Bono, Band Aid, and Before: Celebrity Humanitarianism, Music and the Objects of its Action

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Citation information:

And there won’t be snow in Africa this Christmastime

The greatest gift they’ll get this year is life

Where nothing ever grows

No rain nor rivers flow

Do they know it’s Christmastime at all?

-Bob Geldof (Band Aid 1984)

Introduction

In the wake of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia, the Irish musician Bob Geldof created Band Aid, an organization of pop music stars eager to aid the needy through the production and sales of a record, ‘Do they know it’s Christmas?’. With the refrain, “Feed the world, let them know it’s Christmastime,” Band Aid propelled the singers into the realms of politics, international affairs, economic policy, and disaster relief. Through its explicit use of celebrities and wide appeal, Band Aid seemed to herald a new era of celebrity humanitarianism, which has since been replicated and expanded, most notably by the anti-poverty activism of Bono, the calls for an end to conflict in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo by George Clooney, and through similar musical projects such as Live 8 and ‘We are the World 25 for Haiti.’ In this chapter, we argue that these various initiatives are not novel at all; instead, they follow long-standing celebrity humanitarian trajectories that can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century. Since that time,
celebrity activists have repeatedly pushed for solutions based on direct Western intervention in what we now think of as the developing world. Whether demanding direct colonial intervention as the only effective means of ending slavery in Africa during the nineteenth century, or blaming the failures of twenty-first-century development on a lack of political will and adequate funding, celebrity humanitarians often reinforce stereotypes of the global poor as helpless, which reinforces and reproduces the highly unequal structures of power that characterize our world. In arguing that modern celebrity humanitarianism is nothing new, our intent is not to criticize the words and deeds of particular celebrities; rather, we seek to highlight the ways in which celebrity humanitarianism itself leads to misunderstandings of the Global South, which enable particular kinds of interventions that work against the liberatory goals that celebrities espouse.

We treat musical activism as part of a larger form of modern global politics that we call celebrity humanitarianism. Exploring forms of celebrity activism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we demonstrate the long history of celebrity involvement in Western humanitarian politics. By considering celebrity activism as a long-standing feature of Western discourse about the non-Western world, we demonstrate that celebrity advocacy in humanitarian causes has consistently supported direct Western intervention in the parts of the world identified as requiring humanitarian assistance. The emergence of Band Aid in the 1980s was thus neither new nor surprising in the ways that it framed African problems and advocated interventionist solutions. Finally, we show that Bono’s
contemporary form of celebrity expertise on the issue of poverty is reminiscent of older models of humanitarian activism.

Health, Wellbeing, and the Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism

Celebrity has long been a central feature of Western humanitarianism. In their exploration of celebrity humanitarianism as embodied in Product (RED), Richey and Ponte (2011) limit the concept of celebrity to musicians and artists, and thus argue that significant celebrity activism started in the 1960s. We find this framing too narrow.¹ As early as the antislavery movement in Britain and North America in the late eighteenth century, fame was a recognized tool in directing public attention to the suffering of others. For more than two centuries since, subsequent efforts by Christian missionaries, advocates of colonization schemes, colonial reformers, advocates for humanitarian intervention, and supporters of increased funding for development have all employed strategies which sought to maximize Western public attention by connecting their advocacy to well-known public figures.

In this chapter, we understand the reliance on celebrity as a means of what Richard Rorty (1993: 122-3) called “sentimental education,” by which more and more people

¹ Indeed, this framing seems too narrow for their own argument, as they cite Paul Farmer and Jeffrey Sachs as “fourth wave” aid celebrities whose fame was derived from their professional careers in aid and development, and has nothing at all to do with artistic pursuits. The argument that such celebrity is something new under the sun, however, elides a significant history of individuals with similar profiles and backgrounds that long predates the 1960s.
“expand the reference of the terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us’.” Lynn Hunt (2007: 58) has argued that the development of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, an early form of the novel that consisted of a series of letters exchanged between characters, was an important factor in generating fellow-feeling for non-noble people among European readers. The complex of ideas that have come to be glossed as human rights “could only flourish when people learned to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion. They learned this equality, at least in part, by experiencing identification with ordinary characters who seemed dramatically present and familiar, even if ultimately fictional.” Likewise, by demonstrating their own empathy for those who suffer, celebrities have long acted as models for Western publics, encouraging a wider identification, or sympathy, with those in need.

If humanitarianism did indeed begin with acts of identification with suffering people and the imperative to offer help, it has developed wider goals over time of remaking the world to eliminate the causes of human misery. It is in this sense that humanitarianism, like the related ideas of human rights, is usually understood to be quintessentially modern phenomenon (Calhoun 2008: 76). Because celebrity activists seek to rouse wider sympathy, they almost always invoke narratives of innocent victimhood, which directly imply forms of necessary action. The celebrity humanitarian activist not only identifies with those who suffer, but also points Western audiences to ways that they can become involved in the solution to the problem. In sub-Saharan Africa especially, the

2 This is broadly true, although there are advocates of a pared-down humanitarianism such as David Rieff (2002).
trope of innocence, epitomized initially in abolitionist accounts of the suffering of enslaved women and children, has led to consistent misunderstanding of the human realities of the continent. This is one of the reasons that purportedly humanitarian interventions have often failed to meet even their own objectives. As Richey and Ponte (2011:11) argue, celebrity humanitarians “embody a manufactured consensus, let simple moral truths substitute for rational debate, and thus manage the affect of those who would solve the world’s problems.” In short, the celebrity validates both the definition of the problem and the proposed solution for a general public that might have little point of connection with the suffering other.

