

Culture as "total product"

by Alkis Raftis

Countless definitions are given to the term "culture". Artists, historians, sociologists and politicians take diverging points of view - each probably refers to a completely different thing. For an anthropologist, culture contains everything that a given social group has created, from religion to cooking. For a journalist, on the other hand, culture does not include politics, sports or the economy, since the corresponding news belongs to a different column. Sometimes "culture" is almost synonymous with the fine arts, other times whatever cannot go under another heading is classed under culture.

Turning to the early usage of the term "culture", we see that it was identical to "cultivation" (as in agri-culture); that is, an effort covering a considerable period of time until it gives fruit. This dimension of time-consuming effort has remained: no one, whether a person or a people, can acquire culture in a hurry - while industry, a school system, or legislation can be made as quickly as required.

Thus, the first element (time-consuming cultivation) is retained, whilst the second (bearing fruit) is not. Today, one can be active in culture without expecting, or the others expecting from him, some tangible results. This distinguishes culture from education. In culture, one is not required to achieve a certain degree of knowledge or ability; the accent is put on the process itself, not on the goal. It is generally assumed that cultural occupations are beneficial as such, no proof is required.

This is also evident in daily usage. For the man in the street, "culture" is part of his leisure time, and a small part at that. Culture does not interfere with work, neither with family life, nor with sports. By contrast, in preceding societies cultural activities permeated daily life, being an integral part of work, religious worship, social and family life, even war. Nowadays all these

activities, in the same way as cultural ones, are extremely localized in time and space.

For the average person "culture" is when he goes to the theater or to an exhibition. He goes there only after he has finished his work, his chores and everything else. He certainly spends less for culture than he spends for his other needs. The same is true on national level: the budget of the Ministry of Culture (where one exists) is usually the smallest one among Ministries.

We have distinguished already some basic features of the notion of culture:

- (a) It is time-consuming to produce.
- (b) It has a vague but beneficial outcome.
- (c) It has low priority in modern society.
- (d) It has low added-value.

Of course, there are other dimensions, but let us examine these four.

a) Culture certainly needs a lot of time, this is part of its nature. There is nothing we can or should do about it. Any attempt to produce a ready-made quick-fix culture would lead to poor substitutes.

b) Culture has low priority because we have been led to believe so by mass media and central governments. This is a result of its being slow - no one wants to wait nowadays. They prefer to shift production to activities that yield quickly and concretely. But this is something recent, it has not always been so. The non-utilitarian notion of culture has been proclaimed by modern artists wanting to liberate themselves from the need to produce works which are clearly useful. Let us take music as an example.

A concert musician is judged according to the " beauty" of his music, that is whether he plays "well" or not - but to a traditional village musician the object is not to play "well", it is mainly to make others dance. The more his playing makes others dance, the more they appreciate him - and so more they pay him.

c) Culture is "cheap" within the economy because it is marginal and because it does not give clear-cut results. In my job, for example, I know how much I contribute and how much I earn; in football I know within 45 minutes who won the match and what was the score. On the other hand, when I go to the theater to see a play praised by critics and by my friends, I often get bored. So, in order to get rid of my guilt, I brand culture as highbrow and an intellectual occupation for the idle and the bourgeois - though I only keep a minimal contact with it so as not to be called uncultured.

d) Culture has low added-value. This is mainly because its market has been distorted. Ages ago, high priests and generals used to dance in official ceremonies in temples or before battle. The rich bought paintings to decorate their palaces, the poor danced and painted for themselves. Now, the average city person cannot dance or paint for himself; he merely watches dances or visits exhibitions. Governments, by subsidizing dance companies and picture galleries, only sustain production but do not create demand for dance or painting. Only when big corporations enter the field is considerable demand created. Cultural production has to choose between State philanthropy and aggressive marketing.

Until this point the preceding development is no more than just another cultural product of the type we are flooded with, an intellectual artifact satisfying its author and probably some others, but not serving as an instrument for action. Let us formulate a concrete proposal, not the usual plea for more money but an incitement for better cultural management.

Rather than formulate ambitious plans calling cultural producers to change, or plans asking for State institutions to help, couldn't we turn to a new combination of existing elements? Couldn't each producer of cultural goods become the center of a team of other producers, integrating himself into ordinary "non-cultural" production? The primary, cultural, product would be supplemented by other products in order to become marketable. Thus, the "total product" would have an upgraded status, would escape marginality and would compete favorably for the attention of the public. We could attract

huge audiences to ballet, opera and concerts, even crowds comparable to those of football championships.

In a nutshell, my thesis is the following: Today cultural production is suspended in the air, this is its main problem. It does not follow the principles of industrial production (long range planning, specialization, mass production, marketing etc.). It does not follow the principles of traditional production either (small but stable markets, personal relations between producer and consumer, tried products etc.). There can be no cultural development in the future unless the choice between these two modes of production is taken into account - small scale and large scale. Either way is feasible, provided it is followed consciously. Having the same policy for both directions has proved disastrous.

This proposal is not radically new. The current flows already, it only needs to be channeled. Cinema is already an acknowledged industry, television is becoming one rapidly, the record and the book industries are already moving on a global scale. We must hurry to prepare and plan correctly for the coming world-wide industries of dance, painting and - why not - poetry.

The main characteristics of a cultural industry are:

- 1. Large capital investment orchestrated by banks, multinational corporations or States.**
- 2. Emphasis on marketing as a means of shaping consumer tastes.**
- 3. Planning production and distribution on a world-wide scale.**
- 4. Focusing publicity on the primary producer, let us call him the "core artist".**
- 5. Complementing the primary producer (say, in a film, the leading actor, or the director) by a team of ancillary producers (let us call them "semi-artists") and skilled technicians (managers, coaches, designers, supporting actors, musicians, public relations men etc.).**

6. Combining the core (cultural) product with a battery of other products, from perfumes to tee-shirts, that are being marketed in parallel, the whole being a "total product".

We are familiar, through the work of folklorists, anthropologists and sociologists, with the characteristics of the traditional mode of production. Specific research needs to be done, focused on the structural aspects and the variations from one culture to the other. Once traditional production features have been studied, they can be adapted to fit present non-traditional conditions. This is a difficult task but a worthy one.

There is an urgent need to promote cultural production on village and neighborhood level. Village and neighborhood people have become passive consumers of centrally diffused culture. When they do produce culture, it is not their own, based in local tradition, but an imitation of mass-produced culture.

In summation, a national cultural policy should have two axes:

- a) Regulate and/or compete with the cultural industries (the mega level).**
- b) Stimulate and sustain cultural artisans (the micro level).**

Any proposal for culture, on a national or international scale, will not rest on solid ground unless it tackles the dual problem of cultural production. In cultural as well as in "hardware" production there is heavy industry on one end, there is household production at the other end, and there is everything else in between. Conventional industry has turned to the art of "scientific management" during the past 80 years. In its turn, cultural production of the future will require a great number of cultural managers and a lot of cultural management thinking.

Professor Alkis Raftis holds degrees in sociology, in management and in engineering. He has taught in the universities of Patras and Paris. He has published several books on dance, including "Dance in poetry", "The world of Greek dance", "Encyclopedia of Greek dance" and "Dances of the whole world". He is president of the national institution for Greek dance, the Greek

Dance Theater (address: 8 Scholiou Street, Plaka, 10558 Athens, fax 301-3246921).