‘Rescuing African Bodies: Western Celebrities, Human Rights and Protest in Africa’

P. O. Daley
School of Geography and the Environment,
University of Oxford

Paper to be presented at workshop on ‘Post-post independence? African political thought, contemporary process and the international’, School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary, University of London 19-20 July 2012.

Abstract

This paper addresses the role of western celebrities as key referents in the debate on human rights in Africa and what this means for how protest and popular uprisings are understood and represented in the global north. Drawing from examples of recent celebrity advocacy in the West, the paper argues that celebrities, as part of new neo-liberal networks of governance, represent progressive change as arising from further western intervention and ethical consumerism. I argue that celebrity protest, based on neo-liberal subjectivity, consumerism and privatized concerns, serves to undermine distance emancipatory politics by de-contextualizing the causes and by representing non-consumerist and radical political agenda as flawed. Such a view can contribute to the de-legitimization of local and popular anti-capitalist and anti-dictatorship movements for global activism, African agency and progressive social movements. The paper concludes by assessing the implications for building international solidarity in the 21st century. I conclude that, despite attempts to render African voices silent through the use of the social media, Africans are articulating their views on the world stage, but progressive forces in the West need to seek out ways of giving prominence to such voices.

Introduction

Celebrities are people with a high public profile and come from a range of fields, though the term is used mainly to refer to those coming from the entertainment industry. Since the mid-1980s, celebrity humanitarian advocacy has become more widespread and their involvement, along with the development in social media, is helping to re-shape western public engagement with politics and international development (Meyer 1995, West 2008, Richey and Ponte 2008, Samman et al 2009, Goodman 2010, Biccum 2011).

The literature on the celebrity and politics points to the growing importance of celebrity advocacy in anti-poverty campaigns (West 2008, Goodman 2010, Cottle & Nolan 2007). Scholarly critics have moved on from scepticism towards celebrity activism and its apparent superficiality to consider its links with global power relations and the implications for global solidarity (Biccum 2011). Critics highlight celebrity activism’s role in perpetuating gendered and racial ideologies, especially when Africa, with its well-established inferior position in
global imaginative geographies, is the focus of attention (Richey and Ponte 2008, Repo and Yrjola 2011, Brockington 2008).

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of celebrity advocacy in the representation of political protest in Africa. The paper argues that celebrity advocacy reflects new forms of neo-liberal networks of governance that reinforces global power relations and subordination of African voices. I consider how these new governance structures are manifested in the institutional configurations that are associated with celebrity advocacy and how the cause of human rights is framed by these powerful actors from a collective to an individual (privatized) endeavour. I argue that celebrity protest, based on personality, neo-liberal subjectivity, consumerism and privatized concerns, serves to undermine distance emancipatory politics by de-contextualizing the causes and by representing non-consumerist and radical political agenda as flawed. I then examine the implications for global activism, African agency and progressive social movements. I conclude that, despite attempts to render African voices silent, through the use of the social media Africans are articulating their views on the world stage, but progressive forces in the West need to seek out ways of giving prominence to such voices.

The primary evidence for this article comes from the publicity material produced by celebrities themselves and from media reports, especially websites such as Look to the Stars.com: the World of Celebrity Giving and newspapers. Numerous celebrities are involved in philanthropic activities in Africa. For the purposes of this article, I have selected those celebrities with a high public profile, since they are likely to have the greatest influence in the West. The following celebrities are investigated: George Clooney (Save Darfur Campaign & the Satellite Sentinel Project), Ben Affleck (Eastern Congo Initiative) and Invisible Children (Kony2012).

**Celebrity subjectivity under neo-liberalism**

According to David Harvey (2005), neo-liberalism seeks to commodify all that has never before been treated as commodities. Contemporary celebrity status represents the commodification of the individual, of identity and personality. Biccum (2011: 1340) contends that celebrities are at ‘the pinnacle of modern subjectivity and commodity culture’, representing the success of the individual and of meritocracy. They are ‘embodied commodities of affective labour’.

