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Publisher: Routledge

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Review of African Political Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crea20>

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Published online: 27 Mar 2012.

To cite this article: Lisa Ann Richey & Stefano Ponte (2012) Brand Africa: multiple transitions in global capitalism, *Review of African Political Economy*, 39:131, 135-150, DOI: [10.1080/03056244.2012.658644](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2012.658644)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2012.658644>

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DEBATE/ROAPE FORUM

Brand Africa: multiple transitions in global capitalism

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Introduction

Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte
(Forum Guest Editors)

Africa is often left out of mainstream discussions of emerging trends in the global economy and the business of ‘development’. Whether on the basis of misplaced romanticism, stale Afro-scepticism, or a presumed ‘lack of data’, disengagement with Africa has significantly limited the debates on political economy in a global context. Yet, scholarly interaction on how Africa is understood within the constellation of new forms of engagement, termed ‘brand aid’, suggests that Africa is central to understanding the multiple transitions that are taking place within global capitalism. Helping distant others, typically Africans, has become a way of constructing a postcolonial Western identity, producing a responsible form of corporate engagement in the market, and selling products at the same time. The proposed interventions by Africanist scholars promise to spark a lively debate that crosses ideological boundaries about how we can raise questions that effectively critique the manufacture of Africa that is both material and symbolic as a way of selling the inequalities of global capitalism. This

debate/forum arises from selections from panel discussions at the European Centres for African Studies (ECAS 4) Conference in June 2011 and the Association of American Geographers’ Annual Meeting in April 2011.

The first intervention by Richey and Ponte outlines the concept of ‘Brand Aid’ as a new way of linking commerce with global do-gooding that has Africa at its centre. What such shifting notions of aid and globalisation can mean for understanding Africa in the changing landscape of global capitalism is taken on in Cheru’s intervention. The next piece, by Abrahamsen, analyses the symbolic meanings of what ‘Brand Africa’ might actually mean for Africans and for scholars. Harrison’s intervention grounds the current trend of ‘what can Africa do for you’ in its symbolic history of interconnected images. Then, Mercer points the critique toward experts themselves: how the performance of public and private aid rests on particular and new forms of expertise. Among the most attention-grabbing and surprising of the new Africa ‘experts’ and brand managers, the phenomenon of celebrities and their do-gooding is analysed in the next intervention by Brockington. Finally, the forum editors conclude with some reflections on the contemporary traders in the buying and selling of Africa as a commodity.

- (1) Lisa Ann Richey, Roskilde University and Stefano Ponte, Danish Institute for International Studies – Brand Aid and Africa

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- (2) Fantu Cheru, Nordic Africa Institute – The right to consume: compassion and the intricate new phase of capitalism and Africa
- (3) Rita Abrahamsen, University of Ottawa – Africa in a global political economy of symbolic goods
- (4) Graham Harrison, University of Sheffield – Images and representations of Africa: old, new and beyond
- (5) Claire Mercer, London School of Economics and Political Science – The privatisation of aid?
- (6) Dan Brockington, University of Manchester – Celebrity interventions
- (7) Lisa Ann Richey, Roskilde University, and Stefano Ponte, Danish Institute for International Studies – Conclusions and a research agenda

Acknowledgements

We thank all of the presenters and participants in the panels at these two conferences for helping this debate to take shape through their engagement.

Brand Aid and Africa

Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte

Brand Aid is a new modality of ‘helping Africa’ that has emerged in the past five years. We have examined the experience of Bono’s Product RED as the quintessential example of what Brand Aid is and what it does to representations of Africa (Richey and Ponte 2011). Launched at Davos in 2006, Product RED is an umbrella brand under which iconic brands such as Apple, Armani, Hallmark, Nike, Starbucks and others sell special product lines. A percentage of profits from Product RED sales goes directly to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. These funds are then used to provide AIDS treatment for Africans living in Ghana, Lesotho, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland

and Zambia. While in ethical consumption of fair trade or ‘sustainable’ products the consumer aims at (re)shaping production and exchange systems related to the product itself, in RED there is a disconnect between the products on sale and the cause (saving AIDS victims in Africa). With Bono at the helm mediating between helpers (corporations and consumers) and the helped (distant Africans), consumers can save HIV/AIDS patients in Africa ‘simply’ by shopping. Other Brand Aid initiatives have also surfaced over the past few years: from Benetton’s ‘Africa works’ campaign, involving Youssou N’Dour¹ to the SEIMEI drinks line promoted by former supermodel Helena Christensen², and to Vivienne Westwood’s ‘Africa shoppers’ handbags that embody luxury fashion’s engagement with the continent.³

Brand Aid reflects the combined meaning of ‘aid to brands’ and ‘brands that provide aid’. It is ‘aid to brands’ because it helps sell branded products and improve a brand’s ethical profile and value. It is ‘brands that provide aid’ because, like other cause-related marketing initiatives, a proportion of the profit or sales is devoted to helping others. As a response to the crisis of legitimacy in international aid to Africa, Brand Aid also helps to rebrand aid itself and aid to Africa in particular.

