

The importance of critical social theory in the African business paradigm

By Helen Lauer

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I.

Business vs. ethics

I'm surprised by what I have come here to say. I would not have expected to be advocating a division of labour between the doing of business and the doing of ethics, but it seems this is where I have been led so far, by setting out with the modest intention of correcting what seemed initially like a minor but repeated slip in the fragment of the literature I've read about corporate social responsibility in cross cultural contexts of economies in upward transition.¹

Here is the error I noticed. Some scholars assume—mistakenly, as I will argue—that it is the diversity of moral opinion existing worldwide which is the crucial challenge to running a transnational business honourably here in West Africa as elsewhere in places that have come to be lumped together as developing countries. This assumption is conveyed for instance by William Frederick's work published in 1991 and 1994, by Bryan Husted and David Allen in 2000, by Moon and Woolliams also in 2000, Daniel Litvin in 2003, and others.

These scholars say, for instance, that “social responsibility is about stakeholder management; . . . it is about . . . achieving long term social objectives to create competitive advantage. [It] is about meeting agreed public expectations of [a] business firm's behaviour; . . . it is a way of protecting the firm's strategy from the social issues affecting the firm” (Husted and Allen 1998: 9; 2000: 23-25). And “social responsiveness is [a firm's] ability to respond to social pressures . . .” (Frederick 1994: 154). It would seem that practicing social responsibility cross culturally is all about unbiased reconciliation of conflicting preferences. Moon and Woolliams (2000) for instance depict the practice of corporate social responsibility as requiring a kind of honest brokering, taking on board the views of relevant stakeholders and business operators with their culturally specific styles of body language, handshaking, voice modulation, gestures of deference, as well as their potentially conflicting responses to moral puzzles, without fearing or favouring any alternative. Cross-cultural ethics appears to involve a resolve to restrain from challenging or questioning or judging any one point of view that registers as sufficiently popular on a suitably reputable opinion poll, such as Trompenaars' data base (Moon and Woolliams 2000: 107, 113).

By focussing on an illusory tension between astute observation of social norms vs. reasoning through to moral imperatives, I think Moon and Woolliams underestimate the ethical dilemmas and challenges that do arise from genuine conflicts of interest between private company partners and public stakeholders in West Africa.² I think the situation on the ground here is at once more pernicious and more straightforward than some of the contributors to the readily accessed literature on cross-cultural corporate ethics would have us

¹ I have to qualify everything that follows by conceding I have only read a fraction of this literature. This whole talk may be taken as a plea for your instructions for further reading.

² Because I harp upon over-generalisation as a core error in global discourse concerning African affairs, I am obliged to restrict these remarks to the only region I know anything about. The main arguments in this essay would not apply elsewhere anyway (since they are historically specific to transnational trade legacies with West Africa); although I assume close analogues might.

believe.³ However we interpret the contrast between statements that report norms and customary practice vs. statements that convey judgments about right and wrong, I think we can agree that the capacity to make ethical judgments and choices is part of what we inherit with language, with the innate or learned ability to talk to ourselves. But from the fact that morality can only be thought about within one linguistic and cultural tradition or another, it does not follow that no distinction can be discerned between following cultural customs or social norms on the one hand, and making judgments about whether a given custom or norm is ethically right or wrong, on the other.

In what follows, I first show why ethical reasoning cannot take the place of, nor be replaced by, efficient strategizing to mollify stakeholders while satiating shareholders. These are two important but distinct sorts of social enterprise.

Of course they are closely tied up. As a matter of psychological fact, we seek out each other's views and priorities to figure out what is the right thing to do. Getting things right morally correlates often but not always with garnering social approval. Even the mere exhibition of concern over ethical issues is reinforced by the relative security and comfort that most corporate communities gain from social approbation. But the conscientious pursuit of social approval and the achievement of public commendation are one thing; the fixing of moral commitments and financing their practice are another.

