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Better (Red)TM than Dead? Celebrities, consumption and international aid

LISA ANN RICHEY & STEFANO PONTE

ABSTRACT Bono's launch of Product (RED)TM at Davos in 2006 opens a new frontier for development aid. With the engagement of companies such as American Express, Converse, Gap and Emporio Armani, and now Hallmark, Dell and Microsoft, consumers can help HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. Aid celebrities—Bono, Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Farmer—guarantee the 'cool quotient', the management and the target of this new modality of aid. RED functions using the guarantee of celebrity together with the negotiated representation of a distant 'Africa' to meet competing, and perhaps incommensurable, objectives. A 'rock man's burden'—imagined along familiar constructions of sex, gender, race and place—frames African beneficiaries' receiving process. At the same time, RED depicts consumer-citizens as fashion-conscious yet actively engaged and ethically reflexive. RED rescues international aid from its dour predictive graphs and disappointing 'lessons learnt' and spins it as young, chic and possible. By masking the social and environmental relations of trade and production that underpin poverty, inequality and disease, RED reconfigures the world of possibility in what might otherwise be rationally impossible ways.

Bono's launch of Product (RED)TM at Davos in 2006 opens a new frontier for development aid. Product RED is 'a brand created to raise awareness and money for The Global Fund by teaming up with iconic brands to produce RED-branded products'.¹ Consumption, trade and aid wed dying Africans with designer goods. With the engagement of American Express, Apple, Converse, Gap, Emporio Armani, Motorola, and now Hallmark, Dell and Microsoft, consumers can help HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. They can do so simply by shopping, as a percentage of profits from Product RED lines goes to support The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Aid celebrities—Bono, Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Farmer—guarantee the 'cool quotient', the management and the target of this new modality of aid. Linked

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to commerce, not philanthropy, Product RED reconfigures international development around aid celebrities and consumer-citizens united to do good by dressing well.

Since its introduction at Davos in 2006, RED products have been made widely available in the UK and the USA (where it was launched on the Oprah Winfrey Show). Some RED products have been released in Japan, Switzerland, France, Canada and Singapore. RED has already received extensive media attention, including promotions on CNN's Larry King Live, two RED issues of the Independent (edited by Bono and Giorgio Armani), Trafalgar Square's (MOTO) RED SQUARE concert featuring the Scissor Sisters, and a massive \$25 million marketing campaign by Gap. This campaign included stars photographed by Annie Leibowitz and wrapping Chicago's three-story Michigan Avenue Gap store in RED vinyl. The 5 August 2006 issue of the internationally prestigious medical journal the *Lancet* was a co-branded product: (*The Lancet*)^{RED} contained advertisements for RED products and contributed \$30 000 'in support of this important project'.² From Emporio Armani RED watches to a RED iPodTM and from a MOTORAZRTM RED phone to a (RED) GAP sundress, a percentage of the profits from the sale of all RED-branded products is contributed by the 'iconic' partners directly to The Global Fund. RED grants are made through the Fund's standard disbursement processes and have been dedicated to the Fund's best-performing programmes for AIDS in Africa—so far funds have gone to Rwanda, Swaziland and Ghana.

Product RED is a quintessential concoction of current understandings of 'best practice' in corporate strategy, aid delivery and trade. In relation to corporate strategies, it promotes the concept that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is good for societies, environments and for business. Over a decade of civil society action against corporations' labour practices, environmental mismanagement, predatory extraction of natural resources, high prices for medical treatment against HIV/AIDS and unfair trade practices has pushed the agenda of CSR. Often corporate responses have been reactive, rather than proactive. In contrast, Product RED proactively seeks to engage businesses in its version of CSR that marries co-branding and help for Africa. The fact that such successful brands participate in this exercise implies for others that it meets their financial, social and environmental objectives (the so-called 'triple bottom line').³ Also Product RED's architecture takes its inspiration from the currently favoured form of corporate organisation—the 'network' company—which is flexible, organized by projects, lean and generally better able to plug into several different networks.⁴

