A Reimagination of 'Preferential option for the poor' in the Context of Postcolonial Political Theology in Africa

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This paper argues uses data (experiences) from my doctoral project completed in 2013, investigating the experiences of women and youth living with HIV in Kenya and their participation in HIV and AIDS policy making processes – and the role of institutions and organisations which accompany them in their journey towards transformation.

Context for Political Participation – Post-Colonial Africa

The push for this 'reimagination' is provided by a key factor which, even after 'colonialism', continues to shape socio-political processes in Africa. This is the politics of privilege which favours the perspectives and experiences of the elite to the detriment of people at the margins.

There is no one definition of public policy. Conventionally, with regards to national government, policy is the product of political influence, determining what the state does or choose not to do: who gets what, when, and how (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2005, p. 1). **Public policy exists to deal with the 'public and its problems' (Dewey, 1954). Problems or issues in society may be environmental, social, legal, economic, developmental, or international (Smith, 2005). Consequently, public policy directly affects social welfare, social institutions and social relations (Cheyne, O'Brien, & Belgrave, 2008; Dye, 2005; Gerston, 2004; Osman, 2002; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2005). It is concerned with management, redistribution, production, reproduction and protection, and works in tandem with policy related to national social and economic goals (Keriga and Bujra's 2009).**

However, while public policy entails a significant role for governments, other entities such as cultural and religious organisations, business and the private sector, education and other institutions' policies also impact on people's lives and should be considered within the purview of public policy. **From this perspective, public policy discourse is (should) be conducted by individuals and groups from across all sections of society (Parsons, 1995; Hughes & Calder, 2007). Public policy becomes and embodies "assumptions about things on which virtually all of us have something to say" (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2005, p. 5).** The policy process, that is the totality of the process of deciding what is and what is not an issue in society, choosing which issue to address or not to address, and deciding how to address these issues is an interactive process, involving a range of people (and institutions) known as 'actors' (Parsons, 1995, p. 1; Shafritz, Layne, & Borick, 2005, p. 23; Smith, 2005, p. 1). **This is not merely a technical function of government and its institutions.**

'Policy actors' must include providers of goods, services, or activities related to the issue; consumers of goods and services in the 'issue' area; experts with specialised knowledge of the issue; advocates and lobbyists representing particular interests in the issue; and officials with authority to solve the issue (Smith, 2005, p. 10). However, **the degree to which different actors contribute to the process is dependent on approaches to public policy making.** At one end of the spectrum, some subscribe to the view that public policy making is *rational*. Policy makers systematically utilise data and analyses to arrive at decisions aimed at achieving the maximum social gain (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 150). This conceptualisation assumes that neither policy actors' personalities nor the institutional context of the policy matter because technical

understanding of the problem triumphs (Shafritz et al., 2005, p. 42). At the opposite end of the spectrum *pluralist* theory perceives policy making as a confused and erratic process under no one's rational control. It suggests that policy making comprises solutions among competing interests (Osman, 2002) and opinions, which are "always vetted in an environment where a marketplace of ideas plays out in the public arena" (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 23). The process involves (or should involve) negotiation, bargaining and accommodation of many different interests and values (Osman, 2002). Other views fall somewhere between these two, namely the *incremental* theory (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, pp. 43-44; Lindblom, 1979) and the *mixed-scanning* theory (Etzioni, 1986).

Some view policy-making as a top-down approach (Clemons & McBeth, 2001, p. 59) in which the process is dominated by a powerful elite. These include political leaders, special interest groups and influential citizens "who engage in wheeling and dealing in a smoke filled room to outmanoeuvre an adversary" (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 150). **Elite theory suggests that ordinary citizens are apathetic and ill informed; that elites actually shape opinion rather than masses determining elite opinion. Thus the 'top down' approach to public policy is the preference of elites (Clemons & McBeth, 2001, p. 23). For instance, for a 'problem' to be a problem it must threaten the values and interests of the most powerful in the society, or a significant number of citizens, or is seen as a serious threat to a small but favourably perceived group, or to a group that has traditionally received government protection (Clemons & McBeth, 2001, p. 5).**

Others writers argue that policy making is a circular process. Ordinary citizens relay their opinions and preferences to policy makers who reciprocate with information, analysis, and political advice that in turn help citizens better express their own needs (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010, p. 150).