**Histories of celebrity humanitarianism**

Long before Bob Geldof, most prominent humanitarian activists achieved their initial celebrity and legitimacy through direct experience with the issues that they spoke about, usually as a result of extended travel. An examination of anti-slavery humanitarianism in Africa illustrates some of the long-standing features of celebrity expertise in Western discourse about the non-Western world, and the close connection between this form of activism and arguments for Western intervention as the solution to perceived problems. When the Anglican clergyman James Ramsay published his seminal *Essays on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* denouncing the practice of slavery in the Caribbean in 1784, he drew on decades of experience evangelizing to the enslaved on the British Caribbean island of St. Kitts (Brown 2006: 39). Olaudah Equiano, who was the most famous black person in Britain even before he published the narrative of his own life as a slave in 1789, buttressed his antislavery
activism by drawing on his experience as an African who had been enslaved as a child and then transported to the Americas. Many of the other leading opinion-shapers on matters connected to Africa attained their fame by extensive travels to the continent. In this sense, experience preceded celebrity. We might think of Paul Farmer, Mother Teresa, Nicholas Hopkins, and Jeffrey Sachs as modern examples of this type of celebrity-expertise.

The first-hand experience and eye-witness testimonials of suffering were not a new development in the late eighteenth century. As early as Gomes Eanes de Zurara’s account of suffering African slaves disembarking at the Portuguese port of Lagos in the fifteenth century, European witnesses had explicitly criticized the brutality and horrors of Atlantic slavery (Russel-Wood 1978: 30). Likewise, the Spanish Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval, who devoted more than 40 years of his life to ministering among enslaved Africans disembarking from slave ships at the port of Cartagena, in what is today Colombia, wrote a scathing critique of the treatment of enslaved Africans during the middle passage in a book published in 1627 (Brown 2006: 39-40). These and other critiques of Atlantic slavery were not effective in mobilizing an antislavery movement before the late eighteenth century.

One factor that made the social movement to end slavery possible was the ability of activists to move beyond the critique of the brutality of slavery, and the individual spiritual needs of the enslaved as missionaries saw it, to a focus on what could be done to undermine the system of slavery itself. Celebrity expertise and activism were essential to this shift.

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3 Whether his account of an African past was accurate or not, his authority to speak about slavery came from his own experience. See Caretta 2005, Lovejoy 2006.
Among the few eighteenth-century anti-slavery activists with direct experience in Africa itself was the English entomologist Henry Smeathman, who had lived on Banana Island in what is today Sierra Leone between 1771-74. Smeathman’s 1786 publication, *Plan of a Settlement to be made near Sierra Leone*, made him a founding figure in the creation of the Sierra Leone colony which was established in 1786 as a British settlement for black loyalists from the war of American independence. Smeathman was not at the forefront of the “sentimental” campaign against slavery that relied on generating empathy for the suffering of enslaved Africans; rather, he served the essential role of providing a particular solution to the problem raised by supporters of the status quo: what would follow abolition? Upon his return to Britain from Africa and the Caribbean in 1779, Smeathman became an advocate for free plantation schemes for Africa, which, he argued, would eliminate the need to transport African slaves across the Atlantic. This position supported an argument made by antislavery activists like the Quaker doctor John Fothergill, or the better-known Granville Sharp, that the Atlantic slave trade might be undermined by encouraging a trade in African commodities instead of slaves. It was hoped that increased commercial links with Africa would stimulate crop production along the African coast, and that this would make it unnecessary to grow sugar in the Caribbean (Brown 2006: 259-62).

Smeathman’s authority to speak about colonization was based entirely on the celebrity he had earned from his experience in Africa. He reported that Africans lived in scattered settlements and as such, it would be necessary to concentrate people in order to make commercial agriculture feasible. According to Deidre Coleman’s account,
Smeathman “fantasized about regulating and disciplining the local Africans through the division of labour, a process which would be assisted by European machinery and European purchasers.” Africans would thereby “rise above the production of mere necessaries to achieve a ‘great super-abundance’, and it is this excess which would enable them to stop selling their own people” (Coleman 2005: 38). One of the means that Smeathman proposed for enabling the agricultural development of the African continent was the employment of slaves who would be purchased and freed. Indeed, the early colonization in Sierra Leone was undertaken as part of the larger anti-slavery project, and it relied on labor from redeemed slaves.

The common feature of all the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century colonization schemes associated broadly with the antislavery movement was that sites of colonization were chosen almost at random, usually without having been seen. For all of these colonization schemes, Africa represented barbarism confronted by civilization, a kind of tabula rasa ready for European inscription. Sierra Leone, for example, was identified as a site because of the spectacular terrain rather than on the basis of practical information on the suitability of the land for agriculture. Smeathman conceived of Africa as possessing limitless resources, if only a way could be found to better direct African labor. The colonization schemes assumed that it was Africans who would do the work, even if coercion was required. For these reasons, the dreams harboured by colonization planners failed to materialize in African realities. These early ideas of how to develop Africa were justified on arguments of moral uplift and civilizing projects. They certainly did not
involve consultation with the Africans themselves, who were seen to be unqualified for such a conversation.