In relation to aid delivery mechanisms, Product RED fits the sought after model of delivering aid efficiently and with a lean and flexible structure. It is a private initiative providing funds to a public-private fund. Product RED is an initiative that is not burdened by additional bureaucracy. All the elements are present already: the Global Fund, which prides itself in having overhead costs of only 3%; DATA (debt, AIDS, trade, Africa), Bono's own 'lean' organisation from which Product RED springs; and the flexible, lean and compassionate corporations that produce the fashionable goods (or rather,

market them). The Global Fund notes explicitly that ‘the agreements with RED and its partner companies do not add significant administrative work for The Global Fund or its recipients, ensuring that the funds raised go to where they are needed most’.⁵ Finally, Product RED fits a newly consolidated paradigm that both aid and trade are central to development. Far removed from the old days of leftist tirades against trade (aid, not trade) and the opposing neoliberal stance against aid (trade, not aid), the ‘consensual’ 2000s have marked the rise of the ‘trade and aid’ mantra.

Product RED provides a new mechanism for development finance that weds business with help, consumers with celebrities and doctors with rockers. The RED genesis story as popularised through mass media coverage depicts RED as the creative fruit resulting from many seasons of labour by the aid celebrity extraordinaire, Bono.⁶ RED is described as the outcome of Bono’s having thought that his ideas for helping the poor needed to be marketed in a less ‘misty-eyed, bleeding-heart way’.⁷ Bono clarified this at the RED launch: ‘Philanthropy is like hippy music, holding hands. Red is more like punk rock, hip hop, this should feel like hard commerce.’⁸ And, in fact, ‘the real surprise is that Bono turns out to be a card-carrying capitalist. He wants companies selling RED products to make a profit by helping the poor—doing well by doing good.’⁹ In the words of the American Express RED launch representative, it is ‘conscientious commerce’—good for business, good for all.

Product RED seeks to bring ‘Africa’ to the minds of the idle rich, thus providing an opportunity for them to ‘help’. In July 2007 Bono guest-edited a special issue of the magazine *Vanity Fair*—the purpose of which was to ‘rebrand Africa’. Given the legacy of slavery and colonialism and the history of extraction of resources and supply of armaments to the continent, it is difficult to imagine a time when the rich have not been interested in Africa. Assuming that Africa is far from the minds, lives and income-sources of the rich readers of *Vanity Fair* contributes to the myth that there is no real linkage between the rich and the poor, between the entrepreneurs and Africa, or between capitalism and disease.

While acknowledging that any initiative with such hype and crass consumerism would struggle to gain credibility as a legitimate contribution to international aid, our article demonstrates that Product RED should be given serious analysis as a manifestation of 1) the impact of aid celebrities on policy making; 2) the legitimacy of consumers as citizens; and 3) the construction of Africans with AIDS as worthy recipients of profits generated from heroic shopping.

In this article we do not seek to adjudicate the ‘success’ of the RED initiative, nor to compare RED as a modality of aid with other types of existing interventions.¹⁰ Our investigation will show how Product RED functions using the guarantee of celebrity together with the negotiated representation of a distant ‘Africa’ to meet competing, and perhaps incommensurable, objectives. We will show how Product RED reconfigures the modalities of international aid around compassionate consumption through the guarantee by aid celebrities to save Africans with AIDS. RED unapologetically promotes status, capitalism and conspicuous consumption

in the name of 'helping' While this may seem far removed from conventional aid interventions, we argue that RED may be as much reflexive realism as crass hypocrisy. A close examination of Product RED will demonstrate how relations of inequality are inherent in donor–recipient exchanges. Negotiating the terms of giving speaks as much about the donors—or, in this case, the consumers—who give, as about the needy Africans with AIDS, who receive. Product RED relies on the mutual coexistence of proximity and distance, or empathy and separation, between the shopper/helpers and the producer/sufferers.

In the next section we discuss the context of RED as development aid to Africa, channelled through a public–private institution—The Global Fund. Then we introduce the 'aid celebrities' who are the critical functionaries performing the totemic work of mediating between consumers and their beneficiaries. The following section describes the construction of the RED recipients, in which the 'rock man's burden' frames the 'problem' along familiar constructions of sex, gender, race and place. After this we highlight how Product RED depicts its consumer-citizens as fashion-conscious but yet actively engaged and reflexive. But by prioritising disease over the social and environmental relations of trade and production, Product RED effectively fetishises the commodities sold under its umbrella. We argue that, by marrying consumption of iconic brands and aid through celebrities, it makes consumption 'compassionate' and 'conspicuous' at the same time. Finally, we elaborate some conclusions on Product RED as a new modality of international aid and its implications for linking shopping and helping with representations of global giving and receiving.