Brand Aid is based on three pillars: a brand, a cause, and one or more celebrities. As brands become very valuable assets for corporations, they can also turn into liabilities. They are vulnerable to negative media exposure, which in turn can affect consumers’ brand perception and shopping choices. Managing the ethical profile of a brand is therefore a key issue for corporations. Brand Aid can be an attractive vector for building the ethical component of brand reputation because it does not question the fundamentals of ‘hard commerce’ and at the same time can help increase sales, visibility and brand equity. Brand Aid is also based on the existence

of a 'cause', on how 'we' (in the West) mobilise resources to solve the manifestation of a problem instead of asking questions about how the problem came to exist in the first place.

By dedicating Brand Aid funds to causes that are removed from the everyday workings of branded corporations and their consumers, Brand Aid can capitalise on mediated images of highly normative ideas of 'helping' Africa. The daily complexity of how development aid works or the lived experiences of its various proponents and recipients are far too complex for the communication strategy necessary to sell products on the basis of good feelings. The management of this affective need to 'help' others relies on the intervention of celebrities. Famous people – whether they are economists, rock stars or billionaires – connect products and Africans. These are not Africans who make the products, or grow the commodities, but are those who are 'helped' by every purchase made by a Western consumer. The consumer can identify with the celebrity subject whose ability and commitment to help Africa is both selfless, and perhaps self-serving. Brand Aid makes it possible to be, in the words of Bono, 'a good-looking Samaritan': nothing must be sacrificed to achieve a good conscience by extending the hand of global help to others. Thus, Brand Aid enacts the myth of 'just capitalism' to reconcile the contradictions of global wealth and poverty. It does so by portraying the idea that capitalism can be fixed to rein in its excesses and target its creativity and resources to help groups of 'deserving others' (in the case of Product RED, Africans suffering from AIDS). Africans themselves are marketed as effectively as the luxurious commodities they help to sell.

Notes

1. <http://www.benetton.com/africaworks/>
2. <http://www.seimei.me/en/legal>

3. <http://www.vivienneewestwood.co.uk/multimedia/ethical-fashion-africa-launch>

Notes on contributors

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Stefano Ponte is Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and Professor of International Political Economy at the Copenhagen Business School. His areas of interest and publication include the changing role of Africa in the global economy and the role of celebrities, brands and consumption in development finance and intervention. His recent books include *Brand Aid: shopping well to save the world* (Minnesota University Press, 2011, with Lisa Ann Richey), and *Governing through standards: origins, drivers and limitations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, co-editor with Peter Gibbon and Jakob Vestergaard).

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The right to consume: compassion and the intricate new phase of capitalism and Africa

Fantu Cheru

Our debate could not come at a better time since a particular kind of wind has been blowing across the development community in recent years that celebrates public–private partnership as the best way to deliver aid to needy countries. The Global Alliance for Vaccines Initiative (GAVI) and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) are two recent

innovations that have opened the door for greater corporate involvement in global problem solving. In so doing, corporations have been able to use their 'corporate social responsibility' credentials to further promote their business interests. This new financing modality, part and parcel of the grand neoliberal project, has been in practice for more than a decade now. It does not question power imbalances, nor does it question the theology of neoliberal market fundamentalism. At the same time, it preaches the responsibility of the rich towards their less fortunate cousins in distant lands, what George W. Bush called 'compassionate conservatism'.

I do not believe that we should be opposed to the idea of harnessing the resources and knowledge of the private sector altogether. However, we should never forget the structural power of capital, how it shapes our world view, and how we go about solving critical global issues. As Barnett and Cavanaugh's work has argued persuasively, the new global order is spearheaded by a few hundred industrial and financial corporations with the technological means and strategic vision on a global scale to burst old limits of time, space and national boundaries and ideology. By developing the art of planning, producing and marketing on a planetary scale, the global corporation is rushing into the vacuum left by the increasing inability of national governments to govern or provide an alternative vision.

The corporate vision is more powerful than the actual money or hard infrastructure they provide. We must be aware however, that corporations engage in social causes, not because they believe that they can end suffering; but rather, they consider engagement in 'low-cost heroism' (Richey and Ponte 2011) as profitable business strategy. 'What have we got to lose?' is the question most asked in corporate board rooms. They call this 'social entrepreneurship'.

We must analyse the inroad made by Brand Aid against the background of the

failure of the conventional aid system to transform people's lives and the political and economic structures in poor countries: while development aid has done many good things in general, transforming power relations has not been one of them. It is no wonder that we are in a stalemate right now: one side wants to see aid die a peaceful death while the other wants to keep the aid system going in the face of mounting evidence that aid has failed to 'transform systems'. Outside of these opposing northern constituencies stand the citizens in the recipient countries who are wary of Western paternalism: their rallying cry has become 'please don't develop us! We don't want your charity; we only want to do business with you!'

There is a great deal of frustration out there that many compelling reports and innovative proposals have been produced that promote global security and development in ways that address root causes of poverty, violence and despair. However, these reports, although produced by eminent panels and commissions, have not been able to generate the political momentum required to move from recommendations to implementation. These disappointments gave way to a new method of kick-starting political momentum for mobilising 'political will'. Now, a global multi-stakeholder dialogue, involving governments, civil society, businesses, faith communities, international organisations, academia and the media were all intended to work together to accelerate thinking on global problem solving and implementing these global commitments.

