Street Parliaments. Public Spaces of Speech and Citizenship in Africa

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Foreword

In the last few years, researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds (political science, anthropology, sociology) have independently started to focus a new social phenomenon, observed in different african countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Congo and others. This is the spontaneous formation, in the streets of the main towns, of organized spaces for assembleary gatherings aimed at discussing news, rumors, social issues, religion and, above all, politics; the formation, in other terms, of "street parliaments" where citizens can enact (or in some cases, mime) political participation through speech and socialization.

While enquiring the "*parlements*" of the "patriotic movement" in Côte d'Ivoire, Richard Banégas thought about the possibility of building a network of researchers working on this specific topic. He thus created a "street parliament" branch of "The arts of citizenship" program of cooperation between the International Master of African Studies of Paris1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and the Institute of African Studies of Columbia University (supervised by Banégas himself and Mamadou Diouf). This is how "Street parliaments. Public spaces of speech and citizenship in Africa" project was born and funded. Florence Brisset-Foucault (University of Cambridge) and Armando Cutolo (University of Siena) joined it as scientific coordinators.

The first initiative of the project produced the panel *Oratory in As-*

sembly. Citizenship, Orality and Public Spaces in Africa at the ECAS4 African Studies Conference in Uppsala (june 2011; www.nai.uu.se/ecas-4/panels/141-156/panel-141/). A "Street parliaments" issue of the journal "Politique Africaine" is programmed for autumn or winter 2012. The "Street parliaments" project welcomes proposals of collaboration and exchange by scholars working on oratory, citizenship, public space and assembleary practices in Africa and elsewhere, aiming at a comparative perspective.

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"*Parlementaires debout*" of Kinshasa, "People's Parliaments" of Nairobi and Eldoret in Kenya, "Ebimeeza" in Uganda, "agoras", "parliaments" and other patriotic "congresses" in Côte d'Ivoire, "grins" of Bamako and Ouagadougou: a new demand for debate and public discussion, for spaces where to gather and to speak, is flourishing in the streets of many african countries, capturing audiences sharing different social, cultural or political affinities. Some of these spaces become permanent apparatuses, going through processes of institutionalization and bureaucratization within local or national networks. This is how in Côte d'Ivoire, under Gbagbo's regime, a plurality of "national federations of agoras and parliaments" was created and was immediately followed by other, analogous associations federating the orators. In the same way, the members of the "*grins*" – i.e. the places where people meet for drinking tea and discussing with friends in manding West Africa – were organized into a "national federation" by an formerly orator of the Abidjan's "la Sorbonne" (the most important street parliament of the country). In Kampala, the first public meetings organized at the Obligatto Club have been transformed into authentic radio talk-shows, capturing audiences wide enough to induce other radio stations to organize similar happenings, some of them in local languages. The political relevance of such a phenomenon has been perceived as a veritable menace by the State powers, who decided to forbid it.

How to analyze these people's gatherings and assemblies? Are they conceived as spaces of confrontation with the power or, on the contrary, do they work as transmission belts aimed at communicating its passwords? Are they counter-hegemonic "*lieux propres*" (as de Certeau would call them), promoting active practices of citizenship, or are they instruments for the depolitisation and subordination to a postcolonial (even if apparently deliberative) order? Our interdisciplinary proposal, which connects political science and anthropology "from below" – through an ethnographic approach aimed at producing what Michel Foucault defined as a "political anatomy of details" – doesn't want to give normative answers

to such questions. It has, instead, the aim of producing empirical analysis of assembly practices, with the forms of speech and performance characterizing them. This is why we do not propose any specific theoretical frame nor the sharing of defined bibliography, inviting the researcher in our network to share and discuss their perspectives of enquiry and strategies of problematization. Most of all, we invite to an ethnographic research on these public spaces and on their actors (namely, the orators), giving limelight to some of the new forms and practices of citizenship in Africa. This will bring us, eventually, to engage in a comparative and theoretical reflection on the social, historical and imaginary foundation of public space South and North of the Sahara.

What do we talk about?