Aid to Africa, AIDS and the Global Fund

Product RED provides a new modality for international development assistance to fight AIDS in Africa. Yet, while it looks very chic and contemporary, it is simply joining a larger bandwagon of donors who want to fight disease to achieve 'development'. Aid to deal with AIDS in Africa is currently in vogue because it fits comfortably under declared intentions of global change, it is a pet aid project of the current US administration, it can be done 'efficiently' and it provides a straightforward entry-point for linking business and donors.

International development assistance has always been linked to donor countries' need to give aid in particular ways and to concerns that the funds given are used as intended. The current basis for all development assistance rests under the three pillars of the 'Monterrey Consensus':¹¹ country ownership, a comprehensive and long-term approach, and partnership.¹² This framework is meant to direct aid towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by 189 states. Included among these goals is to 'halt and begin to reverse the spread of AIDS by 2015' and also to 'provide, in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries'.¹³ International trade agreements have been revised in order to enable increased access to generic AIDS drugs, but these have had limited impact.¹⁴

Foreign aid to the world's poorest countries, most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa, has been mired in controversy since its inception. Over the past three decades rich countries' levels of foreign aid as a share of their GDP have plummeted.¹⁵ Yet AIDS-related aid in Africa thrives. In spite of the comparably low proportion of its money given to development assistance,¹⁶ and of a reluctance to use foreign policy as social work,¹⁷ the USA embraced aid to Africa under President George W Bush, with a \$15 billion African AIDS initiative as its flagship.

Donor initiatives make up 68% of all funds, public and private, spent on AIDS in developing countries as calculated for 2005: this is far higher than the 8% share agreed upon in Cairo in 1994.¹⁸ HIV/AIDS accounts for almost all development assistance for control of sexually transmitted diseases.¹⁹ Activists and the many affected by HIV/AIDS would argue that this is a reasonable response to the disease-burden of AIDS. Nevertheless, AIDS receives far more dollars per disability-adjusted life years than any other cause.²⁰ Why? Effective advocacy, the fear factor that if not controlled in developing countries, AIDS could have a greater impact in rich countries, and a well publicised 'efficiency' argument are some of the answers.

Former US Senator Jesse Helms notoriously disparaged aid to poor regions such as Africa as 'throwing money down a rathole'.²¹ Yet, in spite of such perceptions, when the then US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill returned from his tour of Africa in 2002, he declared that more money would be given to poor countries, but that this money must be used with more efficiency than in the past. De Janvry and Sadoulet (2004) argue that the 'efficiency condition' can be met in international aid in two ways: either through limiting aid to those countries which follow good economic policies, or through funding 'good programmes' whether or not they are in the context of 'good policies'.²² The latter, easier option has been embraced by donors and includes the creation of a semi-autonomous distribution mechanism that allows programmes to be set up even where policies are weak. These social funds are neither state, business nor civil society but can be a mix of any of these in varying proportions.

Product RED's profits go to one of the most well known social funds—The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, an independent, private foundation governed by an international board that works in partnership with governments. The Global Fund is strictly a funding and not an implementing agency. In spite of the publicity given to social funds as new modalities, they are financed mostly by the traditional sources of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA): donor-country governments as represented in the Development Assistance Committee and, to a lesser extent, multilateral institutions like the World Bank.²³ Yet Product RED gives the impression that the work that it funds to combat AIDS is innovative, outside of the usual bureaucratic mire of development aid, and reliant on individuals.

However, the point, we argue, lies not in the effectiveness of Product RED as a funding modality, but in its innovative characterisation of the relations of consumption and donation. This is essentially mediated by celebrities.

Celebrities

Celebrity activism for worthy causes has been taking place for decades. International development experts associated with celebrity activists have become 'aid celebrities' themselves. They embody a new positive, 'win-win' approach to solving poverty and disease. After more than three decades of defeatism in development, aid celebrities are the new totems of possibility.