In other words, celebrities are branded personalities/goods that are, in some cases manufactured and professionally marketed - increasingly by the celebrities themselves. Branding involves the ‘clear translation of a personality into a commodity that is brokered and exchanged’ (Marshall 2006: 6). Celebrities are what Robert Goldman (1987) calls ‘commodities signs’ - the joining together of a material entity with a signifier. They are in essence doing the ‘interpretative labour’ for capitalism. Through their attachment to branded goods and as brands themselves they act to increase the exchange value of commodities. Consequently, Marshall notes, ‘celebrity identity is a form of intellectual property that is sometime regularly updated or sustained over decades’ (Marshall 2006: 6). As ordinary humans, they can only preserve their value by distancing themselves from
everyday life, by controlling the mystique around them – by appearing to be more than ordinary human beings. Increasingly, as manufactured and marketable commodities, they are both ‘empty and rich’ and disposable; ‘their shelf life … is short’ (Furedi 2010: 497).

Therefore, a celebrity’s worth is determined by his/her ability to continually manufacture and preserve distinctiveness and garner loyalty through affectivity. Marshall (2006: 635) sees the celebrity power as ‘its capacity to embody an audience and more specifically the ‘affective investment’ of an audience’. He continues, ‘celebrities embodies the power of the audience members – the audience’s power – their economic clout - is represented by the celebrity and their capacity to deliver the audience for the industry’ (Marshall 2006: 636). Corporations, politicians and charitable organizations utilise celebrity power to reach a wider and increasingly younger audience. Celebrity endorsement can produce a collective subjectivity but, due to the temporality of their status, it tends to be ephemeral.

Celebrities link development with ethical consumption or, according to Goodman (2010), ‘development consumption’, where the process of purchasing everyday goods becomes not just consumption per se, but an act that is enveloped in ethical or moral values that add to the empty and temporary gratification of consumption. Zygmun Bauman (2007) argues that in a consumer society, happiness is only temporary, as consumption depends on the perpetual creation of new needs. Justification of such needs as images of suffering and poverty reach the living rooms requires some compensatory activities.

Attaching celebrities to causes has become a business in itself, resulting in the establishment of several commercial enterprises. One of which is a New York-based company, Pure Growth Partners, established in 2011, and which describes itself as having a ‘revolutionary mission to find and create sustainable brands using a “one to one” give-back component to donate directly to the world’s most effective charities’.¹ Another is the California-based Global Philanthropy Group set up in 2006 in to ‘guide the philanthropic activities of the very rich’.² The company claims that it is founded: ‘in the spirit of traditional philanthropy, for the love of humanity, [it] was formed to improve the world’.³

**Celebrity and politics**

There is a growing multidisciplinary literature on the rise of celebrity culture in late modern societies and its relationship with politics (Marshall 2006, Furedi 2010). Much of the recent literature draws attention to the increasing scale of celebrities’ involvement in wider social life, especially the ways in which their advocacy is blurring the boundaries between politics and popular culture (Furedi 2010, Marsh et al 2010).

Celebrities are said to have democratic currency because of their audience appeal. They embody the personification of Max Weber’s ‘charismatic individual’ - as an alternative source of authority within society. Furedi (2010) argues that politics is being celebritized at the same time that formal authority is being stigmatized. Political authority is being ‘outsourced’ to celebrities and politicians rush to obtain some of the aura of celebrity. For Henrik Bang, celebrities are part of a discursive network of governance composed of elites incorporated by the state to shape and promote its agenda among a public disinterested in conventional politics.⁴ At a global scale, it could be argued that celebrities, humanitarian
agencies, multinational corporations, western governments constitute a network of neo-liberal governance targeted at non-western societies. This discursive power is based on established social hierarchies and involves a multiplicity of actors – in effect a new imperialism.

Celebrities have become active in the field of development, anti-poverty campaigns and humanitarianism. Under neo-liberalism and the accompanied growth in the humanitarian industrial complex, crises that were once interpreted as political have become de-politicized, as they are made amenable to international interventions. Multi-lateral organizations (UN agencies in particular) and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sought celebrity endorsements ostensibly to raise western public awareness of particular issues and the profile of their work, in what is increasingly a crowded market place (Goodman 2010). Such celebrities then become spokespersons for particular human rights issues and act as mediators/translator of such issues to a western audience.