We all know that aid has been an instrument of state craft. Helping the poor has been largely a pretext for the precedence of commercial, geopolitical and cultural objectives. In the early days of aid, the system generated a constant stream of ideas, incentives and directives on how non-Western peoples should develop. As a vehicle for ideas, aid has often promoted universal templates of *de-publicised*

development, led by experts and technocrats. However, in all fairness, the first 40 years or so of aid resembled to some degree a competitive market of ideas. Since the 1980s, the aid regime has grown increasingly monolithic and centralised. Non-conformist thinking, such as the Scandinavian or Dutch promotion of social democratic norms in the 1970s, has been discouraged. By the late 1980s, most bilateral aid polities had been brought into alignment with a cluster of neoliberal precepts and macroeconomic approaches orchestrated by Washington institutions. As of the early twenty-first century, these bodies form the commanding heights of the world's unitary aid system.

A second characteristic of the new aid system is the public–private–philanthropic partnership in the delivery of aid. These are called multi-sectoral global initiatives, and many of them are focused on access to essential medicines or health care. Some of the initial examples are the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the Onchocerciasis Control Programme, and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation. These multi-sectoral initiatives put business in the centre of global aid in new and important ways, and paved the way for Brand Aid initiatives like Product RED. The RED model presents the possibility of doing business and giving at the same time. What is obviously clear is how these narratives ignore the underlying structures of production, distribution and ownership, i.e. the structure of power that drives global and national imbalances.

Now, with Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffet and others directing their private earnings toward global causes, it appears that we are entering a new era of 'giving to good causes' that goes beyond older forms of philanthropy. Brand Aid, or as the subtitle refers, 'shopping well to save the world' is a completely new model that could have come right out of Harvard or Wharton Business School. Brand Aid, which sells products, is itself a new product line in the form of ideas.

Rest assured that different varieties of this model will be rolled out in the coming years. For now, consider this the highest state of neoliberal globalisation.

Therefore, development aid funded by taxpayers may soon become a thing of the past. Aid financing for what are considered to be 'sexy and tantalising African problems' is to be done through a strategy of 'shop till you drop'. This campaign is for branded products to help those in distant lands afflicted with miseries that can be alleviated by consumers. What a fantastic excuse to indulge even more in consuming tantalising products without having to feel guilty. This is supposed to be a win–win solution: (1) there are no more taxpayer-financed aid programmes needed; (2) you can help the needy without having to give up your own lifestyle and without having to come face-to-face with them; and (3) you can do this without having to renounce the new religion of 'globalisation as the right to consume'. In this way, Africa's misery is being used as a billboard to advertise brand products.

Thus, while the Brand Aid critique is another instalment in the growing critical literature on aid, it is also more than that. This is another way of looking at the intricate and ever-changing face of global capitalism with consumers who increasingly view globalisation as 'expanding the right to consume' and the new face of 'corporate social responsibility' as capital enters the aid business in new ways. This gives credence to the notion of 'globalisation with a human face'. The solutions provided by Product RED affirm people's right to consume without feeling guilty. This relies on the narrative of solutions that suggest: (1) complex crises cannot be understood in 'real time'; (2) the response to such complexity requires a simplified account as the basis for action; and (3) we do not need to bother questioning whether this is a crisis 'in the system' or a crisis 'of the system'; thus no debate is needed on the fundamental questions that would require drastic change.

What does this all mean to the future of 'engaging Africa' and on whose terms?

- Brand Aid is in fact reinforcing stereotypes of Africa to make money: Africa is the recipient, not the producer of brand products and this 'Africa' sells!
- It is giving a new lease in life to 'aid' at a time when the number of countries needing aid might actually diminish as the growth prospects for Africa improve.
- The old donor–recipient model dominated by the OECD countries is increasingly becoming passé. There are many players now: new powerful countries, hedge funds, sovereign wealth funds, and other new sources of capital for poor countries.
- Product RED is just the tip of the Brand Aid iceberg: just like the phenomenon of the growth in derivatives, junk bonds, swaps, global securities, etc. that became the fuel for the birth of a global 'casino economy' – get ready to witness an ever more innovative array of instruments to promote 'compassion buying' in the coming decades.

Note on contributor

Fantu Cheru is Emeritus Professor and the Research Director at the Nordic Africa Institute. He has been on the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Panel on Mobilizing International Support for the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). He works and publishes on poverty eradication, policy reform and institutions and has published numerous works on Africa and the global economy, including the recent co-edited book, *The Rise of China and India in Africa: challenges, opportunities and critical interventions* (with Cyril Obi, Zed Books, 2010).