Prominent celebrity activism has been taking place since the 1960s. As shown by Huddart, a first wave, inspired by Dr Martin Luther King, took place within the US civil rights movement.²⁴ A second wave coalesced around the anti-(Vietnam) war movement and opposition to the draft in the USA, when the first 'benefit concerts' took place. A third wave followed from the 1970s, where activism aimed at responding to global concerns.²⁵ But perhaps the most important events that marked the growth of celebrity activism were Bob Geldof's recording of 'Do They Know It's Christmas' billed as 'Band Aid' in 1984 and the related 'Live Aid' concerts of 1985. An estimated two billion people watched the concerts, and the telethon raised almost \$150 million, the largest ever at that time. Geldof's use of sponsorship at Band Aid made it possible to minimise costs and maximise the amount of donations to the cause: linking business profits with charitable fundraising set the stage for Product RED. Furthermore, 'Live Aid's use of highly emotional televised images to stimulate donations... changed the face of international fundraising'.²⁶ Now we are saturated with these images, so much that we do not need to refer to them, they are always out there in the collective subconscious. This allows Bono and Product RED to focus on cool, sexy branding rather than on poverty, inequality and disease. Although sponsorship had become accepted practice after Band Aid and Live Aid, with Product RED the marriage of consumption and social causes has become one and indivisible.²⁷

Aid celebrities are not only important because they underpin Product RED. A trinity of aid celebrities (Bono, Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Farmer) is also behind the establishment of The Global Fund, the main beneficiary of RED. The influence of this trinity over the agenda of aid for AIDS is unrivalled. It was actually Sachs who started The Global Fund. Sachs describes Bono as an 'enthusiastic supporter', noting how 'none but the incomparable Bono has opened the eyes of millions of fans and citizens to the shared struggle for global equality and justice'.²⁸ However, 'one more piece was missing':²⁹ it was still believed that AIDS treatment was impossible to implement in poor countries. As told by Sachs, 'my colleague Paul Farmer put those arguments to rest for me and, in some ways, for the world'.³⁰ Sachs, Farmer and two other colleagues from Harvard prepared the Consensus Statement by Members of the Harvard Faculty to show that treatment was possible and scale-up could be practical in poor countries.³¹ On the basis of Sachs' advice, the UN Secretary-General announced at the Abuja Summit on AIDS in April 2001 his support for the creation of The Global Fund. This was followed in subsequent months by support from US President Bush, the UN General Assembly and the G8 leaders—and thus The Global Fund was born.

The bard: guarantor of cool

Only Bono, the quintessential ambassador, could have started Product RED. He is compelled to reconcile the 'divides that separate Northern Ireland from the Irish republic, rich from poor, Catholic from Protestant, Democrat from Republican, aggressor from victim, Christian from Muslim'.³² Now he has reconciled corporations and inequity, branding and disease.

Bono's engagement in political activism dates at least to the early 1990s.³³ His letters to newspapers, public challenge to Tony Blair and meetings with world leaders are thought to have had a direct impact on the debt cancellations that the G7 offered in 1999 and on the US contribution to the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative. More recently Bono joined the campaign urging pharmaceutical companies to lower their prices for anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment for AIDS. He was photographed with GW Bush in Monterey in 2002, when the president announced that the USA was to increase its foreign aid budget to \$5 billion between 2004 and 2006 in what was termed a Compact for Global Development. Later in 2002 Bono and the then US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill took a 10-day tour of Africa, also known as 'The Odd Couple Tour of Africa 2002'.

Bono played a key role in the 2005 Live 8 series of concerts organised by Bob Geldof to put pressure on G8 leaders meeting in Gleneagles. According to the Live 8 promoters, 'the G8 leaders have it within their power to alter history . . . Live 8 is calling for people across the world to unite in one call—in 2005 it is your voice we are after, not your money.'³⁴ Interestingly Bono's Product RED turns this statement on its head, implicitly suggesting that 'we are after your money, not your voice'. Product RED is about individual consumption, not about public engagement in activism or advocacy. It is a private commitment showcased by wearing RED products in public, with Bono guaranteeing the cool quotient.