Celebrities eschew conventional politics. Many, such as Bono, the singer with the rock band U2, forge public relations with both conservative and liberal political parties. As Zizek (2008) points out these new breed of philanthropists have no time for the old right and especially the old left. Such celebrities believe that they are equipped to step back from politics, talk straight to big business and to the leaders of G8 countries, and solve global, distant problems through consumption and aid. For Bono: ‘It’s no secret that lefty campaigners can be cranky about business elites. And the suspicion is mutual. Worldwide. Civil society as a rule sees business as, well, a little uncivil. Business tends to see activists as, well, a little too active …’ (17 April 2010, New York Times).\(^5\)

Such neutrality is not reflected by the way in which governments co-opt celebrities. For example, April Biccum (2011) examines the role of celebrity advocacy in western governments’ (UK and Australia) development education projects to mobilize youth in the production of new global citizens who proselytize neo-liberal globalization. This is in sharp contrast to the anti-capitalist stance of the anti-globalization movement (Biccum 2011). Similarly, the use of Angelina Jolie as a patron for a government project set up by Britain’s foreign office\(^6\) to fight sexual violence in conflict zones will no doubt divert attention from women activists on the ground, who challenge not just male violence but its links to global weapon sales and militarization.

Some celebrities use their high profile status to promote their personal politics. The actor George Clooney explains how he became involved in the Save Darfur campaign: ‘The one thing I learned from Bono (U2’s lead singer) early on was you have to pick [a cause] you specifically want to work on, and you have to really engage’.\(^7\) For some celebrities the cause appears to be a public relations strategy to add an ethical component to enhance their market value. A celebrity with a negative profile might be told by his/her marketing agency: ‘We need you to start doing things that make you look sacrificing and compassionate’.\(^8\)

**Africa as a space for celebrity advocacy**

Western celebrities, addressing issues of social inequality, and poverty tend to direct their attention to the non-western Other. Ninety celebrities on the *Look to the Star.com* site
have charitable links with Africa. The continent is the focus of much of celebrity humanitarian advocacy, primarily because of the space it and its people occupy within western imagination and the intersections between race, modernity and power.

Despite the fact that the experience of modernity in the West, which ‘liberated human beings from physical want’, was socially and spatially unequal, under neo-liberalism deprivation in the West is attributed to individual failing. Africa’s lack is interpreted not as the consequence of its historical and contemporary position in the global political economy, but because of its own cultural limitations. Westerners see themselves as having eliminated risks and danger from their lives, which, according to Hewitt (1995), are now treated not as a consequence of, but external to modernity – to economic development and everyday life. Instead, poverty, wars and hazards are treated as extreme experiences that occur in geographically distant places and can be solved through technical interventions. Therefore, as Richey and Ponte (2008: 720) explain, ‘Africa’s place in the hierarchy of development is so well-established’ that the ‘construction of donor and recipient would not be challenged’.

Africa and Africans as a focus of celebrity largesse has a long history in western popular culture. Africa occupies a particular imaginative geography in the West that renders the continent known and unknown - its ‘remoteness’ and ‘mysteriousness’ make it a template on which western visitors to the continent can construct narratives of their endeavours, often featuring danger and intrepidity which are easily believable and rarely contested by audiences back home. Westerners can become heroic individuals, ‘white saviours’ through the exercise of white supremacy.

Despite the availability of increased knowledge of the realities and diversity of the continent, in popular discourse colonial images persist. In Western imaginings of Africa, even in the Twentieth-century, the continent remains a singular place, a nullity, a terra incognita, a known and unknown distant land, trapped in its own barbarity and yet to be fully rescued and civilised by westerners. Contemporary western celebrities’ engagement with Africans draws on this colonial legacy of proselytizing western enlightenment and custodianship of humanity. April Biccum writes that we are witnessing:

A re-invention of the 19th century humanism that animated the civilised mission, the idea that full humanity is only expressed by rationally organized industrial societies, and those regions of the world that are not industrialised need to come under colonial/global tutelage until they are civilized enough to govern themselves’ (Biccum 2011: 1344).

Humanitarian action tends to reinforce hegemonic discourse about hierarchies of race – propagating the notion of the ’White Man’s Burden’ (Abdul-Raheem 1996). Jemima Repo and Riina Yrjola (2011) has shown how celebrity humanitarianism uses pre-conceived images and stereotypes of people and places; in the case of Africa, hierarchies of human beings (race) and places (far distance) are used instrumentally and are reinforced in public consciousness through celebrity action. For Balaji (2011: 52), ‘race is central to how pity is enacted - appearing both invisible and hyperinvisible at the same time ... The relationship between those who pity and those who are pitied ... is instrumental in creating the Other’, especially since ‘poverty and famine have long been associated with a dark non-white world
where tragedy and hopelessness reigns and where one’s success is determined by the compassion of Whites’.