Consider a regional corporate manager who is obliged to work out an ethical solution to a practical problem, like deciding what minimum wage to fix in an impoverished economy, or how much company money to commit gratuitously to environmental protection measures. To adjudicate among her viable options, suppose she follows the advice of Moon and Woolliams (1991: 107) by consulting the Trompenaars data base of 50,000 entries from 100 countries which summarises statistically the majority response to ethical dilemmas concerning like matters on a national basis. She then recommends a policy commensurate with the dominant views tracked in the country where her franchises are based. She thus attunes her corporate policy to local opinion, or what Moor and Woolliams call the ethical environment. But in so doing she has confused political correctness with moral conviction. The manager thus skirts the issue of what is the morally right thing to do and instead goes for what the traffic will allow. Like the honest tradesman who avoids alienating his customers by always giving the right change, she is just using good business savvy. Not all instrumental goods have moral significance.

By dodging the challenge of reasoning about the moral worth of public opinion in this case, I think she may not have been culpable for doing anything ethically wrong; but I would not count her action as socially responsible in an ethical sense. She may be exhibiting social responsiveness as Frederick defined it in 1994 (p. 154). But this seems to me to be a play on words. An opportunist who notices all his co-workers are so focussed on a football match that he can safely raid the till could be called socially responsive in Frederick's sense.

The trouble with Trompenaars' database as a guide to ethical strategising (Moon and Woolliams 2000: 111) is that it yields empirical facts about the choices made by questionnaire respondents, but it does not reflect the moral propriety of those choices. It cannot. A moral agent can perform this task; it's not an algorithmic problem. Even if a computerized data base ingeniously avoids distilling the dissonance of a complex society into

³ It's worth noting that what I read is what is available online for free in this part of the world, except for one radical perspective that I treasure, which was granted me in a free anthology because my colleague needed it reviewed for his University of Ghana Business journal, *Management and Organisation*. I think in a trenchant analysis of the unethical features of globalisation this personal circumstance is not at all trivial. I will return to the reasons we might profit by drowning out the noise of the global arena with a wider and more accessible distribution of African based critiques of late capitalist welfare democracies in the second portion of these remarks.

oversimplified chords that harmonise with the preferences of its political elite, the fact that a practice is socially encouraged does not make it morally acceptable, even among the very people who condone it, covertly or overtly. Popular opinion and moral judgment on a given day may converge, or not, depending upon a host of circumstances. This is partly why there is a constant debate among constitutional law scholars about whether the jurists and legislators of government should try to educate, nudge, and propel their citizens to a more humane, more dignified law-abiding status quo than the one they inherited from their predecessors.

For corporate managers to face seriously the challenge of social and environmental responsibility is to ask a similar question about the leadership role of those who govern the business community. To what extent should recently arrived yet dominant fiscal players in a nation's private sector be acting as frontrunners of enlightened development for a country in economic transition?

Millennium Development Goals

Five years ago, a standard answer to this question involved reliance upon the UN Millennium Development Goals, authored by Jeffrey Sachs.⁴ But apart from the surrealism of pegging their expiration date at 2015, the MDGs talk in numerical terms of minimum standards, foregoing the language of fundamental rights and human ideals.⁵ To get specific, because the MDGs mandate international partnerships, they have been criticized by uncompromising economists as adroitly bypassing the needs of subsistence farmers in agrarian economies who are wholly responsible for feeding the majority of externally indebted populations.⁶ The MDGs do not address the need for African labour market's protection against foreign commandeered exploitation, nor the need to control price fluctuation of imported goods, nor the need to correct the anomalies of world trade that are due to subsidies and tariffs favouring only G-8 countries' producers and suppliers. Nor do the MDGs address the need to protect African manufacturers and markets from monopolies inflicted by multinational conglomerates. The MDGs focus too simplistically on national aggregates and ignore the internal variations in illiteracy, unemployment and poverty throughout national territories, whereby the correction of such regional imbalances is so crucial to achieve sustainable economic growth, as stressed by the Ghanaian economist Abena Oduro (2009).