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Africa in a global political economy of symbolic goods

Rita Abrahamsen

Discourses about Africa are always also discourses about the West, and historically Africa and other non-Western areas have often appeared as 'the other' through which the West constructs its own civilisation, enlightenment and progress (see e.g. Mudimbe 1988). With the emergence of brand aid and a globalised consumer culture, Africa's role in constructing that self-image appears to be changing in subtle, yet important ways. Put simply, private giving and charity to Africa is no longer primarily a religious obligation or a political conviction, but instead being concerned about Africa has become part of the relentless self-invention of a particular kind of modern consumer. This of course is not entirely new, but the growing popularity of brand aid (and similar consumer-based activities) suggests that we need to expand our investigations of the role that Africa and Africans play in today's globalised consumer culture. Is it possible to speak of the production and circulation of Africa (and the idea of Africa) as a cultural commodity within a global economy of symbolic goods? And if so, what is the relationship between such a global economy of symbolic goods and the material economy of production and consumption? What are the possible political effects for Africa and for reforming the global economy? To unravel these issues, students of Africa need to engage not only with the complexities of the political economy of consumption, but also with an area of politics more commonly left to cultural theorists, namely the politics of affect and emotions. Here I offer a few initial observations on where such inquiries might lead.

In order to understand Africa's role in a globalised consumer culture, we need first to appreciate that consumption is not only an act, but also a statement: in this

context, the material act of buying a RED-branded product is simultaneously an emotional cultural performance. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) reminds us, commodities are a means of expressing identity and signify one's place within social hierarchies. They are not simply goods sought for their 'use value', but stakes in social contests that help acquire social positions and maintain differences between them. Commodities, in other words, are part of daily efforts to secure, advance and reproduce class cohesion and hierarchies. They facilitate movement within and between class positions and have the ability to make and remake the line of distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

It is in this sense that with the advent of brand aid, the idea of Africa appears as a commodity, its poverty and illness symbolic goods in a global economy of signification that allows (predominantly) Western consumers not only to express their identity, but also to reproduce social hierarchies and class differences. Yet, the rebranding of Africa as cool might simultaneously change the ability of Africans (even if economically dominated) to acquire and wield symbolic capital. Thus the picture is one of dynamic tensions rather than stasis and social fixity. To date, we know little about the implications of this for Africa and Africans, although the analysis in Brand Aid indicates that attention might be diverted away from the structural causes of poverty towards more easily measurable 'results' so as to make the consumer 'feel good'.

'Feeling good' is arguably the driving force of a consumer society where desire is infinite and insatiable. Emotions play a central role, and shopping is said to stimulate both pleasure and autonomy as well as anxiety in the face of overwhelming consumer choice (Bauman 1990, Campbell 2004). This means that if we are to understand the position of Africa within a globalised political economy of symbolic goods we have to engage with the politics of affect. This entails taking emotions – both

at the individual and the collective level – more seriously than is common in academic disciplines still operating in the shadows of a Cartesian dualism where affect and emotions are feared for their irrationality and populism, the opposite of the reasoned and rational citizen needed for democratic politics to prevail (Thrift 2004).

Within a globalised consumer culture, affect takes on renewed importance, and raises important challenges at numerous levels. For one, it alters the role of experts (and also the academic expert) within discussions of Africa. In the past, discourses of development and aid have constituted the economist, the statistician, the doctor, the social scientists, etc. as those authorised to speak authoritatively about the 'problems' of Africa. Within a culture of consumption, the power of this kind of expert knowledge recedes in the face of appeals to emotions, often by pop stars and other celebrities. The celebrity is a different kind of expert, whose knowledge is not derived from numbers, deduction, or semi-structured interviews, but from 'feeling the pain' of the poor and from offering an emotional connection to the subjects of development. One need not go so far as many recent theorists of affect (for whom affect is an autonomic and unconscious process) to appreciate that this might have implications for the possibility of progressive politics, as it is not clear how political activists might intervene strategically in situations where affect plays important roles (see for example, Connolly 2002, Massumi 2002, Thrift 2004 and for critique, Leys 2011). As Jean Bethke Elshtain (1992) has observed, we fear the politics of affect because it seemingly banishes the reasoned politics of rational beings to the sidelines, and encourages an ontology that replaces the Cartesian maxim 'I think therefore I am' with the emotive 'I feel, therefore I am' (see also Campbell 2004). If such an emotive self-understanding comes to shape how individuals participate in social and political life, the citizen is perceived

to give way to a therapeutic self (Elsthain 1992).

Faced with the emergence of a new modality of aid where Africa is part of a global political economy of symbolic goods allowing sections of contemporary consumer society to produce and maintain their identity and class positions, there is a need for African studies to interrogate these (and other related) issues further. Is it really the case that as the consumer is born, the citizen dies, or do people act and engage at multiple levels as both reasoned citizens and emotive consumers? And is such action just facile 'consumerism', or is there something that – without being naïve about the symbolic politics and inequalities involved – needs to be understood without dismissing it as superficiality? Is it possible to think of affect as a different kind of knowledge, containing its own insights as to how to behave ethically in the world? And is the scholar's standard reaction to and dismissal of the politics of affect a performance to validate our own knowledge of Africa and to defend our position as 'experts' with the right to speak authoritatively about the continent? If Bono and George Clooney, Annie Lennox and Angelina Jolie with all their glamour and sex appeal are more successful in drawing public attention to African issues and more able to bend the ears of policy-makers, then at the very least the scholarly community needs to engage reflexively with our own limitations in this regard. In doing so, African studies has the opportunity to make potentially important contributions to contemporary social theory and political debates.