First of all, we would like to make it clear that our enquiry is not confined to instances explicitly defined as "street parliaments", even though it takes the latter as the starting point of the research, as empirical objects of reference. It is not possible, in fact, to encompass our research object within a given frame. Not just because the construction of assemblies is greatly variable from one society to the other, and from one historical period to the other. The main reason is that "street parliaments" show strict relations with other spontaneous gatherings and organized spaces for public speech, be it of partisan, associative, religious, academic or sportive kind. Indeed, one of the main hypothesis of our issue rests precisely on the possible osmosis between different form of apprenticeship to public speech, as well as on the diffusion of oratory abilities. The latter may connect, for instance, a Pentecostal church with a student union and with local "parliament". Thus, lines of research concerning other forms of assemblies and "deliberative" instances (as religious ceremonies, local councils, reconciliation forums, participative development projects and other forms of direct social interaction) will be included, as far as they will address outdoor, open spaces, and as far as they will engage within the problematization of public speech we are going to develop. This may concern institutionalized and standardized practices, as well as other contexts that have been invested only informally and sporadically, as for instance Tharir square in Cairo at the time of the mobilization against Moubarak's régime.

Research topics and our hypothesis

These assembleary practices raise many questions, concerning the relation between citizenship and public space. They can be processed following

different disciplinary approaches. We would like to repeat, however, that all of them should be approached with empirical - and not normative or speculative - approach. We thus suggest the following research themes and hypothesis:

1. *The genealogy of assembleary practices and of public speech*. One of the concerns of our program is the historicity of the forms of assembly and of deliberative practices. A culturalist bias would certainly place them under the well-known "*arbres à palabre*" – an argument which, with some intellectual laziness, has been used to stress the weight of deliberative "tradition" south of the Sahara. Traditions are, of course, invented or reinvented, and it would be interesting to understand, in our perspective, why this specific one is used by some actors and not by other. However, it tells us nothing about the particular historical modalities that, in a given context, have brought the citizens of a specific town or neighborhood to meet in order to discuss public matters, football or religion. This is a crucial point: what we want to do is to promote a detailed archeology of assembleary modalities and of public speech, following closely the macro-political and micro-social events determining or influencing their formation.

2. *The ethnography of public spaces of speech, and the sociology of their actors.* Researchers are invited to propose detailed ethnographic descriptions of assembleary practices and of deliberative apparatuses. Do these spaces obey to well-established (spatial) organization? Is there a apposite dramaturgy structuring the assembly? Can we grasp the rules and the hierarchies governing forms of – and access to – speech? If this is true, what do they tell us about power and inequalities in public speech? What do they tell us about the public/private divide? Going beyond apparatuses, we would like to focus on actors: orators, audiences, passersby and bystanders etc. What are the relations connecting those different actors? Who are they? How does one become an orator? Who is authorized in uttering speech, following what modalities of selection? If an audience is there, how does it react? We would appreciate any biographical indications on the leaders and animators of those places, their life-histories, their formation in the art of oratory, their everyday social interactions. We invite researchers to be particularly careful in describing the profile of orators, as well as the forms and the representations of public speech they propose.

3. *Social networks and the circulation of abilities. Enquiring the social connections of assembly practices.* As we said above, one of the starting points of our group-research is the hypothesis that these assembleary practices are connected in some way to other forms of mobilization, of association and of everyday sociality. They should be seen in their relations of mutual implication. In this domain we would like to start from the hypothesis that some circulation of oratory abilities and competences is existing

between different spaces (whether they are of militant kind or not). Such a circulation would involve vocabularies, techniques, norms, rules and representations of public speech. If this is true, we'll have to outline the form of their circulation, in order to understand fully the content of debates taking places within "street parliaments". It is possible, for instance, using orators life-histories to measure the influence of "participatory techniques" promoted by international sponsors within associative milieus. In fact, the circulation of abilities can be extended to the international level. Within the frame created by these forms of circulation, we should detect what model of speech is valued o simply used normally by participants. Thus, in our opinion, enquiring the connections linking a place of public discussion with others spaces should produce sociological insight.