Antislavery activists such as Smeathman consistently argued that their colonization schemes would lead to the betterment of Africans and bring an end to the perverse incentives created by the Atlantic slave trade. Yet even after Britain had abolished its own slave trade in 1807 and later sent navy ships to the West African coast to enforce anti-slaving agreements on other European countries, enslavement and commerce in slaves continued on the African continent. By the middle of the nineteenth century, antislavery activists turned increasingly to campaigns designed to reveal and oppose internal slave trades in Africa. The most celebrated British expert on slavery in the interior of Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century was the missionary David Livingstone, whose extensive travels in southern and east-central Africa made him a household name in Britain. His message was that Africa could be opened to Europe and that there were people of talent and loyalty eager for commerce and Christianity (White 1987: 10). This was the argument that “legitimate commerce” could replace the reliance on slavery in developing a modern Africa. Livingstone was not unlike Smeathman in the solutions he proposed to solve humanitarian and religious problems produced by slavery in Africa. The introduction and spread of missionary Christianity to Africa became a major tool in arguments about how to end the continent’s internal slave trades.

It is important to understand that celebrity activism about Africa was not limited to Europeans. Just as Oulaudah Equiano had been a very important anti-slavery activist in Britain in the late eighteenth century, another former slave from Africa named Samuel
Ajayi Crowther became the face of nineteenth-century efforts to wed anti-slavery activism in Africa with missionary Protestant Christianity. Too often, we assume that it is the identity of the celebrity activist as an American or European that somehow precludes a full understanding or engagement with the people who are the object of humanitarian action. But the role of African celebrity activists such as Equiano and Crowther did not lead to alternative solutions; it instead furthered the credibility of larger humanitarian projects, which included Western interventionist solutions. As such, there is an almost structural character to celebrity activism that overrides the individual identity of particular activists because humanitarian movements are geared towards certain audiences whose reception of activist discourse is necessary in order to mobilize humanitarian action.

The failures of the original colonization schemes proposed by Smeathman in what is today Sierra Leone were overcome to some extent by the importation of recaptured African slaves, intercepted by the British navy off the African coast and disembarked at Freetown. Overall, the British navy captured 1635 ships and freed over 160,000 enslaved people on board ships over the course of the nineteenth century. By 1840, 60,000 recaptured slaves had been freed at Sierra Leone. It was from this population of freed slaves that a new generation of African Christians emerged, eager to evangelize other Africans (Sanneh 1999: 111-2). In Britain, these African Christians came to represent the possibilities for the redemption of Africa from the purported barbarism that had been produced in the Atlantic slave trade era. Samuel Ajayi Crowther was a former slave from the Yoruba-speaking region of modern Nigeria who had been rescued from a slave ship headed to the Americas in 1822 and taken to the colony of Sierra Leone, where he was
discharged into the care of European Protestant missionaries. He was educated, baptized, and sent to London for further instruction. He kept his own name Ajayi, but also took the name Crowther from a European member of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Sierra Leone. He was commissioned by the CMS to set up a new missionary position on the Niger River, and he participated in the failed British government sponsored expedition up the Niger in 1841-42. Crowther was responsible for the first translation of the bible into Yoruba. On a visit to England organized by the CMS, Crowther met with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and presented them with a copy of the Yoruba prayer book.

Crowther’s fame was built on the narrative of his life trajectory as a slave freed by the British navy, and as a child who had embraced Christianity from European missionaries. He became one of the leaders of the Anglican Church in West Africa after he was appointed bishop in 1864. Crowther was famous for an event that came to represent the power of Christian missionary intervention in Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, when he was reunited with his mother in the Nigerian town of Abeokuta in 1846. As the official history of the CMS narrated this event,

Before Crowther had been three weeks in the town, he came across his mother, from whom he had been torn just a quarter of a century before. For a large part of the time she had been in slavery, though never exported from the country; but she had been redeemed by her two daughters. It was on August 21\textsuperscript{st} that the meeting of mother and son occurred; and Crowther noticed that the text that day in the Christian Almanack was, “Thou art the helper of the fatherless.” Afala—that was the mother’s name—proposed to offer a special sacrifice to her gods in gratitude for the discovery of her long-lost son; but on being assured that it was to the Christians’ God that she owed this great mercy, she consented to be put under [Henry] Townsend’s instruction, to learn of Him; and on February 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1848, when the first six new
converts of Abeokuta were admitted to baptism, Afala herself was one of them, receiving, as the mother of “Samuel,” the appropriate name of Hannah (Stock 1899: 103-4).

It was stories such as that of Samuel Ajayi Crowther and his mother that fed closely intertwined movements of antislavery and Christian missionary proselytization in Africa. Unlike late eighteenth-century activists such as Henry Smeathman, whose Africa would be made to develop with European tutelage and the elimination of the blight of slavery, mid-nineteenth-century activists argued that Christianity was the essential requirement needed to redeem Africans and to wean them off of their reliance on slavery.