A corollary of western custodianship of humanity is the infantilization of Africans. Africa is positioned as:

‘Childlike … either as immature or an erratic adolescent, in order for interventions to be possible … bringing up child-like Africa becomes a parental (western) responsibility and not doing so would reflect badly not only on the parents, but it would be disadvantageous for the entire world family’ (Repo & Yrjola 2011: 54).

An alternative ontological framing re-orientates this relationship by contending that association with Africa and Africans has a humanising influence on westerners in the era of neo-liberal subjectivities. Helping Africa provides a space to make sense of the world, a higher purpose that is missing in everyday life due to the atomization and de-humanization that comes with neo-liberal consumption. In western thought, Africa, the cradle of humanity, is seen as the representative space of ‘bare humanity’. Rescuing Africa means resurrecting a common bond of humanity, a human connection; it becomes a moral rather than a political project. Mather, in a critique of the portrayal of Africa by twenty-first American journalist Nicholas Kristof argues:

Americans go to Africa, the motherland, the placenta, to become reborn as human, if anything sloughing off their cyborg natures, becoming naturalised humans, while Africans, just as they did for Tarzan, become more like animals, apes that the American rescue so as to become more human (Mathers 2011: 107).

The association of black people with slavery, suffering and racism in the West and the distancing of western societies from assuming culpability means that Africa provides a space historically, in which white domination can be justified, and more recently, a non-political space, where guilt can be assuaged and redemption achieved.

**Framing the crises: power and authority in celebrity campaigns**

How are the issues behind crises framed by celebrities? This is done in several ways: becoming unchallengeable experts; as business opportunities linked to social responsibility; and as apolitical and ahistorical.

Firstly, this necessitates the celebrity presenting him/herself as authoritative on an issue. Not wanting to say anything that would jeopardize their brand and open them to ridicule, they have to show a certain degree of expertise in order to be taken seriously by the media. Clooney states:

*You have to be more knowledgeable than most reporters would be on it, so that when they try to make you sound stupid because you’re just an actor.*

Expertise is achievable in two principal ways, visits to Africa and association with a known ‘expert. If the celebrities are not attached to an established NGO and are developing their
own personal campaign, they link up with a known western expert, ‘a human rights or development activist’ (John Pendergast in the case of George Clooney and Jeffrey Sachs for Bono). These experts give domestic and international legitimacy to the celebrities own projects, while becoming celebrities in their own right. However, acquiring expertise appears not to result in greater understanding of the crises, as a perpetual criticism is the simplification of the issues.

Credibility demands a fleeting visit to Africa, but not necessarily the actual place of concern, most often a place in close proximity to the crisis whilst accompanied by western journalists and video cameras. George Clooney establishes his credentials on Darfur by visiting South Sudan where he met Darfuri. He explained the basis of his authority with, ‘Well, I can name all the rebel leaders, and I have [their numbers] on my phone’.10 According to Goodman (2010: 109) being ‘placed’ in place is designed to provide the celebrity with first-hand, on-the-ground experience with respect to ‘their cause’, in order to develop the celebrity’s ‘convince-ability as a credible voice on these topics’. Despite the possibility of real time reporting from Africa, celebrities return with films – similar to the sketches, photographs and trophies of earlier explorers. Visits to Africa, a long popular destination for wealthy western travellers, is reported in such a way to suggest that the celebrities had put their personal safety at risk to highlight the problem.

The second issue is that people’s struggles, oppression and dispossession are represented as humanitarian crises that require non-political technical solutions, drawing on ethical consumption and the bonds of a common humanity rather than political solidarity.

Celebrities, while chastising western governments for doing little to alleviate poverty, adopt neo-liberal solutions which involve shifting much of the responsibility to individuals as consumers. By using their wealth and influence in the West to sell branded goods that raise money, celebrities help to reconstruct humanitarianism as an economic enterprise and consumption as an ethical act. For this new breed of celebrity philanthropists, according to Zizek (2008: 15), the ‘market and social responsibility are not opposites; they can be reunited for mutual benefit’. Celebrities join forces with established brands to produce and market the celebrity-branded products and with international NGOs, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies to give moral justification. They help to shift the nature in which poverty is represented by making it sexy and technical rather than structural and the outcome of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Cameron & Haanstra 2008).