It is within this context that that I examined the public policy making process in Kenya (perhaps it's Kenya's history of policy making (a history parallel to that of social exclusion and social inclusion in the country) has been marked by deeply rooted varieties of socio-political, economic, and religious disparities – **which I argue stems from its colonial history.** These often shape ordinary citizens' ability to make informed choices. **Particularly, the history of upper class and elite protection; and how often popular grievances are often framed in terms of geography and uniqueness – which in turn legitimises disparities and marginalisation caused and perpetuated by ethnic and regional competition (Holmquist & Mwangi Wa Githinji, 2009, p. 107).** These issues are not seen as social justice and human rights issues. (I will not go into any details into the political history- because of time and space limitations)

In summary, elite theory of policy making is dominant in Kenya. Atieno-Odhiambo (2005) summarises this as follows,

> The first is the high politics of state, which turned on the issue of state power and who should control that power. Its subtext was racialism until 1963, and tribalism subsequently... it has been re-baptised "ethnicity". The second is the "tyranny of property," pitting the haves against the have-nots and informing the nature of class formation. The third is the deep politics of clan and tribe, pitting insiders against outsiders, clansmen against foreigners, and original landowners against sojourners... Finally there is the theatre of world citizenship, which links the individual and the state to an international discourse on democracy, and a

desired moral world order, established by the modern protocols on human rights and international laws against all forms of discrimination (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002, p. 225).

These began in the colonial times – and in retrospect, the style of decision-making which socially-excludes ordinary people has for years underpinned the struggle for political control in Kenya (Ajulu, 2001, 2002). We can see how this has played out in decision-making by successive governments since Kenya's independence – in creating access and distributing the nation's wealth, goods and services. As at 2012 (when the project was completed) this style of decision-making continued…

Popular Kenyans have become 'weak publics'(Fraser, 1993). Weak publics still rely on power holders to make decisions, even though they are well capable of participating in decision-making as they are the spaces where ordinary people dialogue and opinions are formed. My finds are that were that the individuals and groups that have been disadvantaged the most include women(Apawo & Nadar, 2006; Dube & Kanyoro, 2004; Mwaura, 2008; Njoroge, 2006; Oduyoye, 1994, 1995, 2002), youth (Abbink, 2005; Kagwanja, 2005; Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009a, 2009b), and people living with HIV(Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003; National AIDS and STI Control Programme, 2007; National AIDS Control Council, 2009, 2010) - (among other people I term ordinary). **The social exclusion of these groups is reflected not only in lower incomes and poorer job opportunities, but also in terms of lower educational attainment rates, poor health and under-representation in political and policymaking processes.**

I found an urgent need for the formation and nurturing of critical consciousness by marginalised groups and individuals to participate in decision-making processes.

How do theology or religion accompany these individuals and groups?

Political Theology

At the heart of political theology is how to effectively engage and respond to social justice issues. This means a re-examination/rethinking of concepts, notions, and theories for engaging with social issues and communities.

It is about engaging in what Walter Brueggemann refers to as **'prophetic imagination'**.

"Prophetic imagination requires more than the...old confrontation if the point is not posturing but effecting change in social perspective and social policy" (Brueggemann, 2001, p. xii). **Rather than directly replicating and re-enacting prophetic texts 21st century prophets could use the same material to give wisdom and courage, and to use imagination to move from such materials to actual circumstances (Koopman, 2008; Preston, 1983).** Whatever is 'prophetic' must be more cunning and more nuanced and perhaps more ironic (Brueggemann, 2001, p. xii). Prophetic imagination begins by asking where the love of God is leading, and enabling this love in concrete situations (Davis, 1980).

The contexts of theology – has to engage with other ideologies (more competitive than in the past). An informed and imaginative theology will encourage theologies (and religions) to engage with other disciplines and ideologies representative of plural contexts. Competing against them will encourage theologies to redefine its mission, mandate, and vision thereby strengthening its public

role in social justice discourse. It will, therefore, be better equipped to engage with issues such as those of public policy making explored in this paper.

One of these concepts (for me) is (formerly) 'preferential option for the poor' which stems from Latin America's liberation theology.

Preferential Option for the Margins

My preference for justice for these people at the margins is best captured in the notion 'preferential 'preferential option for the margins'.