Human rights covenants

As an alternative to the MDGs, it is standard to consult the range of United Nations compacts and other world body documents for benchmarks and starting assumptions to establish codes for doing business in depressed economies (Falk 2004; Frederick 1991, 1994; Hamann 2007; Ignatieff 2001; Litvin 2003; Reed 2002; Rossouw et al 2002). But these covenants can still generate anomalies if one confuses the pursuit of ethical policy with the embrace of practices that are approved within a specific set of spatio-temporal coordinates. From the little I gathered through reports issued by the UN Centre Against Apartheid in the 1980s, a prime example of such a *reductio ad absurdum* was the original Sullivan Principles, chartered in 1977 for American companies doing business in South Africa.⁷ For those

⁴ Founder of the Earth Institute, Columbia University in New York and Director of the UN Millennium Project, Sachs presented the MDGs to the Secretary-General of the UN in 2005.

⁵ Political economist Frank Hormeku, of Third World Network-Africa, addressing NETRIGHT, April 2006, Teachers' Hall, Accra.

⁶ Goal 8 requires countries to establish "further an open, rule-based predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system. . . deal comprehensively with the debt problems . . . through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term . . . make available the benefits of new technologies, especially ICT, in cooperation with the private sector." My emphasis.

⁷ These remarks may bear no relation to the Global Sullivan Principles publicised in 1999, the content of which I have no idea.

unfamiliar with the Sullivan Principles, these were the directives by which American corporations earned formal consent to operate in South Africa by maintaining the standards of social welfare officially condoned at the time. Americans built infrastructure that facilitated apartheid laws (i.e. miners' single-occupancy dormitories, Township housing, and the Bantu schools that ran at $\frac{1}{5}$ the cost of educating white Afrikaner children). Compliant American corporations assiduously abided by discriminatory labour regulations, until they were prohibited from doing so in 1994. Yet semantically, the Sullivan Principles are "entirely consistent with" the human rights covenants inscribed in the UN Declaration and the European Convention, the Helsinki Act, the OECD Guidelines for multinational enterprises, the ILO Tripartite Declaration, the UN Code of Trans National Corporate Conduct, to name just six such compacts (Frederick 1991: 176 n. 1)⁸ **SEE NOTE**

II.

So what are socially responsible corporate managers transplanted to West Africa supposed to do? It seems imperative for them to countenance from the outset that the global arena is dominated by a moral vacuity that defies ethical business practice almost anywhere that features a troubled and vulnerable national economy, including those in West Africa, unless standard business policies sustaining the status quo are mitigated by reflective moral deliberation and critical interrogation. For one thing, the international commercial norms which shape the global political economy are not binding by any formally enforceable, legal instruments (Claire Cutler, 1999; Darryl Reed 2002: 240; Richard Falk 2004: 22). International norms of trade are invincible only because they protect, by fair means and foul, the movement and accumulation of privately commanded profits of investors who back financially the most powerfully endowed military-industrial conglomerates. Secondly, development consultants whose advice is promulgated internationally by the knowledge distribution arms of these same conglomerates, by and large do not know what they are talking about when it comes to interpreting the needs and aspirations of West Africans. This is not for lack of concern, or diligence, or formal training. It is a very deliberate function of political history, as I will try to show in the remainder of my remarks.

The invisibility of indigenous African norms

The strengths of indigenous African governance, traditional tactics for the management of natural resources, and the commercial savvy of major economic players over a millennium in this part of the world, are largely invisible to the international gaze. Quite intentionally and without apology, there is much more to African governance and economic activity than may ever be permitted within the purview of international surveillance (Lauer 2007).

Thus, when in 2003 the former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, himself a Ghanaian, decried African states for lacking viable institutions to promote poverty reduction, conflict resolution, and internationally respected human rights,⁹ he was referring to the continent's modern central states. These are political entities that did not exist in West Africa 150 years ago. And with this charge, no one in post-colonized West Africa is much disposed to disagree, because these modern central states are recognized as perfunctorily established, pre-fabricated props, auxiliary to the locus of long-standing (i.e. ancestrally empowered) governance. I'm not suggesting here that the ancient institutions of chieftaincy are fit to

⁸ See "The Sullivan Principles: No Cure for Apartheid," UN Centre Against Apartheid Notes and Documents No. 16/80, issued May 1980. *Associated Press* May 12, 2008. In 2008 apartheid victims were reported as suing 36 US corporations including Bank of America, Bristol Myers-Squibb, Colgate-Palmolive, Exxon Mobil, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Nestle, "for aiding in violations of international law."