However, as European missionaries became better established in West Africa, and as European colonial expansion proceeded apace, the role of African Christians in the missionary project was greatly curtailed. By the 1880s, European missionaries could write about their African co-religionists in ways that were completely dismissive of their shared faith:

I regret to say that with a few—very rare—exceptions, those African pastors, teachers and catechists whom I have met have been all, more or less, bad men. They attempted to veil an unbridled immorality with an unblushing hypocrisy and a profane display of ‘mouth’ religion which to an honest mind was even more disgusting than the immortality itself. (Ayandele 1966: 211)

The very existence of African Christians in leadership positions within missions challenged the racist hierarchy that was at the root of the emerging European colonial project in Africa.

Crowther died in 1891, still officially a bishop in the Anglican Church. Instead of replacing him as bishop of the “Niger territory” with another African Christian, a European was appointed. This hastened the exodus of many African Christians to the new
independent African churches. Over the next thirty years, these independent African churches grew in importance and became one of the principal mechanisms of Christian evangelization in many parts of the continent, very often much more important than institutions established by European missionaries (Ayandele 1966, Peel 2003). Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s celebrated life story represented different things to different people. His life was both the embodiment of the hope and promise of European antislavery. But the sad end of his life also stood to many West African Christians as a mark of the limits of African opportunities under European control. To them, it represented a kind of betrayal of the promise of Missionary Christian antislavery. In the terms of this chapter, it is perhaps less surprising that even an African celebrity activist’s life work would be superseded by the impulse for direct European control.

**The Twentieth Century Celebrity**

The advent of full-scale European colonialism in Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century produced another form of celebrity activism that was most often constructed as a scandalous exposé of colonial misdeeds. There is, of course, a long history of this kind of writing that goes back to the beginning of European colonial expansion. Famous examples include Bartolomé de las Casas’ sixteenth-century critique of Spanish colonial violence against indigenous people in the Caribbean and Edmund Burke’s impeachment campaign against the East India Company’s Governor General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, at the end of the eighteenth century. In Africa, the best-known example of this kind of celebrity activism is the Red Rubber campaign in Britain against the systematic violence employed
in West Central Africa by the Belgian King Leopold II in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The main public figure in the humanitarian movement for Congo was Edmund Morel, who had started work as a clerk in a trading firm in Liverpool in 1890 at the age of 23. In his job at the trading firm, he dealt with African commerce. Morel became very interested in Africa and used his knowledge to argue that a policy of free trade should be pursued in African colonies and that the rights of Africans to their land and its produce be respected. As Morel wrote,

> The Congo native, like the native of every part of the African tropics, must be protected in his rights in land, property, and labour. All those rights have been swept away from him by the most colossal act of spoliation ever imagined by mortal man. The right of trading freely in the produce of his soil, and in the fruits of his labour must be restored to him. What is trade? Surely it is the most elementary function of humanity? (Morel 1906: xxi)

In his public campaign, formalized in the Congo Reform Association founded in 1904 with the objective of ending King Leopold’s control over Congo, Morel used the language of older antislavery campaigns. For example, in 1906 he wrote, “Let our governing statesmen be well assured of this. There is in the atmosphere of England at the moment a singular determination to liberate, with God’s help, the natives of the Congo from their unspeakable bondage, and to save Europe the shame of tolerating, by consent, the revival, under worse forms, of the African Slave Trade” (Morel 1906: xxv).

Just as the anti-slavery activists before them had argued that direct European intervention in Africa was needed to eradicate the slave trade, Morel’s Congo Reform Association advocated a better, more paternalistic form of colonial rule for the Congo. It
never advocated an end to colonial rule because like so many Western humanitarian campaigns focused on alleviating African suffering, the solution was understood to lie in European tutelage and development. Similar tropes appear in other cases of celebrity humanitarian advocacy in Africa before the Second World War. When the prominent French writer André Gide (1927) published an account of his trip through French Equatorial Africa in 1927, he described in detail the brutality of forced labor in ways reminiscent of the Congo Reform Association a quarter century earlier. Shortly thereafter, the campaigning French journalist Albert Londres (1929) published a similar exposé of the violence employed by the French colonial state in constructing the Congo-Océan railroad.

In these cases, the celebrity of the authors was useful in raising the issue of colonial violence in Central Africa to a larger French public. But as in the case of the Congo Reform Association, suggested solutions rested on a reformed colonial rule. In these forms of what Gary Wilder has called “colonial humanism,” Africans were defended as victims of the malevolent and exploitative forces of misapplied colonial rule, but the solution was always a more rational form of European colonial uplift (Wilder 2005).

In the instances of Londres and Gide, their own independent celebrity, separate from discussion of Africa, brought increased attention to the issues they wrote about. In this way, they are examples of the quintessential celebrity humanitarian of the latter half of the twentieth century – celebrities who were well known first, before gaining expertise in the continent. The profile of the celebrity expert changed even more dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century in part through the rapid expansion of media and technology as tools of entertainment. Musicians and pop artists, in particular, were
increasingly visible as humanitarian activists from the 1960s onwards in a variety of American domestic causes, the civil rights movement, and the anti-Vietnam War protests.