Their original concept of 'God's preferential option for the poor' was born at the crossroads of a changing Catholic church and the revolutionary political-economic ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the 1960s, Latin American and Caribbean Christians' struggle for justice and solidarity with the poor led them to raise new questions, which also pointed them to fertile new pathways in the discourse about faith. **Liberation theologians wanted to convert reflection into practical theology. They sought to understand Christian concepts of grace and salvation within the situation of the poor (Rowland, 1999, p. 16).** Therefore, their theology was founded against the churches' struggling to remain faithful and relevant to their followers in the face of poverty. Poverty, they believed, was caused by two major issues. These were capitalism and politics. Liberation theology, therefore, developed texts and notions to counter the major contributors to poverty. For instance, socialism was preferred to capitalism. Politics, on the other hand, was defined as the struggle over state power. Clearly, this was a narrow definition of power and has since been critiqued in literature. Essentially, it overlooked other sites of power struggles and politics such as gender, ecology, race, and popular culture (Petrella, 2004, p. 1). Therefore, I agree with the proposal that first the concept be reformulated to 'options for the margins' to open it up to all forms of oppression and marginalisation.

Practically, the socio-political and religious context within which liberation theology emerged has changed dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s. The breakdown of socialism represented the loss of a practical alternative to capitalism. Capitalism was blamed for the decline of the nation state's ability to control economic activity. Similarly, state politics in Latin America can no longer be defined within their own boundaries. Globalisation in particular has seen an upsurge of culture as a politically contested site and the subsequent downgrading of the traditional political sphere, the struggle for state power (Petrella, 2004, p. 2). **My point here is that it is easy to argue that concepts and notions of liberation theology in its originality are no longer relevant in the 21st century. This would simply be because the situations under which they were founded have changed or have taken other forms. Liberation theology's methodology and style are criticised from within and without (Lebacqz, 1986, p. 113; Petrella, 2004; Rowland, 1999).**

Conversely, their concepts remain influential globally (West, 1995, pp. 445, 446). Their impacts are apparent in the development of parallel theological frameworks in other parts of the world. They have contributed to frameworks in which experiences of oppression, vulnerability or marginalisation have led to a sustained reflection on Christian theology. These include African theology (Gibellini, 1994; Kofi & Sergio, 1977), and Black theology. These theologies explore in different ways the dialogue between social context and scripture and tradition (Petrella, 2004, pp. 132-136; West, 2009). **Primarily, the attraction to liberation theology is because of its discourse**

and rhetoric of transformative justice, the insistence upon economic and socio-political analysis, the gospel frameworks for doing God's justice, and the glorious prospects of freedom for those oppressed (Weiler, 1991, p. 450).

Latin America's liberation theology concepts have been redefined by parallel liberation theologies and reformulated to be relevant in the 21st century. But Latin America liberation theologians have also responded to the change of contexts. They have responded mainly in three ways. Liberation theologians have either set out to reassert core ideas, revise or reformulate central categories of their theology or sought to criticise the idolatrous nature of capitalism and modernity more generally. Either way, according to Petrella, their response has not been satisfactory. The three positions all suffer from the inability to devise concrete alternatives to the current social order (Petrella, 2004, pp. 2-18).

Reformulation:

The original 'preferential options for the poor' can be reformulated to 'options for the margins' to incorporate a wide range of marginalised individuals and groups (Jazreel, 1997; Pope, 1993). Analytically, the 'poor' may be seen to represent only one category of oppression – economic poverty.

God's preferential option for the poor was first reflected and articulated in two major conferences in Latin America, the Medellin and Puebla conferences respectively. The bishops at Puebla and Medellin were having to negotiate widespread deprivation and desperation, and local church history of disinterest and even disdain for the poor (Jezreel, 1997, p. 30). The notion portrayed a serious, open-eyed, determined posture towards the problem of poverty in particular, and any other problems that render other individuals and groups invisible. It represented a shift from a perspective that was dogmatic, deductive and top-to-bottom to one that was exploratory, inductive, and bottom-to-top. Thus, the church was able to identify with all the people of God, particularly the people at the grassroots. The churches choose the side of the poor.

A statement from the Second General Conference of the Latin American episcopate in Medellin was held on September 6, 1968 indicated that,

> ...we affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation. The vast majority of our fellow humans continue to live in a situation of poverty and even wretchedness that has grown more acute. We wish to take note of all that the church in Latin America has done, or has failed to do, for the poor... The poor too have been encouraged by the church. They have begun to organize themselves to live their faith in an integral way and hence to claim their rights... Service to them (the poor) really calls for constant conversion and purification among Christians. That must be done if we are to achieve fuller identification each day with the poor Christ and our own poor (Hennelly, 1990, p. 254).