⁹ Kofi Annan, addressing the Second Ordinary Session of the African Union in Maputo Mozambique, quoted July 10, 2003 by *BBC Worldservice News Hour*, and in *Daily Graphic*, Saturday July 12, 2003, Accra newspaper pp. 1, 5.

resume running the country; that's impossible; it's silly to suggest. Yet there's no gainsaying that modern state structures, with their externally imposed boundaries, imported bureaucratic apparatus, compulsively distracted loyalties and preoccupations with the greed-motivated dealings of foreign states, have been regarded for over half a millennium in the collective West African experience as unfortunate necessities, whose antics reflect the norms and standards typical of engagement with the outside world. Modern central states lose credibility insofar as they must deal with trans-national corporations—indeed they are mandated to do so by number 8 of the Millennium Development Goals.¹⁰

At a less tangible—certainly less fanciful—level, the regional organs formed by Africa's central state bodies remain comparably out of touch with the populations they are supposed to represent in the global arena. This supposition of representation is held by outsiders but it is not shared by the majority of West Africans. In 2003 a Nigerian critic of ECOWAS observed that “a major flaw [of ECOWAS] is the absence of popular support and participation [and this is] . . . typical of most modern Africa's regional and sub-regional integration projects” (Asinwaju, 2003: 715).

Nevertheless, although modern state structures and their complicit economic institutions make the ancestors furious,¹¹ this fury is hardly felt in this era of globalisation, indeed in Ghana it is moribund. For it is also the case that in West Africa—most notably in Ghana, the legislation, foreign diplomacy, domestic labour policy and centralised public services are still designed in large measure to serve foreign capital interests.¹² It may not be at all far fetched to suggest that African company management and labour organisation today might be studied as an extension of the beliefs and value systems which long ago materialised as the fortresses of Elmina, Cape Coast and Gore Island. It has been argued (Harney and Nyathi 2007) that current symptoms of organisational dysfunction faced in African corporations today are historically rooted in centuries of euro-centric racism.¹³ Martin Fuglsang (2007) also regards the history of corporate business in Africa as indelibly linked to the economic subjugation which created the industrial giants located around the perimeter of the Atlantic Ocean. These giants have grown legs that traverse the globe, continuing to operate through the “internal apparatus of capture in capitalism” (2007: 72).

Given this underside of globalisation, many post-colonized states are able to function at all because they have evolved dual or parallel systems of governance and economic activity, thereby compensating somewhat for the tension between conflicting roles of modern governments in the capitalist world order—serving as good business partners to TNCs on the one hand and responsible stewards of their citizens' welfare on the other. I am not romanticizing the persistence of parallel systems of governance by chiefs, nor am I promulgating any illusions about the grinding demoralisation perpetrated by Ghana's bloated informal economy. I merely point to their existence historically and materially, to illustrate the opacity of economics and governance in this part of the world from the standpoint of onlookers broadcasting advice about ethical standards from the global arena. I hope in this

¹⁰ It is perhaps sloppy of me but not wholly inaccurate to imagine that the remote, invincible and elusive power of General Motors and Exxon, Anglo-Ashanti Gold and Dutch Shell Oil Company today make roughly the same impression upon contemporary residents of West Africa as was imposed by the giant slave forts of Elmina, Cape Coast and Gore Island upon ordinary residents along this coast four hundred years ago.

¹¹ Paraphrased from a quotation of Ali Mazrui (1986:11). Featured by Damian Opata (1998: 135).

