

The NPI and the 'Kulturpolitik' of Social Entrepreneurs

By Terry Hirst

THE GERMAN WORD 'kulturpolitik' has no real equivalent in English. This suggests that some peoples have categories of thought for relating cultural activity and analysis to political possibilities and action that the British lack, as everybody in Africa understands. So let us use the German word in English to talk about culture and politics, and the relevance of 'kulturpolitik' in Kenya today.

We know from recent experience that songs and word symbols can have important, politically mobilising, significance. We know that radio, TV, newspapers, books and films - and their images of life - can affect both individuals and society at large in political life, and vice versa. But we pay little attention to the actual *culture as theology* - the science of the whole process of developing a coherent 'world view' that makes the transmission of the values of life intelligible, and how it comes about in any given culture. ***"It is through the creation of intelligibility that meaningful education spurs the output of daring, initiative, and constructive ability,"*** as Justin Rweymamu said, and that should be a cultural inheritance. Democratic politics, as we all know, is really about how we all agree as to 'who gets what, where, when, and how', that we are willing to be taxed in order to sustain.

So that involves 'kulturpolitik', which in English has come to mean only a virtual theory of media, leaving out all the other nurturing agencies? Where it does have meaning, most obviously amongst religious people, their modern theology and culture rarely makes any connection between cultural creativity and political outcomes, failing to span the gap between symbol and society. Few people, other than the artists themselves, attempt to relate the aesthetic to the political realm. While we are rightly suspicious of the relation of art to politics or commerce, where it can become mere propaganda or just advertising, but the relationship need not always be considered theologically negative. The example of Elimo Njau's murals in the cathedral in Murang'a, which are at the same time culturally, politically, and even theologically revolutionary, proves this.

"In the history of the nineteenth and twentieth century art the same story has been repeated again and again. The artist, isolated, knows that his maximum moral

responsibility is to struggle to tell the truth; his struggle is on the nearside, not the far, of drawing moral conclusions."

John Berger, *'Permanent Red: Essays on Seeing'*, 1960.

However, in the graphic media arts, politics and market commerce are integrally linked, and this is where most media artists live. Our decisions to undertake particular cultural actions are most often determined by our sense of social identity, and so come about by moral argument in an ethical discourse, particularly where development issues are concerned. But politics and the commercial market make their own demands. Why then do we never seem to question what is, or what is not, an ethical choice?

Many different agencies mediate *values* today, unlike in the recent past. Today the individual "has no choice but to make choices," as Anthony Giddens pointed out, and our young people are entering a post-traditional, post-modern society, where nothing is 'given', and they can - and must - choose every fact of their lives. Appropriate technologies are now starting to rule the day, and appropriate ideologies will emerge as a means of renovating exhausted and discredited political agendas. Everything is now based upon the ethos of survival for ordinary folks, and this is the main thrust of Third World - as opposed to First World - post-modernism, as diverse as developing countries' cultures themselves. The future is no longer what it used to be, largely because we fail to understand the importance of the past, and its effect upon us in the present of today.

"The destruction of the of the past is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late 20th Century. Most of the young men and women grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in."

Eric Hobsbawm, *"The Age of Extremes: the Short 20th Century, 1914-1991"*, 1994.

It will pay us to look at some of the terms more closely, particularly the traditional and post-traditional public past, meaning 'modern', and 'post-modern', where nothing is 'given', yet implies a whole basket of information that is - if not given - still very available, and often still being practised and shared as tacit knowledge.

- TRADITIONAL, or pre-modern: these cultures were characterised by subsistence agricultural production or nomadic pastoralism, or a mixture of

both, with some elements of hunting and gathering. Throughout East Africa there are very deep and wide knowledge bases about plants and animals, in very many languages, many of which have been recorded. However many of the plants are yet to be described scientifically, even though they are well understood as cultural inheritance in terms of food self-sufficiency, and medicinal value.