These rock heroes – such as Bob Dylan and John Lennon – were participants in the larger protest politics of their time. They did not initiate or spearhead their own movement or organization but rather were brought in by others (Richey and Ponte 2011: 32). By the 1970s, the role of the rock hero as activist had become more reminiscent of the celebrity humanitarians of the colonial era. The musicians themselves now introduced new areas of concern to their fans in order to initiate action, and eventually, influence policy makers. In music, the transition was slow, beginning most notably with the 1971 George Harrison and Ravi Shankar benefit concert for the newly formed country of Bangladesh. This concert and its accompanying fundraising activities raised only $240,000, leading Lennon to comment that benefit concerts were a “rip-off” (de Waal 2008: 51).

The fundraising potential of charity singles and concerts increased exponentially in the 1980s. A 1984 charity single ‘Do They Know it’s Christmas?’ by a collection of pop stars under the name Band Aid brought musicians into the full tradition of celebrity humanitarianism. The single, its follow-up concert Live Aid, and later projects by artists such as Bono began to mark the celebrity as an educator to the public, an initiator of mass action, and an influence on policy. Ironically, the democratization of participants in international humanitarian assistance did not alter the types and methods of intervention. Instead, this democratization was used to build support for long-standing models of development, such as the massive mobilization of food aid, that reproduced an imperative to act centered on interventionist, technocratic models.
Band Aid Narratives: Helpless Africans and Stingy Governments

The 1984 Ethiopian famine captured the attention of Bob Geldof, the lead singer of the Irish rock band Boomtown Rats. Horrified by images of starvation in a BBC newscast, Geldof decided that something must be done, and collaborated with the Scottish singer/musician/songwriter Midge Ure to produce the charity single, ‘Do They Know it’s Christmas?’ Geldof enlisted fellow artists from the UK, Ireland, and the United States to sing as the group Band Aid, and convinced Margaret Thatcher’s government to donate the V.A.T. from sales back to the charity. Band Aid in part inspired the American grouping of musicians, USA for Africa (United Support of Artists for Africa, including Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie, Harry Belafonte, and Dionne Warwick) and their charity single, ‘We are the World’. Between London and Philadelphia, these two groups joined to stage a multi-sited concert in 1985, Live Aid, to continue raising funds for Ethiopia. Either live or via television, it is estimated that approximately 2 billion people watched, and about US $150 million was raised (Richey and Ponte 2011: 32).

Live Aid garnered so much attention partially because of its use of media, both music and television, to engender an affective response amongst a mass audience (Westley 1991). Unlike future celebrity initiatives, Geldof did not initially claim a position of authority, but rather strove to share his own embodied sense of injustice and inhumanity with his audience, becoming a bridge between the Western audience and the faraway (de Waal 2008: 44). “As a musician, Geldof’s personal response to the images of starving children he saw on television was to translate the emotion into music, the symbolic language with which he was most familiar. The fact that the discourse which is popular
music connects a wide group of people, gave him an audience and a powerful support base” (Westley 1991: 1020). Geldof’s use of sentiment is evident in the lyrics to the single, provoking the listener to reflect on a common humanity:

*It’s Christmas time, there’s no need to be afraid.*

*At Christmas time we let in light and banish shade.*

*And in our world of plenty we can spread a smile of joy*

*Throw your arms around the world at Christmas time.*

*But say a prayer, pray for the other ones.*

*At Christmas time it’s hard but when you’re having fun…*

*There’s a world outside your window and it’s a world of dread and fear.*

*Where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears.*

*Where the Christmas bells that are ringing are the clanging chimes of Doom.*

*Well, tonight thank God it’s them instead of you.*

Here, lyrics invoke a sense of difference between those with plenty and those without, and the need to embrace, pray for, and pay attention to the less fortunate. The music video and the Live Aid concert focused on this sense of a community of ‘us’ – of dutiful concerned citizens. The official video contained no images of Africa, but rather focused on the work and fun being completed and enjoyed by the rock stars, highlighting a sense of joining together. Similarly, the end of the London portion of the Live Aid concert emphasized a sense of community. Not only was there a call to action, but also a distinct sense of an emerging sense of a collective experience, responsibility, and history making,
as expressed in the Live Aid logo’s claim that the day of the concert was “the day music changed the world”. Geldof adroitly combined the lyrical sentiment, the affective experience, and the use of images, including a naked, starving child in the logo for Live Aid and videos demonstrating the difficulty of a young child to stand up. The success of this event was sealed in its ability to merge the musical and visual to affect action (Westley 1991: 1020).

In generating affect and a sense of larger community responsibility, one of the results of Band Aid and Live Aid was to democratize and popularize involvement in international development and humanitarian initiatives. Even without attending or viewing the concert, one could influence international actions through consumerism. “At the symbolic level, Geldof used his own understanding of the symbolic and affective power of music to forge an effective analogy: to consume music is to feed the hungry” (Westley 1991: 1032). The power of the concert also drew in youth with a sense that they could make a difference (1033). If nothing else, at least through the awareness and support of their favorite rock star, individuals became connected to a vague ‘just cause’ and a moral crusade to ‘feed the world’, fostering new understandings and engagements with development challenges, including increasing impulses to have first-hand experience of the developing world.