A good example comes from studies of the Rock Star Bono’s charitable entrepreneurial venture, Product (RED)TM, created in 2003, and its relationship with multinational corporations. RED uses celebrity ‘cool’ to market products that straddle the line between trade, ethical consumption and aid (Richey & Ponte 2008, Ponte and Richey 2011). RED teams up with corporate brands such as Armani, Starbucks, Apple, Dell, Nike, Gap, Converse and Dr Dre to produce a red version of their products with the RED label attached. To make their products appealing to the discerning consumer, RED, as Richey and Ponte (2008: 720) note, eschews conventional ‘humanitarian imagery of death and suffering’, by presenting its products and promoters with the same glitz, glam and fashion-magazine gloss as any luxury goods [demonstrating that] the desire to shop and to see the world a better place – are not always contradictory'.
Other examples include the Rapper Jay-Z’s Rocawear range, designed to appeal essentially to urban African-American consumers. Rocawear’s 2007 advertising campaign used South Africa as its location. Once again the celebrity teamed up with a corporation and a charity; in this case MTV and the NGO Water for Life. According to the company’s publicity material:

‘Rocawear ... was embraced and honoured by the African natives’. The ‘06 Rocawear shoot in Africa was monumental and spoke volumes for Rocawear’s global power as a brand’. http://thediamondcelebration.com/blog-single/jay-z-rocawear-2006-south-africa

Rocawear’s advert reproduced the exoticized images of Africa in the West, both in the photographic images of safari locations and women scantily clad in animal print designs.

The final example is of the African-American rapper Curtis ‘50 Cent’ Jackson, who adopted a similar strategy to launch Street King - a high caffeine drink, aimed once again at the urban market. The charity of choice here is the World Food Programme. According to the promotional material, one shot of SK equals one meal for a starving African. Despite chastising corporate greed, for marketing and distribution, Street King is reliant on Pepsi Cola, the multinational corporation, for its distribution on the East Coast of the USA.

Thirdly, celebrity involvement can have a longer-term and negative effect by stripping crises of their historical and political context. As Goodman (2008: 109) explains, ‘wider structural and social problems are forcefully refracted through the neo-liberal lens of the “heroic individual” taking responsibility off the institutions, states and the economic structures of inequality more generally’. A similar claim was made by the Ugandan scholar, Mahmood Mamdani (2009), in his analysis of campaign of the US-based Save Darfur Coalition (SDC). The SDC, Mamdani contends ignored the complex history of Sudan, simplified the issues to racial and religious binaries of Arab Muslim perpetrators and black Christian victims. Mamdani refers to SDC’s use of mortality figures in 2005 that bore no resemblance to the reality. He argues that through the media and an advertising blitz, SDC reported fictional data to support its claim of genocide in Darfur and its call for military intervention. The American discourse on race in Darfur and Sudan positions the Americans as ‘powerful saviours’, located at the top of the hierarchy of humanity.

The Save Darfur campaign, which started out as a student and faith-based initiative in 2004, led to the setting up of the ‘Not on our Watch Foundation’ supported by celebrities: Don Cheadle, George Clooney, Matt Damon and Brad Pitt. According to Mamdani (2009: 62), the campaign, following so closely after 9/11 presented Darfur as a moral rather than a political issue. Comparing Americans’ response to Iraq at the same time, Mamdani contends that ‘those who march for the Save Darfur campaign were responding as humans with a moral obligation, not as citizens’. Thus Darfur was easier to campaign for. ‘Saving Darfur is an act of not of responsibility but of philanthropy’, it is of largeness of heart ... a cause about which they can feel good’. Iraq, on the other hand, he argues, ‘makes some Americans feel responsible and guilty [and forces some] to come to terms with the limits of American power’.
By 2011, as the proclaimed genocide in Darfur did not manifest itself, SDC’s focus turned to calling for western military intervention in the DR Congo, because of the scale of estimated deaths there. They then turn to the monitoring of ‘Islamic’ Sudan using spying equipment and regular satellite imagery. Clooney’s Satellite Sentinel Project (SPP) has been heavily criticised by South Sudanese as spying that undermines the sovereignty of the state. In response Clooney justifies his project as protecting South Sudanese from genocidal violence perpetrated from Islamic Sudan to the north. He declares himself to be ‘the anti-genocide paparazzi ... if you know your actions are going to be covered, you tend to behave much differently than when you operate in a vacuum’ (quoted in Time Magazine 2010).

