)habermasian theory, this paper will try to open a comparative reflection on the historical and imaginary foundations of the public sphere in Africa.