However, Band Aid and Live Aid’s sentimental education relied on the creation of a single, uncomplicated story, lacking nuance and reproducing negative stereotypes and conservative interventionist models. Again, the lyrics are demonstrative:

*And there won’t be snow in Africa this Christmas time.*
The reference to Africa within the lyrics is of a single, homogenous, helpless region. Although created to fight famine in Ethiopia, there is no mention of the country itself, and the references to hunger and starvation are limited to a discussion of geographical causes (“no rains nor rivers flow”) and resultant agricultural failure (“where nothing ever grows”). In his interviews, Geldof’s narrative of the famine focused the relief supplies and surplus food available through the United Nations and European Community, criticizing supposedly stingy Western governments (de Waal 2008, 51). Thus, in creating a narrative of the helpless African, a second narrative was born consisting of the celebrity claim that “we know what to do”. Geldof’s argument was that humanitarian crises, and, later, broader issues of aid and development, were simple issues of political will within donor countries. In the case of 1984 Ethiopia, the solution was then also simple and lacking nuance: give food.

People listened. The rise of consciousness and its expression amongst the masses meant that Western politicians paid attention and money rushed in, despite concerns by aid experts and critics who pointed to the more complicated causes of the famine, including the policies of the Ethiopian government and an ongoing rebellion (de Waal 2008: 51). As de Waal notes, “The fact that the famine was a crime perpetrated by the Ethiopian government under President Megistu Haile Mariam, and that relief agencies could become

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4 With thanks to Derek Rhodes for an in-depth discussion of the lyrics.
accomplices to that crime, were swept aside in a simplistic rush” (Ibid.). In part because rebel groups in Ethiopia also used the aid, it is estimated that the supply of humanitarian aid helped to extend the war by at least a year (de Waal 2008: 51-2). The pressure of efforts such as Band Aid and Live Aid allowed “high profile but less effective programs flourished at the expense of lower profile but more professional ones” (52).

Thus, both the representations of Africa produced by Band Aid and Live Aid and the resultant humanitarian interventions led to negative results. The long-term implications of various forms of celebrity efforts have reinforced the depiction of Africa as poor, starving, and sick. The African body is depicted starving and naked, yet nameless. Western history is then constructed, with a responsibility to save Africa and the reconstruction of a colonial order wherein the West is needed and the only actor with the necessary resources, including a plan and money (Yrjola 2009: 9-17). These tropes, of helpless and savior, have been engrained into the public imaginary, as demonstrated in a 2002 report by Volunteer Services Overseas UK. Research with over 1,000 UK adults (aged 15 and over) in November of 2001 emphasized the creation of a public knowledge of Africa based on extreme poverty, poor living conditions, and a desperate, daily existence (2002: 5). The study showed that 80 percent of the British public associated the developing world with images of Western aid, famine, and disaster, considering those living in the developing world to be helpless victims dependent on the help of the West to improve their conditions (3).

Although Gedlof did not initially represent himself as an authority figure, through the course of initiating Band Aid and Live Aid his narrative of the causes of the Ethiopian
famine became predominant. While liberalizing spaces of participation for involvement in international causes, the spaces of response remained narrowly confined to Western interventionist policies. In the years that followed, more rock stars and other celebrities identified themselves as experts, this time claiming authority and providing prescriptive plans of actions. None have claimed this humanitarian identity more adroitly than Bono.

**The Artist as Activist: Everything New is Old Again**

Bono, born Paul Hewson, is most known as the lead singer of the Irish band U2. He has long engaged with issues of social justice, associating with Amnesty International (such as through the 1986 *Conspiracy of Hope* tour), humanitarian relief (such as through participation in Band Aid), and the Jubilee 2000 campaign to reduce debt in the Global South. His twenty-first century humanitarian efforts sell a particular view of global poverty, particular representations of the challenges that we must address, and prescriptive means by which we might address these challenges. Specifically, in his public statements, Bono uses his celebrity to burnish the image of two key claims in development. The first is that we already know how to solve the world’s problems, and the only barrier to doing so is political will. The second is a subtle revival of environmental determinism, in the claim that people’s futures are determined by their geography. In making these claims, Bono draws on representations of Africa, and of the developing world, reminiscent of those that have populated the history of celebrity humanitarianism.

Bono’s activism, like that of many musical humanitarians of the Band Aid generation, took a course that focused on raising awareness of issues both through art and public statements. Early on, U2’s music was suffused with commentaries on issues in their
native Ireland. For example, the single ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday,’ from the 1983 album *War*, is a commentary on the familial rifts created by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This focus became international on the 1987 album *The Joshua Tree*, where a song about the impact of the national miners strike on mining communities (‘Red Hill Town’) sits alongside a song about the disappearances associated with the regime running Argentina at the time (‘Mothers of the Disappeared’) and another that overtly critiques the American influence on events in Central America (‘Bullet the Blue Sky’). Bono’s early activism was not prescriptive, but aimed at creating an emotional connection to the issue for the listener, and as such served as a form of sentimental education aimed at mobilizing U2’s fan base to influence how governments and society addressed particular social challenges (for discussion, see Andrews et al. 2011).