¹² Recently broadcast remarks of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, if in earnest, suggest that Liberia may become a singular exception to the general rule within the next decade. *BBC*

¹³ These symptoms include disaffection, under-performance, factionalism, nepotism, deflection of resources, abuse of facilities, excessive turnover or stultification of personnel, disarray, aimlessness, *aporia*. See Bill Buenar Puplampu (2005) “Toward a Framework for Understanding the Distressed Organization: Insights from Practitioner-Based Organizational Interventions in an Emerging Economy,” *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Fall 57(4): 246-258.

light it begins to emerge why non-African criteria produced in the global arena are inadequate if not irrelevant for assessing the quality of corporate governance, juridical procedure, executive performance and the intra-regional diplomacy in West Africa's post colonial societies, while everyone here concedes vigorously that there is great need for improvement in all these areas.

Let me be sure to make myself very clear: the legitimate conflicts that may arise for the private corporate community which may be peculiar to West Africa are not due to contemporary *perceptions* and *attitudes* towards trans-national companies based on layers of deeply antagonised shared experience located at the receiving end of transnational trade strategies and policies on the west coast of Africa. I am saying rather that it is the actual legacy left by the performance of international agencies themselves throughout history that contributes to the ethical problems encountered for foreign business investors today.

The global arena's standards of good governance and best business practice are inadequate in part because the actual structures, protocols and philosophies of indigenous African political and commercial cultures still do not concern G-8 country leaders and trans-national corporations. The current preoccupation remains, as ever, with whether or not African governance and economic institutions are favourable for long-term returns on foreign investments and for protection of the ongoing adventures in resource extraction.¹⁴

This disaffection works both ways. The systems of governance and resource management tactics that are indigenous to Ghana, for instance, have not only been compromised and embroiled by their collusion with the morally heinous trans-continental extractive schemes and strategies governed and orchestrated by illegitimate foreign authority figures since colonial times. These traditional systems have also continued to evolve in *defiance* of foreign schemes and authority. We don't have time here for the details, except later in discussion.¹⁵

The point to stress here is that the most effective and enduring aspects of indigenous leadership and economic strategies for self-determination and survival under the most extreme odds must have been hidden from the international gaze in order to have remained

¹⁴ This explains why for instance the Darfur crisis where the Sudan borders on Chad suddenly sprang into existence for the global public's humanitarian gaze in 2001, the very year that the World Bank's biggest African investment in history, the precious Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline project, reached completion—although in fact the Darfur based conflict with the Khartoum government has been raging with steadily increased virility since the 1980s, and its beginnings date back to the 1800s.

¹⁵ From the standpoint of late-capitalist welfare states whose bottom line interests here are restricted now chiefly to oil and mineral extraction, the soft side of West African power is equally attractive once it is recognised: the region's ancient consensual democracies, resource management, environmental conservation, social welfare and commercial regulation, social tolerance and inter-state diplomacy are all radically futuristic according to the neoliberal ideals of stable, good governance. Some examples of these progressive institutions in anglophone countries of Africa (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda) are the varied rural credit arrangements (Songsore, 1992), small scale cooperative industries, private philanthropies, village scholarship schemes for study abroad, holistic medicine, strict ecological taboos regulating fishing and hunting, land-for-food trusts, parent-teacher associations, work/study and life-skill learning programs, neighbourhood health-care and house-to-house support networks (Kaleeba, 2000) that nearly eradicated the AIDS crisis in the 1990s, following Idi Amin's protracted war against his civilians in Uganda. The success of these instruments of social and economic welfare all fall within the responsibility and remit of traditional rulers and their councils of elders. However, the dominant authorities in the international community do not regard these village institutions as governmental. In the 1990s, World Bank experts analysed these so-called "social safety nets" as makeshift, *ad hoc* coping mechanisms, urging that these folkways be passively exploited by central governments to mitigate the increase in poverty, chronic disease and premature mortality—increasingly dubbed HIV/AIDS in Africa. (World Bank, 1993: 15). But the depraved status of broken immunity for Africans was induced and propelled in the early 1980s by IMF advice for economic reforms. Subsequently in 1995 the term 'social safety net' was appropriated and absorbed into IMF fiscal adjustment jargon to refer to central government expenditures budgeted for direct relief payments (dole) to the eligible poor. IMF (1995/2000, pp. 27, 28)

viable and effective—hidden in the sense that their utility and functioning would not be recognised readily nor articulated first hand through the international languages of former colonisers (English, Dutch, German, Spanish, Portuguese, French). Furthermore, to interpret indigenous systems so that they serve their constituents in West Africa today, one must continue fielding and redressing global misrepresentations of African society. In some respects these stereotypes remain the same as when they were introduced with the intercontinental trade which began for West Africans on the unfortunately sour note alluded to earlier, roughly 500 years ago.