Samar Al-Bulushi (2011), in an open letter to Clooney, highlights the fact that the company that is collecting the data on behalf of SPP supplies data to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) – a force set up by the USA to protect its interests in Africa through further militarization, in spite of opposition by African people (Keenan 2008). As Clooney’s partners are all US-based, Al-Bulushi asks: where is South Sudan in this power equation; what does independence mean for South Sudan? For him the exclusion of Sudanese actors and thinkers from the campaign signals ‘a lack of interest in the internal political processes that are crucial for strengthening democratic citizenship’ (Al-Bulushi: npn).

By March 2012, Clooney’s mission has turned to the Nuba Mountains of south–eastern Sudan and to ‘detering civil war and genocide in Sudan’. Once again, Sudanese have accused him of de-contextualising the crisis from its history and taking ownership of their struggles for justice and peace. Sudanese opposition parties and youth, who have been fighting against the Bashir regime, have become marginalised in the global discussion of how to transform the Sudanese state.

African intellectuals and human rights groups are unable to compete with the charismatic authority of the celebrity. The aura of celebrity ensures that George Clooney and Bono can be called to address the UN Security Council, the US Senate and meet business elites at the World Economic Forum. A brief visit to Chad and Southern Sudan in 2006 made Clooney sufficiently knowledgeable about Darfur’s problems that he was asked to address the UN Security Council in September 2006. In March 2012, after a visit to the Nuba Mountains, Clooney was invited to speak to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and was praised by Democrat Senator, John Kerry, as demonstrating the best of ‘citizens’ activism’. Clooney’s wealth and influence removes him from the category of an everyday citizen, whose political power is confined to being a consumer and a ‘hit’, ‘ping’, ‘tweet’ or ‘click’ in the social media.

**Kony2012 and Celebritization of Protest**

*Kony2012*, another celebrity–supported campaign, gained worldwide publicity in March 2012 and illustrates not only the potentiality of the social media for activism, but also

---

1 SSP is a collaboration with Not on our Watch, the Enough project, Sudan Now, Google Trellon, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Digital globe.
affirms the ways in which celebritization is being used to sidestep local activists who have been campaigning also against the Ugandan government’s military intervention.

*Kony2012* is a 29 minute video\(^4\) launched online on 5 March 2012 by the American-based NGO, Invisible Children, to raise public awareness of the abduction and brutalization of children by the rebel, Joseph Kony and his Lord’s Resistance Army, in Northern Uganda. Kony was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2005 for war crimes, and since 2006 has shifted his base to the DR Congo. The film, having attracted over 100 million viewers within a month, gained enormous media attention. It entreated young Americans to buy a bracelet and a US $30 Action kit in order to make Kony famous, and to donate money to the charity for reconstruction work in Uganda. Endorsed by high profile celebrities, such as George Clooney and Oprah Winfrey, the film aimed to mobilize young Americans to put pressure on the American government to extend its military intervention in the search for Kony. Partly due to the NGO’s pressure, in October 2011, the US sent 100 troops to support the Ugandan army in its hunt for Kony and in March 2012, the African Union also agreed to dispatch a 5000 strong military force.

The film was subjected to numerous criticisms, from simplification and misrepresentation of the problem since the war in Northern Uganda had ceased, advocating a naïve military solution to capture Kony, to the NGO’s misuse of funds raised for Uganda.\(^5\) Using A-list celebrities both as endorsers and opinion makers is central to the film’s mobilization among the young. With one click on the charity’s webpage, its supporters can send messages directly to 21 celebrities, comprising of entertainers and dot.com billionaires and 13 policymakers (a mix of Republicans, Democrats and the UN Secretary General), who are depicted as change agents, in that ‘they have the authority to see Kony captured’.

Another aspect of the film is its organization around the creation and use of celebrity status. The producer uses the film for self-aggrandisement, to confer celebrity status to his five-year old son and on Joseph Kony, branding him ‘a bad guy’, who ‘good guys’ can stop militarily. The ‘viral’ effect of the film in the social media was exalted by George Clooney stating, ‘there’s 100 million people who know the name of a war criminal now that didn’t necessarily before, and that’s a good thing.’\(^6\) The film assumes that because the producers and America’s youth had no knowledge of Kony’s 26 years of infamy in Africa, he was ‘invisible’, and making him and his atrocities famous will ensure his capture and return Northern Uganda to normality.