The teacher: guarantor of efficiency

Jeffrey Sachs is the economist behind many of the initiatives to cancel debt and 'eradicate poverty' that have emerged in the past decade. Sachs has not only piled up an impressive number of high-pedigree positions in the development arena, but is also a true global celebrity. He was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine in 2004 and 2005. He was deemed 'most important economist in the world' by the *New York Times Magazine* and 'the world's best-known economist' by *Time* magazine. The status he has achieved as a 'progressive' economist is even more striking, considering that in the late 1980s and early 1990s Sachs spent most of his time advising Eastern European and former Soviet Republics on 'shock therapy', a series of economic reforms that were meant to help former communist regimes find the path of capitalism painfully but quickly. Generally, in the 1980s, Sachs was part of the wave of economists who criss-crossed the world to advise developing and transition country governments on structural adjustment and market liberalisation.

Then, in the mid-to-late 1990s, Sachs went through a populist transformation, repackaging himself as a progressive economist. He became interested in the macroeconomics of public health and went back to his early career interest in debt reduction and restructuring, now modified into debt cancellation. He also became more interested in Africa. He collaborated with Ann Pettifor in raising the public profile of the Jubilee 2000 debt cancellation campaign. He began accompanying Bono on many occasions—both of them embodying the image of relatively young, successful professionals carrying the torch of ‘soft capitalism’ and Western values. Both men, on separate occasions, met Pope John Paul II—Sachs did it twice. Yet many of the poor and diseased Africans Sachs is now trying to save became so at least partly as a result of the reforms he advocated in the 1980s—public sector retrenchments, roll-backs from the provision of public goods and services, and the elimination of parastatal entities which controlled commodity trade and exports and used to cushion farmers from commodity price shocks.

The healer: guarantor of the solution

When Bono claimed at the November 2005 *Time* Global Health Summit that ‘a world without malaria or TB is no longer unthinkable’,³⁵ the reference was to Paul Farmer. Physician and medical anthropologist, he has shown by example that ARV treatment can revive patients suffering from the late stages of AIDS, even in the poorest circumstances. He is an accomplished scholar and a clinical physician with dual practices in the USA and Haiti. Farmer began his life’s work while still a medical student at Harvard, when he set up a community-based healthcare delivery system on the central plateau of Haiti, the poorest country in the West. To support this, in 1987 he founded a Boston-based charity called ‘Partners in Health’, which supported the work of the Haitian centre *Zammi Lasante*. He began with a one-building clinic. ‘Today, the well-equipped facility, with its operating rooms, blood bank, satellite communications, laptops, and other components of modern medicine, is a global model for delivering public-health services’.³⁶ Farmer’s tactic of ‘social medicine’ includes providing lifesaving medicines and surgical care together with clean water, food, housing, education and social services. In 2005 Partners in Health received the world’s largest humanitarian award, the \$1.5 million Hilton Prize, for their multifaceted and unconventional approach to aid. Farmer’s work in Haiti was a pivotal factor in the country’s selection as the first in the world to receive money from The Global Fund.

Farmer’s books link his medical and moral missions with an important political message of ‘putting the poor first’.³⁷ He has become the first ‘global doctor’, known through the anecdotes and photographs of his Haitian community members, his work substantiated by science, effectiveness and efficiency.³⁸ While Farmer’s moral tone and ascetic lifestyle (carbon footprint notwithstanding) do not at first glance seem compatible with the flashy, ‘bling’ image of Product RED, such an approach would have been impossible without his revolutionary work on the potential of AIDS treatment, embodied

in his own totemic role as the healer. Farmer guarantees that more money can do something to solve the problem of AIDS in poor countries.

Summary

More than simply exercising their networking capabilities, aid celebrities act as emotional sovereigns, in the classical republican sense where the sovereign manifests the true will of 'the people'. Bono, Sachs and Farmer are called upon to speak truth to public health. Their field experiences are recounted as narrative devices in various and dissimilar publications. For example, a recent World Bank working paper authored by a team of macroeconomists outlines a monitoring model for the MDGs.³⁹ As a text it is characterised by decimals, Greek letter coefficients and tables of regression results. Yet the introduction consists of a lengthy quotation from Bono's interview with a popular US news programme, NBC's 'Meet the Press'. The celebrity totem says the things that the economists cannot—'it is the most extraordinary thing to watch people dying three in a bed, two on top and one underneath, as I have seen in Lilongwe, Malawi'.⁴⁰