Throughout anti-colonial and revolutionary activities, themes of resistance to these stereotypes have prevailed, alongside resistance to the ruthless mercantilism and profit seeking disregard for human welfare and dignity. This resistance in word and deed constitutes the foundation of an implicit critique of the western post-industrial technocratic narrative, even as the élite of West African societies have always functioned, and continue to serve, as subalterns and clients of Anglo-European and American commercial expansionists.¹⁶

I hope it is clear now what utility lies in relying upon cultural interpreters and historians whose first language is *not* one of the former colonizing nations but whose formal command of an international language is sufficiently rich to critique fundamental inconsistencies in the neo-liberal capitalist doctrines of human nature and their derivative universal definitions of human rights alongside unlimited quest for domination. Africanists and culture narrators can help business policy makers to protect African work forces against prevailing neo-liberal delusions about the exploitability of this continent's human and natural resources, delusions about the expendability of Africans' extended family obligations and sexual norms, delusions about the dispensability of individual worker's relations to significant others in the organisation as a whole.

Modernity has been scrutinised scathingly from within since World War II, so far as they *can* be.¹⁷ But more original and penetrating insights can cast critical light on modernity by relying on those who extrapolate traditional African values and their persistent, victorious economic legacies. The world has much to learn from people whose cultures have encompassed and survived the ravages of colonialism. By continuing their traditions of dissent and critique, African humanities scholars can provide the business world with the historical momentum with which to defend against those oversimplifications that are trademarks of foreign opportunists—with respect to the theories, research and product

¹⁶ Critiques of Anglo-European political economies are not at all new to colonised and post colonised African communities. In the history of Ghana, anti-colonial dissent and uprisings, citizens' complaint correspondence and petitions to British governors all critiqued the social status quo. Mission based motivational literature, messianic cults, Bible literacy and self-help and health campaigns, Negritude consciousness and resistance to foreign colonial privilege all reflect centuries of explicit social critique and political opposition to bad business and administration policies. Farmers' strikes and slow downs, burning of produce, the Mau Mau Rebellion and other land reform uprisings, the heroic student strikes not only of Soweto outside of Cape Town but in the Darfur of Western Sudan in the 1980s, all constitute non-discursive texts that criticise trans-national capitalist values.

¹⁷ E.g. critics of post industrial capitalist society, notably Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (of the Frankfurt School of Marxism), Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Jürgen Habermas. We can read the work of the early humanistic psychology movement Abraham Maslow, the founder of client-centred therapy Carl Rogers, the progressive pedagogue A.S. Neill, social critics Hannah Arendt, Claude Ake, Edward Said, and the seminal researchers who spawned the Women In Development literature, to see the failures of neo-liberal policies exported to Africa and India from late-capitalist welfare states. These social critics describe how consumerism extinguishes the individual in so-called individualistic cultures, how cultural innovation is reduced and dissipated through commercialisation as commodities for mass marketing, how reproductive work is bifurcated and dismissed from the domain of valued marketable labour, how organised industry has alienated the self from society and from nature.

developments that dominate African public health care delivery, democratic government spending, educational opportunities, and quality of work.¹⁸ African scholars and social critics can advise corporate managers at the steering wheel of economic development partnerships not only how to govern and how to do business—but also how *not* to govern, and when it comes to doing business with foreigners, where to draw the line.

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¹⁸ To quote from the Nigerian political historian Toyin Falola (2009), the African humanities are earmarked to “educate society about the imminent dangers of globalisation and stimulate the greater imagination, encouraging broader reflection on the future of society.”

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