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Images and representations of Africa: old, new and beyond

Graham Harrison

Jane Guyer speaks of the 'co-production of Africa and Europe over centuries of economic and political engagement'. This co-production has, of course, been highly unequal, embedded in structures of empire, of European intervention in Africa, of exploitation and violence. But it is co-production nevertheless. Not to recognise this is to efface African agency (even in within the most extreme constraints and

between the most austere of choices) and it is to reduce the social complexity of Africa to something akin to a single entity.

Part of this co-production involves the ways in which British nationalism has relied on imagery from Africa. Duly 'domesticated', Africa's representation within Britain has been a vital facet of what passes for British political modernity. Abolitionism relied on a small number of simple and caricatured images of Africa, but the emotional vectors generated from these produced new forms of political campaign, electoral politics, the involvement of (largely middle class) women in broader public issues, consumer politics (the boycott), and ultimately, after abolition, a great efflorescence of a sentiment of narcissistic national self-esteem. Abolitionism left a legacy of Christian liberal humanitarianism, as well as a normative prop for the free market and a drive to 'civilise' Africa through colonial endeavours. When we think about Brand Aid, and its connections between the virtuous consumer and the fate of distant others, we would do well to remember how deeply embedded in (post-) imperial public norms this subjectivity is: the British middle classes might avoid 'blood sugar' (grown on Caribbean plantations) and they might also purchase a brooch confessing one's sympathy for the prostrate African slave – a boycott and a buycott. The marriage between a vigorous entrepreneurial branding (Wedgwood potteries) and an emerging British 'consumer republic' was the progenitor of the hypermobile and ceaseless consumerism that pervades Britain today.

Following abolitionist politics, Africa served as the source of a sequence of variegated images, each bundle of which fed into Britain's sense of nationalism and imperial grandeur. The slave image remained as a foil for Christian mission; it was replaced as the 'savage' Africa image became the template for a colonialism in which colonial 'heroes' such as Cecil Rhodes and Lord Lugard spoke of Africans as violent and

childlike – the racialised selves that supposedly required beneficent British discipline. And, once again, African imagery served to generate a sumptuary sensibility: of patriotic purchase, mainly promoted through the Empire Marketing Board with its advertisements of dour tobacco farmers and poorly figured African workers. Oddly, the 'buy British' consumer message relayed in many other forms subsequently was articulated through the commodities of Africa and India.

The rise of African nationalisms after the Second World War (in which Europeans amply demonstrated their ability to act as savagely as any region) generated new images of rival modernity and a politics of racial affirmation that spanned the Atlantic and generated a vibrant ideological voice of negritude and Afro-centrism. Images here were often iconic: Kwame Nkrumah, Agostinho Neto, Nelson Mandela, Samora Machel, Julius Nyerere, Patrice Lumumba. One might think these images entirely disconnected from British national self-affirmation and the production of the consumer: these 'solidarity' images demanded something altogether more radical and explicitly political. But, movements to support African nationalism – the Movement for Colonial Freedom being the best example – fed into the liberation politics of the Anti Apartheid Movement (AAM). Perhaps the AAM's main form of activism was also the boycott: of South African produce, tourism, banking, and then a broader sanctioning of cultural and sporting links. In a nutshell, the solidarity politics of the AAM worked through a consumer politics which was only rivalled by the slave sugar boycott as an exemplar of what is now called ethical consumption.

Throughout the entire post-colonial period, the most powerful and pervasive image bundle to derive from Africa was the famine image. There is a great deal one might say about this imagery, but here it is worth noting some key linkages to our theme. Firstly, famine appeals were

the original means through which celebrity cause-making occurred. As is well known, Band Aid was – whatever the motivations of those involved – a conduit through which artists became celebrities with a cause. Secondly, appeals for donations have become increasingly articulated as a marketing device: pitched as a ‘hard sell’ through highly distressing images, and sometimes phrased as value for money: ‘give ten pounds, save a life’, a pernicious calculus which both encourages donations and degrades African lives.

And now, the present: the neoliberal consumer culture of the West, steeped in unsustainable credit structures, a vulgar and universal praise of wealth as a good in itself, and a historically unprecedented level of social inequality. Brand Aid nestles within this broader neoliberal consumer culture that has profoundly affected the way Africa is represented. The key coordinates are:

- (1) A focus on the consumer as a social identity.
- (2) An ‘aspirational’ aesthetic in which purchasing is associated with feeling good and/or feeling better.
- (3) An infantilised sensibility in which a purchase will please the consumer a great deal in a short amount of time.
- (4) A ceaseless imagery of attention-grabbing in which highly worked imagery, wordplay, and tie-ins to websites, celebrities, films, and ersatz activism are the main currencies.

How does this affect the way Africa is represented in Britain and other Western countries? If the Christian liberal humanitarian tradition was based in the question ‘what can you do for Africa?’, then the commoditised sumptuary ethos asks: ‘what can Africa do for you?’ This is not to say that money does not get raised or that people do not sign e-petitions. But,

we need to be clear on the normative ‘logarithm’ here. It is:

Purchase a commodity/brand > enjoy the imagery of the commodity/brand > feel better about oneself > have an immediate impact on the lives of distant poor people.