However, in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, something changed for Bono. The character of his activism, and his musical connection to that activism, shifted from raising awareness to policy prescription, and Bono the policy wonk emerged. Influenced by the narratives of Band Aid and Live Aid, he has credited this shift to his experience during a visit to Ethiopia in 1985, during which he and his wife Ali worked with the charity organization World Vision. While he has never explained the lag between this visit and the start of his policy activism for Africa, by the turn of the twenty-first century, Bono was a different activist. Bunting (2005) argues that “Bono brought much-needed glamour to a worthy campaign when he took up debt relief in 1999. Since then he has pioneered a new model of how celebrities can use their power. What marks him out is how he is re-inventing how rock stars do politics.” However, marking Bono as a new type of celebrity
activist for his efforts to understand the issues for which he advocates fails to grasp how the “Bono-as-wonk” character is a return to the celebrity activism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a wonk preoccupied with the details of aid and development work, Bono now can discuss the challenges facing the global poor with a different kind of legitimacy, one that can obscure the contested nature of his prescriptions, and the deeply conservative and problematic representations of the global poor that undergird his claims.

Bono’s efforts on behalf of the global poor are emotional pleas for attention to global problems, coupled with a newfound form of expertise and authority, articulating policy solutions and a crucial, urgent historical moment. His 2004 commencement speech at the University of Pennsylvania is an example:

The fact is that this generation--yours, my generation--that can look at the poverty, we're the first generation that can look at poverty and disease, look across the ocean to Africa and say with a straight face, we can be the first to end this sort of stupid extreme poverty, where in the world of plenty, a child can die for lack of food in its belly. We can be the first generation. It might take a while, but we can be that generation that says no to stupid poverty. It's a fact, the economists confirm it . . . For the first time in history we have the know how, we have the cash, we have the lifesaving drugs, but do we have the will? (Hewson 2004)

Here there is a rather specific claim, that science, technology and money can solve the problems of global poverty, what New York University economist William Easterly (2010) has called “technocratic illusions.” These claims mirror those made by Bono’s intellectual advisor on issues of aid and development, the Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs has argued that there are “known packages of effective and generally low-cost interventions” (Sachs and McArthur, 2005) that, if simply applied to the challenges at hand, could solve the problems of global poverty. In effect, Bono and Sachs’
“technocratic illusions” reduce aid and development to something that rich people in the Global North already know how to do for poor people in the Global South, and therefore a simple question of political will (Andrews et al. 2011). This representation of aid and development drastically simplifies the significant challenges that politics, social roles, power relations, and development’s disciplinary framing of the world present to those seeking to improve human well-being in the Global South. Further, the emphasis on the actions and will of the Global North limits the potential for those living in the Global South to be actors in their own development beyond passive recipients.

When policy arguments distill the complexity inherent in aid and development to simple emotional pleas, it becomes easy to harmonize musical activism and policy prescription. The overtones of sentimental education in the claims of Sachs create space for lyrics such as those in ‘Miracle Drug’, from U2’s 2004 album *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*. Here, in a song that clearly references illness and medicine, and certainly could be read as a reference to the AIDS crisis in Africa in which he has long taken an active interest, Bono sings “Science and the human heart/there is no limit,” overtly linking sentimental education and technocratic solutions such that the later cry “reason is on our side” takes on overtones of both, driving the listener to believe that we can fix this problem if only we try. Contrast this with the representation of the state of African economies and health systems in the lyrics from ‘Breathe’, a single from the 2009 album *No Line on the Horizon*, where Bono sings “16th of June, Chinese stocks are going up, and I’m coming down with some new Asian virus. JuJu man, JuJu man, Doc says you’re fine, or dying.
Please.” In the hope of technocracy we have the solution to the problems of those who would go to the “juju man” for unscientific and otherwise unproductive help.

When artistic sentimental education and technocratic solutions harmonize, the result is the production of the musical celebrity as a model for action. The celebrity defines a problem and raises awareness about their particular representation of the problem, points to and legitimizes a solution to the problem, and therefore empowers that solution. In Bono’s case, the result, in part, appears to be durable support for technocratic programs like Sachs’ Millennium Villages in the face of long-standing concerns over the conceptual framing of such work, and growing evidence that the villages cannot achieve all of the poverty-reduction goals they were created to address (see, for example, Cabral et al. 2006, Carr 2008, Clemens and Demombynes 2010, Wanjala and Muradian 2011).

The imagery of the Global South referenced by Bono and Sachs points to the very particular views of the world that undergird their technocratic claims. One of these is the revival of environmental determinism, the idea that physical geography shapes the behavior and culture to which individuals belong. This school of thought, popular in late nineteenth and early twentieth century geography, was discredited by the late 1930s as a form of scientific racism, in which studies informed by environmental determinism used the different environments of colonized regions as a means of making claims for the inferiority of the colonized, and therefore the necessity of colonialism. Since then, geography and its allied disciplines have sought to better understand the complex interplay of natural environment and the social world (a very partial list of such work includes Walker 2005, 2006, and 2007, Zimmerer 2007, Zimmerer and Bassett 2003, Durham 1976,
Steward 1977, Blakie and Brookfield 1987, Peet and Watts 1996, Forsyth 2004, Robbins 2004, McCarthy 2005). Without reference to this rich history of intellectual inquiry, Sachs revives a form of environmental determinism, most baldly in the assertion “Wealth and climate are inextricably linked” (Sachs et al. 2001). While his “environmental geography” has been dismissed within academia (Peet and Hartwick 2009, Kearns 2010, Judkins et al. 2008, Sluyter 2003), it has tremendous political utility, justifying continuing interventions on behalf of a helpless poor, such as in the claim that “The poorest countries in the world surely lack the resources to relieve their geographical burdens on their own” (Sachs et al. 2001).