Sanitised sensationalism is intended to link the arduous work of constructing quantified targets for monitoring each goal of the MDGs with the 'avoidable catastrophe' of human suffering. The same story is told in slightly different words in the first chapter of Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty*. What is important about this vignette is not its description of an African clinic mired in poverty, but that it is repeated like a mantra by aid celebrities. Collectively the three celebrities totemically embody the 'good' and have their life stories to guarantee for that. After more than three decades of development pessimism burdening the conscience of left-leaning development enthusiasts and 'ethical' consumers, and with the increasing need for 'meaning' among mainstream brand consumers, totemic aid celebrities merge disparate longings into a new modality for resolving the disparity between rich and poor, well and diseased.

The rock man's burden: sex, gender, race and place

Product RED promises resolution to myriad historical conflicts about the possibilities of being a 'donor', and of confining the most intrinsic problems of development within a geographical demarcation that can be kept separate from the Western self. AIDS provides the quintessential cause as the outlet for RED's hard commerce approach to doing good, because—like fashion, rock music, or celebrity—it is about money, power and sex.

While modern philanthropists have morphed into postmodern consumers, the stationary supporting cast is dragged back onto the development stage to justify this newest version of assistance, the 'rock man's burden'. That Product RED's beneficiaries are African is not coincidental, as re-imagining Africa is part of the RED vision. Mbembe has argued that the real and the imaginary are interwoven in the category of 'Africa'.⁴¹ Ferguson takes this further by suggesting that 'Africa' has a particular place in 'globalisation'—a

'place' understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories.⁴² The 'forcefully imposed position in the contemporary world—is easily visible if we notice how fantasies of a categorical "Africa" (normally, "Sub-Saharan" or "black" Africa) and "real" political-economic processes on the continent are interrelated'.⁴³ Africa seems the obvious 'place' where RED money could buy pills to save women and children with AIDS, and where the constructions of donor and recipient would not be challenged, as Africa's 'place' in the hierarchy of development is well established.

Global HIV/AIDS has been described as an 'epidemic of signification',⁴⁴ in which the representations of the disease are intrinsically related to the ways in which the disease is perceived and managed at all levels. Within global AIDS Africa remains a 'dark zone'⁴⁵ —'a dark, untamed continent from which devastating viruses emerge to threaten the West'.⁴⁶ Photographic images play a particular and significant role in representations of AIDS in Africa, serving as 'visual quotations'.⁴⁷ In an analysis of photographic representations of African AIDS, Bleiker and Kay argue that 'at a time when we are saturated with information stemming from multiple media sources, images are well suited to capture issues in succinct and mesmerizing ways'.⁴⁸ From Live Aid onwards the dominant images of African AIDS have been those of suffering, more likely to generate pity than compassion, portraying Africans as victims with no agency set in circumstances that are far removed from the Western lifestyle.⁴⁹

Product RED completely avoids humanitarian imagery of death and suffering, and presents its RED products and promoters with the same glitz, glam and fashion-magazine gloss as any other luxury goods. As described in the *Sunday Times*, 'the sex appeal of RED' comes from stars like Scarlett Johansson, 'the sizzling face of Bono's new ethical brand'.⁵⁰ While a first reading suggests that the messages promoted by RED are not only unrealistic, but in total contradiction to the 'Abstain, Be Faithful or use Condoms' (ABC) approach to African sex, a closer examination suggests that RED may be offering sexual alternatives, for those who can afford them. Individuals are encouraged to express their sexuality, their attractiveness and their desire through consumer choices, not through intimate actions. 'And that's what RED is all about, the knowledge that desire—the desire to shop—and virtue—the wish to see the world a better place—are not always contradictory'.⁵¹

Product RED is about helping the poor and curing global problems, but it is also about redeeming sex and stylising gender relations. The defining characteristic of HIV/AIDS in Africa is that it is a sexually transmitted disease. Much of the mythology surrounding African AIDS has been based on stereotypical neocolonial depictions of the sexual savage.⁵² Representations and images of AIDS in the West have never before been cloaked in Armani glasses, but they have functioned similarly in representing African culture as hypersexualised. This time there is an implicit contrast with the sexualisation of Western consumption. 'If we as a society continue to desire a "face of AIDS," it will not be to show that we are basically the same but, rather, to show that those who are already projected as deviants do not live here'.⁵³