A key supporter of the charity and the film is the then Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Louis Moreno-Campo, who also courts celebrity status and endorsement in his collaboration on the film. He was later reported as having attended a Hollywood dinner in his honour accompanied by Invisible Children’s Director of Ideology, Jedidiah Jenkins, at which Moreno-Campo encouraged the celebrity guests to support video activism.\(^7\) The irony is that *Kony2012* seeks to mobilise American children to pressure action on a U.S. government to bring a war criminal to an international court that it does not recognize. Furthermore, the ICC and Moreno-Campo have been criticised as being biased in only indicting those leaders and countries that are not friends of America, and in the case of Uganda, for not indicting the government for the commitment of war crimes in its military campaign against Kony (Mamdani 2009).
The film perpetuates a simplistic assessment of a complex regional problem. Moreno-Campo reiterates this with: ‘the only way to stop Kony is to arrest him and solve all the problems.’ Because *Kony2012* producers present Kony as ‘bad’ and seek to appeal to the ‘good’ by calling on a common humanity, the political complexity of the LRA’s war remains absent from the film. The film’s motto: ‘humanity’s greatest desire is to love and connect’ draws on what Mamdani (2009) calls ‘the largeness of heart’. The African’s role is a supporting one – as victims and individuals rescued by the NGO. In sum, *Kony2012* represents a form of global citizenship under neo-liberal governance that seeks to mobilize global youth on international issues from a narrow militaristic and conservative perspective. It resonates with the development education of UK Department for International Development and the Australian government’s AusAid, both of which, Biccum (2011) sees as an attempt to construct a global citizenship that supports the neo-liberal agenda.

In *Kony2012* and celebrity advocacy in general, there is an uncritical representation of western governments as forces for good in the world, if only they could be pressured to do so by public activism. The makers of *Kony2012* promotes, as Belloni (2007: 454) writes, ‘the belief that western involvement in weak states in order to protect individual and group rights arises from unquestionably altruistic motives and is the answer to addressing human suffering worldwide’. Therefore, the call for western military intervention by the SDC and *Kony2012* ignore the contribution of the colonial legacy, the history of western interventions in the affected regions and how the pursuance of a military industrial-complex in the West contributes to the militarization of Africa and offers opportunities for rebels, such as Kony. Furthermore, as many have argued, a poorly conceived military approach to capture Kony is likely to cause more civilian casualties (Atkinson et al 2012).

The merger of celebrity advocacy with multinational corporations and the US state is also typified by the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI) founded in 2009 by the actor Ben Affleck. ECI targets community-based organizations in partnership with Causes.org and USAID and is backed by a range of investors, notably Google, The Howard G. Buffet Foundation, Humanity United, the Bridgeway Foundation, and Cindy Hensley McCain. According to its website, ECI ‘believe public and private partnerships, combined with advocacy that drives increased attention and public policy change, will create new opportunities for the people of Eastern Congo’.18

ECI spells out its blueprint for post-war Eastern Congo which repeats the neo-liberal governance structures being promoted by development agencies. ‘We envision an eastern Congo vibrant with abundant opportunities for economic and social development, where a robust civil society can flourish’.19 By the nature of their partnerships, ECI cannot empower communities, but draw them into a dependent institutional relationship with an international and western INGO, from which the Congolese people’s chances of acquiring democratic accountability is even more remote than the Congolese state. ECI proclaims that it will drive ‘policy changes that will increase US government’s engagement in Congo’. There is no mention of the US government’s long history of involvement in the Congo, especially its support for the kleptocratic regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko during the Cold War, which has been detrimental to the Congolese people (De Witte 2001).
Silencing and Marginalization of African Voices

It is thus apparent in this discussion that celebrity advocacy tends to exclude African voices from the global conversation about their plight. Celebrities position themselves as self-appointed intermediaries for Africans (Daley 2005, Alibhai-Brown 2005). They draw on pre-existing assumptions about the non-western ‘Other’, and the space in which they inhabit, in order to evoke superiority of knowledge and rightfulness of purpose. In his speech to the UN Security Council in 2006, Clooney could claim, ‘I am here to represent the voices of people who cannot speak for themselves’. As Al-Bulushi (2011), in his open letter to Clooney, writes:

*The people of Sudan are invisible in the global conversation, now heavily shaped by your project. The very real political issues at stake are diluted into nebulous questions of morality and the ‘responsibility to protect’, in which external actors like yourself claim a moral authority to defend people who have no way of holding you accountable.*