And, what of Africa’s representation within the signs and wonders of the neoliberal marketplace? We are facing an inchoate bundle of representations, some old and some new. The famine image remains a mainstay, and the tribal/savage trope is still cleaved to by many journalists in their disaster reportage. Within the RED–celebrity–NGO marketing nexus, images of Africa have become increasingly reified and stylised, so intense is the pitch to the consumer–citizen. And, in the midst of all of this, something of the solidarity narrative remains – not through the radical nationalisms of the 1960s and 1970s, but rather through the impact of the emergence of a global social justice movement and the creation of new information technologies. Here we find a more populist and ‘human face’ solidarity: with the slum dweller residents’ group, the agricultural union, the HIV/AIDS support group and others. Groups like these can be seen on the websites of the War on Want or World Development Movement or its curated YouTube pages.

It would be a stretch to announce a new politics of representation emerging out of the increasingly dense and rapid flow of text and image between African organisations and the West (often aimed at African diaspora communities), but we can at least see possible ways to think beyond the methodological nationalism that has been the legacy of empire in Britain; and we can at least start to have a conversation about representation in which we can think about Chukwa-Emeka Chikezie’s challenging rhetorical question: Can you think of even one African voice or face that has communicated the aspirations,

passions, concerns, and expectations of her or his fellow Africans over the last year?

Notes on contributors

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The privatisation of aid?

Claire Mercer

We are told that traditional methods of delivering aid to Africa are ineffective, and that they are now being superseded by privatised delivery mechanisms. Roberto Calderisi (2006), William Easterly (2006) and Dambisa Moyo (2009) for example have led the charge against multilateral and bilateral aid models that are bound to fail because donor governments do not know what works, and African governments are too weak and corrupt to implement plans effectively. As Easterly (2006) puts it, development aid must shed its reliance on top-down 'Planners' who lack the incentives to respond to consumer demands in Africa, and aid modalities must instead use more 'Searchers' who constantly seek out new and innovative solutions to local development problems, scaling up those that work. What this means in practice is that governments are the problem. Instead, new actors such as businesses, philanthropists, non-state actors and diasporas should take on a greater role in the financing and delivering of development aid.

Richey and Ponte's *Brand Aid* (2011) makes an important contribution to this debate. Their focus on Product RED provides a detailed examination of how such new aid modalities are emerging in practice. Every RED purchase generates a contribution to the Global Fund that is spent on

AIDS interventions in designated African countries. RED and the Global Fund are therefore good examples of the kind of 'opportunistic innovation' (Hudson Institute 2008) so urgently required in development aid. RED offers a new model of development financing by connecting the consumption of currently desirable products in the Global North to measurable development interventions in Africa, while the Global Fund generates development financing through a hybrid model of raising public, private and philanthropic monies. RED and the Global Fund provide early examples of the privatisation of aid. Or do they? One of the most important contributions of *Brand Aid* is the insight that arguments about the privatisation of aid seem to owe more to ideology than to the actual sources of financial flows into Africa. Richey and Ponte demonstrate that at the present time there is little evidence to suggest that aid finance is becoming increasingly privatised. To date RED itself has provided approximately 1% of total Global Fund disbursements. When 95% of the funds contributed to the Global Fund still come from traditional aid sources, this seems to be less about the privatisation of aid and more about the role of changing narratives of aid. As Richey and Ponte point out:

Beyond what the 'real' picture of private aid (and RED's contribution) may be, what is relevant here is that the supporters of private giving . . . want to promote the idea that 'traditional' public aid is in crisis and that private forms of engagement, especially from business, provide the way out of the impasse. (2011, pp. 99–100)

Brand Aid raises the question of the role of ideology in the context of development financing, but it also rings true in the African context with which I am most familiar, that of aid delivery in rural Tanzania. I am neither convinced that the traditional (government) model is an outmoded mechanism for aid delivery, nor that it is being

superseded by various private actors. Rather the model of aid delivery is being reconfigured. It relies on patching together old and new actors in new contracting relations. Old actors include government – still the most important provider of services in rural Tanzania, NGOs (who do not count as ‘new’ actors in development anymore), and community groups in villages. New actors include those currently disbursing large amounts of money to government, NGOs and community groups – notably in Tanzania, the Global Fund and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Money is disbursed from Global Fund and PEPFAR to local communities to be spent – not on social services but on sensitisation and education – via complex contracting chains that include bits of the state. The upshot has been the proliferation of small civil society organisations that compete against each other to win small amounts of money to conduct one-off sensitisation meetings around HIV/AIDS or vulnerable children in villages. Innovative, opportunistic and responsive to market signals this activity may be, but the overall contribution to poverty reduction, or development, is intangible. Meanwhile, government continues to be the most important provider of education and health services in rural Tanzania, although here too the effects of the new development financiers such as Global Fund, PEPFAR and others are clearly visible in the relatively over funded enclaves of AIDS clinics within government hospitals (Ferguson 2006, Sullivan 2011).