Despite the commitment, the notion was not comprehensively articulated. A number of questions remained unanswered. These included why the poor were to be privileged and not the rich. Did this mean that God loved the poor more? The two conferences' basic arguments were that in the New Testament Jesus evangelised the poor mostly. A second reason given by the churches was that

service to poor brothers and sisters was a gauge of Christians following Christ. But these were not convincing arguments in relation to a show of impartiality. Besides, how would it represent God's justice?

The most controversial term in the original phrase was 'preferential', which needed to be carefully explained. Preference connoted a priority scheme in which the claims of the poor were given some kind of precedence over the claims of other people. **Gregory Baum illustrated this function when he stated that, "when confronted by a conflict between rich and poor (or powerful and powerless, or masters and slaves), then the Gospel demands... that (we) side with the oppressed" (Baum, 1981, p. 84). Does this mean therefore that God loves the poor more than the non-poor? This developed into a criticism of the notion, in its original form. Generally critics stated that the notion 'God's preferential option for the poor' constituted and promoted unjust partiality (Paprocki, 1995, p. 12).**

There are different ways of explaining partiality (Pope, 1993; p.246). First, a cognitive explanation of partiality suggests ignorance, imbalance and a failure of intellectual honesty which are all required to make decisions on the basis of a reasonable objective gathering of relevant facts. Therefore an option for the poor would mean that theology has failed adequately to explain the situation of the other groups in society. It can only explain the situation of the poor or people at the margins. The moral explanation of impartiality equates it to a sense of fair play and a dominant feature of morality. The third explanation is the religious perspective which was used by the original liberation theology. **Unexplained, 'options for the poor' violated central tenets of Christian faith of the universal salvific will of God, love of God, and the universal significance of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Pope, 1993).**

However, a hermeneutic of privilege could be used to explain the 'preference'. Primarily, this hermeneutic acknowledges the influences of one's social location while interpreting biblical texts and Christian traditions. Social location influences sensibilities, attitudes, priorities, and moral commitments. So to be in solidarity with people at the margins, theology would have to locate itself with the poor. **It requires active engagement which leads to an understanding of the experiences of the poor. In this sense, claims of partiality are justified because they come from concrete experiences of people at the margins**. But utilitarianists, egalitarians and those who subscribe to the equality brand of redistributive justice would not be satisfied with this explanation (Pope, 1993, pp. 251-252).

Preference for people at the margins can also be justified on the basis of the Old and New Testaments – where justice is partial, biased when it concerns the way wealth, social resources, and political power are 'distributed' in society. Preferential option for the margins is defensible when it concerns the welfare of four groups in particular – widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor (Marshall, 2005) (Cf. Deuteronomy 1:16-17; 16:19; 2 Chronicles 19:7). Jezreel suggests that...

> ...partiality is justifiable when it contributes to inclusiveness, a value which pertains to our cognitive and affective comprehension, to our recognition of the dignity of every human being, and our acknowledgment of the comprehensiveness of God's love and of the solicitude for the needy which flows from that love. In all three phases of partiality (cognitive, moral, and religious)... the preferential option appeals to an expansion rather than contraction of love and wisdom... (It) works for an extension rather than restriction of

the interrelationships of parts to one another and of parts within the whole rather than substitution of one system of dominance for another... Unity of the church is only real when it includes the faith, the experiences, and the voices of the poor. Unjustifiable partiality furthers the dominance of one part over the others and... over the whole; justifiable partiality...strives to create opportunities for deprived and oppressed parts so that all parts will be able someday to participate fully in the whole (Jazreel, 1997, p. 32).

Preferential option for the margins is therefore necessary, although problematic. I suggest the following less problematical ways of looking at the concept.

First, 'options for the margins' is a social category. A social category enables its membership and the people who define that category to articulate, and claim particular historical and social identity. They are also able to locate themselves in relation to other groups in society. Anyone who chooses to identify with the category also chooses to begin their work of justice from real socio-political realities of the social category, rather than from the vantage point of elite policymakers. They choose to identify with their suffering and marginalisation. Such a starting point is useful for understanding why the social category is experiencing various kinds of oppression and to act towards appropriate transformations.