4. Performance, oratory practices and their relations to written language. Focusing speech in assembly, our project would like to include a reflection on oratory art in its uses in contemporary african societies. Important anthropological literature as been devoted to this topic, highlighting the "performance" and on the dramaturgies of power. Focusing popular forms of assemblies and of public discussion, we aim here to address "from below" the powers that are put "on the stage". What are the oratory techniques adopted and prized by a specific group in a specific place? What are their symbolic systems of reference? Bringing to light the performance aspect, does it mean that once the deliberative practices have been put on stage they have been emptied of their meaning, becoming just a mimicry of the discourse of power? Can they be reduced to a show aiming at entertaining audiences? The focus on oratory practices in our collective research doesn't mean to confine african societies to "orality", as some anthropological research has done. At a first glance, we would like to make an opposite hypothesis, concerning the centrality of the written word in the popular assembleary practices (regulations, booklets, written discourses etc.). We will try to bring into light the interconnections between the oral and the written dimension.

5. Relations with politics, with the State and with the question of citizenship. Street parliaments and other related gatherings of citizens do raise of course the question of their relation with the political domain, with the State and with the issue of citizenship. The articles could start from basic questions: are these popular assemblies really politicized or are they just spaces of sociability? Are they attended by politicians? To what extent are they influenced by competing parties and by the State? Are they connected to local or national networks and, if this is the case, how are they connected? Do the biographies of the actors allow us to see the overlapping between these different spaces? Beyond this first level of enquiry, our dossier invites the authors to reflect on the models of citizenship revealed

by this assembleary practices. We make the hypothesis that the very organization of these forms of gathering, as well as the principles governing the debates, reflect the representation of citizenship existing within a given society or within a part of it. The capacity of participating to a public debates depends strictly from ideas concerning "who" has the authority to speak for others and who is a "good citizen". What are the qualities of a good orator? In the oratory practices building public discussion, we can detect the presence of un underlying debate (often of contrasting kind) about the political and moral conditions authorizing individuals to speak in public. As Bourdieu – among others – has stressed, the "legitimacy" to speak in public in related to a set of cultural and social conditions drawing the features of inequality, power and domination. It is well known how the practice of language can be heavily discriminatory, and associated to images of power and success, among which the "intellectual" can be found together – but in a more ambivalent way- with the colonial "*évolué*". Our special issue wants to stimulate a reflection on the moral economies of citizenship which are made visible by oratory practices (as, for instance, the "citizenship of distinction" having been observed in the Ugandan *ebimeeza*). It invites also to a problematization of "political competence" and its unequal social distribution, as well as to "hidden inequalities" always hosted by pretended democratic deliberative practices.

6. *Habermas and Foucault in the african streets? Public spaces of speech and political subjectivation*. Behind our empiric approach lies a theoretical interest and a conceptual concern about the possible uses of Habermas notion of "public space". Its capacity to account for "street parliaments" and other informal assemblies must be carefully checked. The risks provoked by "concept stretching" shouldn't be seen just in the difficulties raised by subsuming under a single category different facts and objects. A more relevant risk, in our perspective, comes from interpreting these facts through an unaware use of a notion which has been created within (and for the account of) a specific historical trajectory: the modern European bourgeois salons, where citizens went for "making a public use of their private reason" – recalling here the Kantian formulation quoted by Habermas. The features given by the latter, in order to define the "public sphere" as the political space of citizenship, are beyond doubt quite far from the configurations of contemporary african societies. Nonetheless, should we dismiss the concept of "public space" and thus adopt a relativistic posture? We suggest a different, pragmatic approach, refusing normative, historically situated conception of this category and making use of the Habermas notion as an empirical "research program". A research program that will enquire local genealogies of the "public" and "private" domains, the representations concerning participation and deliberation,

the concepts by which the polity and individual are thought of. In conclusion, our aim is documenting a plurality of "vernacular" notions of the "public space", in order to produce some insight on the history of its formation in Africa. In order to do that, it is important, in our opinion, to pay attention to popular forms of assembleary practices, which in turn brings to our last hypothesis, of foucaultian kind: once apparatuses of domination and exclusion pertaining to deliberative techniques have been identified, can we conceive of "street parliaments" – and other public places of speech- as privileged spaces of political subjectivation? Can we approach them as places where new "regimes of truth" are uttered, revealing the fragmentation of sovereignty?