The only Africans mentioned in their narratives are corrupt politicians and poor victims, mainly women and children, who predominate in the photoshoots. When Africans do respond critically to their representation by celebrities and humanitarian agencies, they are treated as ungrateful children. What is apparent is how access to the social media has enhanced the capacity of Africans to respond to the stereotyping and partial information about the continent.20 However, when they do, they are often dismissed as either being part of the privileged middle class, resentful of the attention being given to the westerners’ or better still ‘racist’, if they criticize the benevolent action of white westerners seeking to do good, in a seemingly unselfish manner, when they themselves lack the material resources to offer their compatriots care, nurturing, and protection.21

Invisible Children’s reaction to the criticism of the absence of voices in Kony2012 was to produce another video, *Kony2012 Part II: Beyond Famous*, with more African voices, predominantly those working for the charity. This time, in classical neo-liberal parlance, the film refers to African ownership of the solutions to the problem of Kony, even though the path and strategy had already been defined by the charity, to which Africans are demonstrating compliance.

If race and power, and space (physical and metaphorical) shape the responses of celebrities, do black celebrities approach Africa differently? Here, one has to distinguish between celebrities with a long history of activism dating back to the civil rights movements. Celebrities, such as Danny Glover who campaigns with social movements in the USA, Haiti and in Sub-Saharan Africa, have credibility beyond the box office. Glover can comment: ‘When you see people dis-empowered or marginalize they’re not only in Africa. They’re here as well’22. He uses his celebrity status strategically to campaign for social justice. In marked contrast, 50 Cent justifies his targeting of Africans with ‘people in the U.S. have a fair shot while those he wants to help don’t even have access to water’23. Here, 50 cent’s comment appears in isolation from his other philanthropic ventures, such as the rapper’s commitment
to providing food to American children through his SMS Audio Company and his aid to children’s charities in the USA through his G Unity Foundation.

Conclusion

However honourable the intentions of celebrities their engagement in humanitarianism can be interpreted as part of a discursive network of governance of neo-liberal subjects. The commodification of international humanitarianism offers immense opportunities for capital accumulation. For the western public, consumerism, especially overconsumption, is no longer a banal, trivial pursuit, it becomes morally justifiable, if it is presented as the first step to active protest and delivers satisfaction.

Celebrities, like humanitarian agencies, seek to appear politically neutral in domestic politics, as they garner support and funds across the political spectrum and adopt technical and managerial solutions that often do not reflect the realities on the ground. As cultural elites and products of global capitalism, they do not challenge the inequalities of global power relations. Their humanitarian work cannot be treated in isolation from the hegemonic discourse of race and development, and the spatial hierarchies of power embedded in such action. Belloni (2007: 454) argues ‘rather than originating from a transnational morality, humanitarianism originates and reproduces the unequal power relationship between the West and the less developed word’. By promoting consumption in the West as the solution to poverty and dispossession, celebrity humanitarianism helps to further entrench non-western Others in globally exploitative relations.

In sum, western celebrity humanitarianism renders Africa invisible to probing, by de-historicizing and de-politicizing the causes they support. In this way they absolve the West of any historical responsibility for the problems Africans are facing – presenting them essentially as moral - as human failure. Claims of unaccountability, false authority and racism are brushed aside as minor due to the urgency of the need to save lives.

Finally, a celebrity’s influence is likely to be superficial and short-lived, but together they might have a profound impact on the ability of global social movements to mobilize against the exploitative effects of global capitalism and geo-political interests. Celebrity advocacy means that social movements seeking to address wider political and economic dynamics that impoverish people, especially capitalist exploitation in Africa, are marginalized, precisely at the moment when the extension of social media to Africa offers so much opportunity.

References


for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), Overseas Development Institute.


---


Clooney quoted by John Horn in LA Times Magazine

Nesrine Malik, 'George Clooney isn’t helping Sudan', The Guardian.co.uk/Commentisfree, 19 March 2012.

See open letter to Clooney from the opposition Sudan Change Now at http://www.sudantribune.com/

Paul Harris, ‘George Clooney’s latest film a plea for help in south of Sudan’, 14 March 2012, at www.Guardian.co.uk [accessed 1 April 2012]

See http://www.kony2012.com/


George Clooney quoted in Donna Cassata, ‘Children clamor for Congress to act against Kony’, Associated Press, 3 April 2012.

Mary Slosson (2 April 2012) ‘ICC Prosecutor courts Hollywood with Invisible Children’, Reuters.co.uk

Quote taken from http://www.easterncongo.org

Ibid

See the wave of African responses to Kony2012 in endnote 15 above