However, the poor as a social category is elusive. Weiler suggests that socially given identities such as 'poor' are precarious, contradictory and in process constantly being reconstituted in discourse as we speak (Weiler, 1991, p. 454). The subject is not an object that is fixed in a static social structure, but constantly being created, actively creating the self, and struggling for new ways of being in the world through new forms of discourse or new forms of social relationships. This analysis makes us aware of the challenges of assumptions of an essential and universal nature of 'poor' and the 'poor' experience. The category evokes the power of 'naming' (Fiorenza, 1996; Kanyoro, 1996, p. 191).

Nevertheless, viewing 'options for the margins' as a category is a reminder that the 'poor' are a multifaceted group. The 'poor' is a part of the whole hence the need for dialogue with other parts of that whole. It challenges the 'poor' and the agents of transformation that accompany the 'poor' to build coalitions from recognition of the partial knowledge of our own constructed identities (Weiler, 1991, p. 470; West, 1995, p. 451). There is an imperative to enter into dialogue with others.

Secondly, 'options for the margins' is a theological ideal, a utopia, a world of possibilities. While using the concept of 'utopianism' I remain aware of the ongoing debates over whether utopia is a playful satire or a serious proposal for an ideal community. Utopia as an idea has remained a critical focus of all visions of a better society. **In a positive sense, utopia is not a place but the spirit of hope, the essence of desire for a better world (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 8; Gur-Ze'ev, 1999, p. 120).**

'Options for the margins' signals the fact that its advocates believe that a different world is possible – a world where people at the margins are enabled to take control over their lives and change their livelihoods. Jose Castillo argues that if we are convinced that a 'different world' is possible and really want this 'different world' to become a reality, our first and most indispensable action has to be to regain a utopian consciousness (Castillo, 2004, p. 35). We need this because utopia represents on the one hand a critique of what exists, the different forms of injustices facing the poor or people at the margins, and on the other a proposal for what should exist, the centring of the margins to include marginalised individuals and groups (Benzaquen, 1998).

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> ...if we neither criticize the world we have nor make proposals for the world that should exist – that is, if our lives and plans are not guided by 'utopian reason' and its corresponding state of mind and way of thinking and of feeling – it will become clear that we are happy as we are, that we are satisfied with the present 'order'... and then logically people satisfied with what they have cannot... produce any sort of change (Castillo, 2004, p. 35).

Used in this way, utopianism is also linked to Christian teaching of hope. A society without a form of utopia in the face of marginalisation and poverty is a society without hope. And this makes it a society in which the privileged focus their aspirations upon holding on to what they have, while the great majority, those excluded and marginalised, cannot get beyond the desperate desire for survival. Thus, a perspective of utopianism provides alternate visions of society, humanity, institutional structures, and orders of knowing which are brought into play. Utopianism causes us to reject as injustice anything that affects the well-being of any member of society.

The commitment to a better world will involve a series of steps including but not limited to a careful analysis of the situation of the category in question to bring about the basic sources of the injustices. It will also involve a self-critical analysis (of the group or individual committed to action) to distance oneself from the injustices we are aiming to reduce. It will also create the need for careful planning, together with those affected, and taking concrete actions at every level of society and within all spheres in order to challenge forms of injustices. Finally, it triggers a need for concrete practical alternatives to the unjust structures and institutions which are being challenged, and to begin the process of bringing these alternatives into being. In all these it is most important that the agent opting for the margins does not take it on themselves to settle the agenda and to provide the answers. Instead, the people at the margins should be enabled to speak and act on their own behalf.

Conclusion

I began my PhD project (completed in 2012) with the desire to see public policies in Kenya address the real needs of ordinary people. The essence of the thesis was that public policies can only effectively address the issues directly affecting women and youth living with HIV marginalised individuals and groups if they are fully engaged in the public policy making processes. (Choules, 2007). Further, because of their own experiences, these people have a privileged insight into the consequences of public policies on their lives. There is a need for participation which enables people at the margins in particular to view themselves as critical agents in public policy making processes.

The concept does not 'romanticise and essentialise' people at the margins. Instead, to argue for preferential option for the poor is to recognise that people at the margins have privileged knowledge of their circumstances. Their experiences become their assets and strength. Policy making processes addressing HIV and AIDS issues should therefore begin from this 'position of experience', and not 'position of privilege'.

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