The continued importance of governments in aid delivery is also apparent in the provision of expertise. Brand Aid draws attention to the changing nature of expertise in development aid. Brand Aid’s focus is on the celebrity development experts on whom RED depends for raising awareness and funds, where expert status rests on who you are rather than what you know. In rural Tanzania something very

similar is happening, where NGOs’ assumed expertise in local development is the basis for channelling money to them. Yet, it is important to distinguish between operational and technical expertise here. NGOs may demonstrate their operational expertise to win Global Fund and PEPFAR money but they have to subcontract the delivery of technical expertise (for example, in HIV seminars) to individuals in local government. It would seem that governments, for all their problems, still have comparative advantage in their capacity to train, employ and post to rural areas the expertise on which development relies. And yet the mantra that government is a poor development actor compared to NGOs and the new financiers is widely rehearsed in Tanzania, as elsewhere. Recognition of the continued importance of governments has become unthinkable in practice in the same way that it has become unthinkable in current debates about development aid.

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Celebrity interventions

Dan Brockington

Brand Aid is a most appropriate term when discussing the work of celebrity in African development issues because brand considerations, by NGOs, corporations and celebrities are central to the negotiation of celebrity development activity. Celebrity is governed by commercial considerations. The celebritariat as we now know it was created in order to sell products (films, music, newspapers). Managing celebrity is all about managing limited media exposure to the best possible advantage. The brand that celebrities cultivate is an essential element of that attention management. In this short section I report early findings from a research project that has been looking at the work of celebrity in the development sector.⁴

Charitable activity, including African development issues, can be an important element of celebrities' images. In a survey of 147 randomly selected celebrities and the 100 top celebrities listed by Forbes in 2006, Thrall and colleagues (Thrall *et al.* 2008) report that at least 50% of celebrities of any level of prominence are engaged in some form of advocacy. The more prominent a person, the more likely they are to be involved in more causes. Advocacy is not a universal trait, but it is a common one in the public lives celebrities live.

The current prominence of celebrity in development affairs is the recent result of three decades of change within the music industry and NGO world. The 1980s were marked by a crescendo of musical albums and concerts for development causes. The 1990s was marked by two trends: a rise in

number, and professionalisation of, development NGOs, and indeed NGOs more generally, and the rise in the number of media outlets which feature celebrity. But it is only since 2000 that there has been a thorough professionalisation and systematisation of relations between the charity sector generally and the celebrity industry (Brockington 2011). NGOs are now thoroughly integrated into the celebrity news industry and celebrity orientated magazines find them a useful source.⁵

A continual theme of interviews I have conducted with celebrity liaison officers is that many people within the charitable sector do not yet 'get' what working with the celebrity industry requires. They do not appreciate the flexibility required (many media opportunities arise at the last minute). They do not appreciate the media constraints (of managing exposure effectively). They do not appreciate the creativity required to come up with endorsement and advocacy that appeal to public figures and which fit their brand:

What works well ... works ... because it works with everyone's schedule and it works with our branding and their personal branding, it stays in their voice and therefore is more authentic and therefore resonates more with the audiences who we are trying to reach and influence.⁶

The importance of brand considerations in celebrities' development interventions does not render them merely superficial. Yes, they are produced to be seen, but that is not their sole rationale. Rather, the outcomes of celebrity interventions are a negotiation between three sets of interests: (1) the celebrity's own personal desires, (2) the commercial considerations of their brand, and (3) the NGOs' needs. Their appearance in the public domain is then further altered by the media logics and requirements. Celebrity advocacy is managed within a portfolio of public appearances in which every single appearance will affect directly or indirectly the commercial value of the celebrity.

The rise of celebrity in the charitable sector more generally is strongly influenced by their courting of corporate partners, who in turn are seeking charities to support as part of their commitments to corporate social responsibility. Charities frequently advertise access to celebrity patrons as a means of attracting corporate support on their website. For their part 'a lot of the corporates obviously see it as a way to get free talent'⁷, they are 'star-struck'⁸ and 'really liked having celebrities involved'.⁹ Sometimes corporate interests can determine the presence, and level, of celebrity involvement in NGO campaigns:

[We asked] do we in fact even involve celebrities or is it that we have real women ... in the ads? We came to the conclusion that actually the corporates like to be associated with the campaign because of the kudos it holds and because of the level of celebrities it has supporting it. Because the majority of the income is raised through corporate partners ... we do actually need to have celebrity support to keep them engaged.¹⁰

But it is not just about dismal economics. One of the reasons why corporates are star-struck is because being part of a corporate elite gives you the possibility of personal access to publicly desirable figures:

[Company G] absolutely loved [public figure H] ... she's very special to a group of men of a certain age ... She's ... lovely and charming and articulate ... she delivers both emotionally and rationally and ... appeals to the softer side of them.¹¹

And where does this leave Brand Aid, Product RED and celebrity interventions in Africa? I suspect that many Africanists would recognise that Africa's brand (if you will excuse this language just for a moment) has needed an overhaul for a while. The intriguing possibility that celebrity interventions raise is that they could focus considerable creative energy on the brand images that are associated with African development causes. Thus far, however, things have not been that

encouraging. The sight of Gwynneth Paltrow in 'ethnic' gear and proclaiming 'I am African' on billboards, or Kate Moss blacked up on the front of the *Independent* is, at best, gauche. However these are as yet only the early stages of serious professional attention to the brands and values celebrity interventions invoke. As NGOs rethink how they are to work with celebrity (Darnton & Kirk 2011), I am looking forward to what they, and their celebrity partners, come up with.