- MODERN, or colonial as Kenya experienced it: this was a largely British culture introduced and widely adopted, characterized by construction, including concepts of monopolistic market establishment, land alienation, resource extraction, engineering, scientific research, technology design, and maintenance; an administrative bureaucracy and legal system serving an aristocratic elite; and the factory system - or modern sector - with its emphasis upon employment, wages and salaries, commodities and the consumer life-style.
- POST-MODERN, (or post-independence) model that we now live in: the multiparty, liberal democratic, capitalist market economy, and due to the globalisation process, preferably with institutional guarantees for access to information and opportunities, education and healthcare, transparent governance and market efficiency:

We are experiencing elements of these three modes, and sources of information, customs and attitudes, co-existing in our society at the same time, and yet creating a sense of despair among many. The young all need a more positive view of the future.

THE IMAGE WE HOLD OF THE FUTURE plays an important part in helping that future to emerge. The potential strength of a society is reflected in the intensity and energy of its own images of the future. Bold, visionary thinking in itself is the prerequisite for effective social change and cultural adjustment. The management of change, and its strategies, are in the effort to convert **probable futures** into **possible futures**, while there will be more argument and discussion over **preferable futures**, if the ideas are in the market place.

All capitalist ventures are speculative, and must exist in the mind before they are realized in the market. Dreaming about *possible* futures, and *preferable* futures, that starts the whole process, begins with the gathering of ideas from the market place. It

has been a random, wide-scatter shot process, unless you are 'in the know'. But the future is not what it used to be, and nearly forty years ago Alvin Toffler suggested another way of doing it:

"A sensitive system of indicators geared to measuring the achievement of social and cultural goals, and integrated with economic indicators, is a part of the equipment that any society needs before it can successfully reach the next stage of eco-technical development. It is an absolute pre-condition for post-technocratic planning (centralized planning) and change management". Alvin Toffler, 'Future Shock', 1970.

Toffler went on to suggest, in 'Future Shock', the establishment of creative development centers, devoted to technically assisted 'brain storming' to: examine the present crisis; anticipate future crises; and speculate freely about possible futures. Toffler's idea was to put creative people in touch with policy specialists and political scientists in a more revolutionary way to make new media productions, by basing creative experiments upon the future rather than on the past, as most traditional utopias have done, picturing simple, static societies.

The point of his exercise was not to predict the future, but to present options - *storyboards* of alternative futures - showing the choices open. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was so interested in the ideas of *Future Shock*, that it wanted them shared widely, particularly among middle management cadres. It immediately commissioned and distributed a 'manga' about them - a traditional Japanese comic book - to which the Japanese are addicted. This process has proved to be very popular, successful, and so profitable for the large studios elsewhere, from Walt Disney, to Dreamworks SKE, and has been warmly embraced by the mass entertainment industry, which is content with the enduring 'status quo'.

The mass-mediated stories of the culture industry, for the most part, traditionally conceive stories in a circular pattern concerning inheritance and substitution, rather than change, as typified by such popular stories as '*The Lion King*'. The profit motive drives the large media players in the search for audiences. But, the process could be set up at a micro-level, with young, creative people receiving a different kind of training in the graphic narrative arts, that includes education and ideas about sustainable rural development, which would then become the foundation for their future creative work as independent artists.

"Traditionally, the story teller has always been a seer of the future, and the role in all cultures has meant communicating wisdom as a use value to the people, allowing them to perceive possibilities and options for self-realization."

Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 1979.

Furthermore, it is clear that relations between working and 'making a living', within the homestead or within the workplace, in all kinds of social and cultural environments, are changing rapidly in response to the new informational technologies. This has been enhanced by the development of solar-powered, stand-alone, IT units that can be functional in every corner of East Africa. The Toffler concept, used by a government/business alliance, as was intended, seems a too cynically manipulative and controlling attempt to 'manufacture consent'. But it could nevertheless be used fruitfully and creatively at the level of a homestead production unit, with personal conviction and more limited resources.