As in the technocratic focus of his advocacy, Bono’s advocacy and lyrics are rife with the ideas and imagery of Sachs’ claims, and thus with long-repeated representations of health, well-being and humanitarian need in the Global South. In his commencement address to the University of Pennsylvania, he argued, “We can be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies.” At nearly the same time, on the single ‘Crumbs From Your Table’ from the 2004 album How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb, Bono sings “Where you live/should not decide/whether you live/or whether you die.” Again, just as with ‘Do they know it’s Christmas?’ and ‘We are the World’, art serves to link unfamiliar, distant others to the public through familiar representations that stir emotional connections that might not otherwise exist. A side effect of this effort, however, is the perpetuation of long-held views of “the developing” as helpless and trapped, awaiting rescue that justify more and better interventions on their behalf.
The model of celebrity-as-wonk, such as is embodied by Bono, raises significant challenges for development and humanitarian relief going forward. While there is little doubt that Bono’s activism is sincere and well-intentioned, the linking of art and activism to push particular prescriptions for solutions to global problems such as poverty appears to facilitate the simplification of complex problems to anthemic choruses, and the reduction of the very rapidly changing conditions of life among the global poor into long-standing tropes of ill-health and compromised well-being from which they must be rescued. In the face of this form of celebrity humanitarianism, it becomes difficult to critique the problems inherent in these prescriptions and representations, as critics (and indeed on-the-ground aid workers) lack the sold out arenas and access to the airwaves that artists like Bono can command, and therefore lack the access to policymakers that such artists can obtain.

**Conclusion: It’s not a Cause, It’s an Emergency**

While many see the emergence of artists such as Bono into the role of activist as a new phenomenon in the development arena, there are clear precedents for the role of celebrity humanitarian from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At that time, the celebrity activist was one whose legitimacy and expertise were based on direct experience with the issue or challenge at hand, and who could connect the public to distant others and motivate action by appeals of sentiment that led to interventionist solutions. The celebrity was empowered by his or her status as a knowing expert to offer policy prescriptions that generally rested on what came to be common crisis narratives for the Global South, a region represented as poor, sick, and helpless.
The apparent novelty of the late-twentieth century celebrity activism of musicians rests on the idea that their ability to serve as a conduit connecting their audiences to distant others, in spite of limited knowledge of the subject at hand, is entirely appropriate and legitimate. In a sense, the very quality of the musician activist as an ingénue makes him or her into a more credible vehicle for sentimental education. Each of these interventions detailed herein has, first, appealed to the emotion of the Western audience, forming a sense of common humanity and the obligation to do something:

Seven thousand Africans dying every day of preventable, treatable disease like AIDS? That’s not a cause, that’s an emergency. And when the disease gets out of control because most of the population live on less than one dollar a day? That’s not a cause, that’s an emergency. And when resentment builds because of unfair trade rules and the burden of unfair debt, that are debts by the way that keep Africans poor? That’s not a cause, that’s an emergency (Hewson 2004).

Here, Bono articulates the poor African to his Western audience by evoking sympathy and emphasizing contrast. The difference is no less than an emergency, and the solution to reducing poverty by eliminating debt is one that comes directly through the actions of the West. As we have argued throughout this chapter, there is a structural link between the raising of consciousness by celebrity activism and the path of action to be followed, a path reliant on Western intervention in the form of education, tutelage, and provision. Smeathman claimed that all that was needed was for the African to learn better modes of productivity and industry. Crowther emphasized the need for Africans to adopt the emancipatory tools of Christianity in order to escape slavery. To combat the horrors of forced labor and violence in King Leopold’s Congo Free State, the Congo Reform
Association called not for the end of occupation, but for a more enlightened form of colonialism under the control of the Belgian government. Geldof mistakenly framed famine in Ethiopia as an issue of Western stinginess, encouraging more and better distribution of goods and food and inadvertently supporting the rebellion.

Seen in this light, the emergence of Bono as an “aid wonk” in the twenty-first century presents us with a return to the celebrity activism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bono often travels to Africa, ostensibly studies development issues carefully, and thus attempts to draw his legitimacy not merely from his musically-derived celebrity, but also from his knowledge of the issues. At the same time, Bono is unusual in that his activism has bled into his art, creating a convergence of the two. The motivations for activism and the motivations behind art are not necessarily well aligned. It is in the spurring of emotion, and the potential conversion of that emotion into action, that the artist shares something with the activist. Yet, the conversion of emotion into action in these cases fail to address the complex challenges that face the global poor, failing at the libratory aims and instead repeating tropes calling upon the West to save the rest. Can the narrative of emergency be squared with the need for careful analysis? As Bono says, the solutions are already known. This turns complicated questions with many competing constituents into questions of will. Little of value can be built on such unstable ground.
References