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Notes

4. The research is sponsored by an ESRC fellowship (RES-070-27-0035). More details about this research are available at www.celebrityanddevelopment.wordpress.com. Unless otherwise stated the sources referred to are interviews conducted with celebrity liaison officers in the US and UK NGO sectors.
5. Source 90 (a celebrity magazine editor).
6. Source 93.
7. Source 63. Others (sources 51, 55, 63 and 76) made exactly the same point. Indeed the possibilities of corporates getting free access to talent poses significant risks to the commercial interests (agents and managers) looking after their time, and could jeopardise the good relations celebrity liaison officers work so hard to build with the celebrity sector. At least two large NGOs have drawn up written guidelines as to how to avoid that state of affairs (sources 61, 71).
8. Source 35.
9. Source 48.
10. Source 63.
11. Source 48.

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Conclusions and a research agenda

Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte

A new brand, ‘Maiyet’, was launched in the autumn of 2011 at Paris Fashion Week. The brand is the latest engagement of Paul van Zyl, whose former responsibilities include those as the founder for the International Centre for Transitional Justice, and previously the executive secretary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Maiyet’s goals are met by ‘forging partnerships with artisans to promote self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship in developing economies’.¹² Not just a commodity, Africa has become a luxury good. However, the product itself, according to van Zyl, must be put first, and ‘while most of the hardware for Maiyet’s handbags is made in Africa, the bags themselves are made in Italy’.¹³ An article on the engagement of luxury fashion and ‘helping’ explains: ‘We could have had an auction and dinner – *but who wants another dinner?* This is more direct and sustainable’.¹⁴ Direct partnership? Sustainability? The old goals of international development cooperation have become buzzwords for what is being termed a potentially ‘systemic change to the definition of “value”’. The potential revitalisation and depoliticisation of engagement between producers, traders and consumers of Africa requires engagement by progressive scholars of African political economy. It is from grounded research, intellectual debate and advocacy that we are able to answer what was clearly intended to be asked as a merely

rhetorical question – who wants another dinner?

Thus, as contributors to a debate, not authorities whose cumulative knowledge has ‘solved’ it, we suggest the following questions to initiate a research agenda on Brand Africa:

- In co-branded products where ‘Africa’ is part of the brand value through production of products by Africans or on the continent, how do the production ‘challenges’ (such as unreliable transportation, ill health, or inconsistent electricity supply, for example) that may affect the quality or timing of the supply chain come to be used in authenticating the ‘Africa’ brand? Do inconsistencies become a sign of ‘individuality’ and thus ‘quality’ in claiming to meet the needs of the ethical consumption market? Do companies simply locate in the most reliable and stable environment, while maintaining a superficial link to African producers?
- How do the new opportunities for providing capital in Africa (new aid countries, investors from emerging economies, sovereign wealth funds, hedge funds, etc.) interface with African states in the diverse political/economic settings on the continent? Will there be alliances or particular groups that emerge as winners or losers in the competition for these new spoils and why?
- What effect does branding Africa as a symbolic commodity have on the ability of Africans to acquire, wield and perhaps even trade their symbolic cultural capital? How might this repositioning of affect in intellectual and political debate shape relationships between Africans and ‘Africa’ in regional, diasporic, local or networked political struggles?

- How can we begin to understand the complex interweaving of affective politics and Africa? How do Africa's politics, cultures, traditions and modernities play into this and on what terms?
- What is the political economy of representation of 'Africa'? Which images sell? What do they sell and to whom? These questions call for critical marketing studies and for progressive scholars to take business seriously from a deeply materialist perspective.
- Where do we look for competing brands of 'Africa'? Who are Africa's celebrities? What do they brand? How do they interact with global celebrities who are speaking on behalf of 'Africa'?

All of the contributors in this debate/forum are scholars with extensive fieldwork experience on the continent, and ongoing engagement with Africa, Africans and research. We are also all linked to various and diverse scholarly, activist and

practitioner communities, which themselves produce and consume ideas of 'Africa'. Not so incidentally, scholars are also consumers of products made in Africa, by Africans, and with component parts grown, mined or sourced from the continent. Yet when it comes to understanding the multiple transitions in global capitalism that hover over, exploit, emancipate or somehow link to Brand Africa, simple ideologies do not serve us sufficiently. What might begin to ground the necessary multi-faceted critique of how Africa and Africans are faring in the face of a changing global economy and the business of 'development' is serious research consideration of some of the questions raised by the previous essays.

Notes

12. Vanessa Friedman, 'Good luxe: what is luxury fashion doing to help the developing world?' *Financial Times*, 19/20 November 2011.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.