"Interestingly, this is a key component in the right wing political agenda in the United States. The

new technology, said Newt Gingrich (advised by Alvin Toffler whose, right-wing utopianism rests

on the idea of a 'third wave' information revolution), is inherently emancipatory. But in order to

liberate the emancipatory force from its political chains it is essential to pursue a political revolution to dismantle all of the institutions of 'second wave' (or modern) industrial society-government regulation, the welfare state, collective institutions of wage bargaining, and the like".

David Harvey, *'Spaces of Hope'*, 2000.

Equally interestingly, few of the enabling technologies that Harvey is talking about in the dismantling of the 'second wave', or 'modern' institutions in East Africa were of much benefit to the people as a whole. The original government/business alliance institutions - marketing boards and the like - and their regulations have been largely pushed aside, or subverted, in their regulatory intent. The welfare state does not exist in any truly functional form, and the collective 'second wave' institutions of large trade union wage bargaining, and the like, have either been betrayed or absorbed by governments. The 'emancipatory force' is merely awaiting its political

liberation in Kenyan people's minds, and the object of this project would be to assist in the wake-up call.

We know that information does not flow from the top down, but we insist on pretending it does in our institutions. Information flows horizontally, in society, between equals in networks of shared interests. The task of something like a Public Information Extension Service, (PIES), would be to discover, and nurture those shared interests, by becoming part of the people's media environment of choice, where they 'check in' daily, because it is useful and it is fun. This could be done in the primary stage by quite a small physical 'piloting unit', giving opportunities to monitor and evaluate its potential. The size of the funding required would be equally modest, compared to the implications of the eventual size, the employment opportunities envisioned, and the ultimate cultural benefits to be derived from establishing a community-centered Public Information Extension Service, (PIES), network in reality.

First we need to establish a separate unit, or small 'pilot' studio, with a 'family business' kind of structure, and let it progress from being a 'sole trader' to a 'limited company', say, within six months to a year. All young people need a range of books and media to answer their non-school, informal educational questions, and a specialized publishing house is needed for this. It could be a eventually become a private company, called perhaps 'Studio Homestead Enterprises' (SHE), preferably limited by guarantee, like a social club, and non-profit distributing. It should have training facilities, and be 'on-line' with a website, in a <.ke> domain, to carry a specially devised 'culture and history of the medium' in Kenya and globally, and have marketing and distribution abilities for its products.

The first 'pilot' studio will need to have funding for the rehabilitation of an existing studio, at least two PCs, a dedicated 'phone line, a modem, a scanner/photocopier, and broadband Internet access for at least one year; and a small staff, comprising a studio manager, a computer programmer, a secretary/researcher, driver/messenger, and five assistants, who should be apprentices in training. Thus it would immediately create ten 'work places', and should attract funding to exist for at least six a year. Also it should have the 'in-house' capacity to train staff and develop its own titles; designing, illustrating and editing, and including undertaking all pre-press production; maintaining a website, with marketing and on-line ordering facilities; and a mail-order department to receive orders and dispatch copies, as well as maintaining stocks.

All the productions of the studio must reflect the qualities of our national cultural heritage positively, yet critically, reflecting the fact that reason and choice are aspects of our individual social identity, along with tolerance. With the establishment of ten 'work-places', with training and guaranteed income for at least twelve months, the creation of a fully functional pilot for the 'PIES model' of a mega-institution capable of further self-organizing development, on a solar-powered, stand-alone basis, anywhere in Kenya or East Africa would be possible. If eventually replicated, with small startup loans or grants for suitable trainees, in all the District, or constituency headquarters, in Kenya, more than 2000 new workplaces would be established, cost efficiently, on a self-sustaining basis, communicating to their own communities, open to commercial co-operation with local business, government departments, and local and international development agencies.

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