While the racialisation of sexuality long pre-dates the contemporary AIDS initiatives,⁵⁴ RED takes a new twist in which sexuality is being reclaimed by

the West as healthy. Bono provides the healthy and sexy body to contrast with the 'African woman dying from sex' body. In the role of the totemic celebrity, he redeems sex, while reclaiming masculinity, and restoring a social hierarchy where cool, rich, white men save poor, voiceless African women and children. All of this is managed within a discourse of concern, care and ethics. Bono states, 'I represent a lot of [African] people who have no voice at all... They haven't asked me to represent them. It's clearly cheeky but I hope they're glad I do.'⁵⁵ The complex scripts of race, gender and global economic inequality are ignored with justifications that 'AIDS is an emergency' and thus normal rules do not apply. At the same time the 'normality' of consumption, and the social and environmental relations of trade and production that underpin poverty, inequality and disease, are not questioned.

Mi(RED) in commodity fetishism: consumption and international aid

The material and cultural aspects of consumption, the role and limitations of consumer activism, and consumption politics have been the focus of a large body of literature over the past two decades, with the classic critiques of conspicuous consumption dating back to the early 20th century.⁵⁶ Rather than providing a detailed review of the large consumption literature here,⁵⁷ we briefly highlight some broad tendencies and focus on how commodity fetishism, via celebrity mediation, successfully marries consumption and international aid.

Characterisations of consumers in the literature vary according to how much power is placed on consumer agency and how material or symbolic the act of consumption is thought to be. In very simplified terms both rational choice models based on *homo economicus* and much of the contemporary cultural/symbolic approaches to consumption see consumers as empowered and dominant actors. The Frankfurt school of sociology,⁵⁸ and political economy/regulation approaches,⁵⁹ have portrayed consumers as dominated—either through subtle manipulation or sheer retail and advertising power. Extreme postmodern positions have moved beyond the issue of agency and see consumption as entirely symbolic.⁶⁰

Condemnatory accounts of consumption still abound in the literature—from critiques of commodity culture as 'debasing',⁶¹ and of consumerism as the 'economics of deception',⁶² to accounts of the so-called processes of McDonaldisation⁶³ and Disneyisation. But much of the recent consumption literature has underlined the reflexivity and multiple identities of consumers,⁶⁴ the complexity of acts of consumption, consumer politics, and consumer agency,⁶⁵ and the tensions between consumption and citizenship.⁶⁶

Product RED plays well in the subtle relation between consumption and citizenship that characterises 'stakeholder capitalism'.⁶⁷ In stakeholder capitalism, rather than relying on the state or the market, consumer rights are exercised through consumer organisations. These rights are exercised not only to obtain 'value for money', but also to demand social and environmental change. Action takes place via engagement of the consumer organisation with the state and corporations, and (increasingly) via

individual acts of ‘conscious consumption’—backed up by systems of certification, labelling and codes of conduct.⁶⁸ In this operating environment consumer-citizens are portrayed as ever more informed, reflexive, active, (sometimes) socially and environmentally conscious, and able to make a difference with their purchasing power.⁶⁹ This is a far cry from the duped and victimised consumer depictions of the past. Furthermore, in stakeholder capitalism, while consumer agency may take the form of collective action through campaigns and consumer organisations’ pressure, the act of consumption remains irrevocably individualistic. Depictions of Product RED consumers as fashion-conscious yet actively engaged, reflexive, able to personally customise their purchases, and therefore inspi(RED) are part and parcel of this trend.

We neither seek to glorify nor to vilify consumption here. We do not seek to describe how much power consumers have, or how reflexive they are. We observe the processes of enrolment that celebrities perform in linking consumption to aid in combating AIDS in Africa, and reflect on the implications of placing priority on disease over the social and environmental relations that underpin the production and trade of the goods that are sold under the Product RED umbrella. Indeed, Product RED sees trade and investment in low-wage countries with poor environmental and labour regulation (and enforcement) in very peculiar ways:

In addition to its contribution to the Global Fund, Gap is making an even deeper level of investment in Africa by producing some of its products there. The (Gap) RED T-shirt, for example, was produced entirely in Lesotho—a small country in sub-Saharan Africa in which 25–30 percent of young women are HIV-positive. A woman working in a Lesotho garment factory that produces Gap products becomes part of a cycle of hope... She works for an employer that offers her services and support and access to HIV testing and treatment. And she’s making a product that’s being sold around the world, the profits from which will be invested back into her country.⁷⁰

Labour conditions, the environmental impact of production, and the real or threatened mobility of the location of production all disappear in the ‘cycle of hope’. It is almost as if Gap was in Lesotho to do women affected by HIV/AIDS a favour. This is the same Gap that (along with Nike, parent company of Converse) was the scourge of international labour activism in the 1990s for the practices of its manufacturing contractors in the developing world. Similarly, Motorola downplays the coltan controversy linking mobile phone production with African conflict in Eastern Congo and environmental devastation, and instead states that ‘our support of The Global Fund is one way that we’re able to give back to the region.’⁷¹ Thus, Product RED, in its positive spin, masks the social and environmental relations of trade and production that underpin poverty, inequality and disease. This process, also known as ‘commodity fetishism’ (the term was first used by Marx), is not new *per se* in capitalist relations. What is new in the context of Product RED is its employment by celebrities in connecting consumption and aid.

Commodity fetishism describes ‘the necessary masking of social relations under which commodities are produced from which capitalist commodity production gains much of its legitimacy’.⁷² In contemporary debates on trade and development issues, the concept of commodity fetishism is used to distinguish between what is hidden and what is communicated about the composition of products and their origins.⁷³ According to these accounts, transparency in trade suffers when there are discontinuities in the distribution of knowledge and creations of mythologies.⁷⁴ Some contributions also highlight, to an extent counter-intuitively, the fact that transparency may also suffer when information on commodity production and circulation is embedded in standardised and externally verified labels and certifications, such as organic, ‘child-labour free’ and ‘sustainable’. The label may become a global, superficial substitute for local, in-depth knowledge of the commodity and of its producers.⁷⁵

For ‘sustainable’ products (eg fair trade coffee, Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) wood products and Rainforest Alliance bananas) transparent information about the processes that lie behind the products is communicated by the label. Consumers and trade operators are supplied with much more information on the ‘where, when, how, and whys’ of the product, production processes and conditions of exchange. This is intended to ‘lift the veil’ of commodity fetishism by ensuring transparency and traceability. However, critics claim that the increasing codification of social and environmental concerns through these standards, codes of conduct and labels actually results in a ‘double fetishism’—the masking of social relations of production combined with the commoditisation of the knowledge about the commodity itself.⁷⁶

Product RED’s reliance on the celebrity is fundamentally different from the current spate of certifications, labels and codes of conduct that characterise ‘ethical and sustainable’ trade. It is contradictory to the ‘audit culture’ that underpins these processes⁷⁷ and which seeks ‘impersonal’ and systemic solutions to problems of quality, food safety, environmental impact and social conditions of production.⁷⁸ Product RED, backed by iconic brands, is based on ‘celebrity validation’, which is based on personal capacity. This allows Product RED to both achieve commodity fetishism and to use aid celebrities as a totem. Product RED is fetishist in the sense that it embeds information about the ‘quality’ of the product in the most powerful instrument of codification—branding—without actually releasing significant information on the trade and production relations that are behind these products. Bono explicitly stated at the Product RED launch that labour issues are of secondary importance to people dying from AIDS: ‘We do not think that trade is bad. We are for labour issues. Labour issues are very serious but six and a half thousand Africans dying is more serious.’⁷⁹ At the same time Bono is the totem of ‘compassionate consumption’, steering away attention from the causes of poverty, such as the inequities of systems of production and trade, by focusing on one of the outcomes, HIV/AIDS. The beauty of this celebrity simplification is that it provides the possibility that everyday people can engage in low-cost heroism.

Better (RED)TM than dead?

'In the 21st century, commerce is the catalyst of change, good and bad. Marketing people, marketing brilliance, marketing budgets; we wanted to work with them. We wanted to make the fight against HIV/AIDS sexy and smart.'⁸⁰ If the focus is on solutions—and if one sets aside corporations' profit-maximizing objectives, the negative externalities of their production processes, and their short-term perspective—then corporations can be seen as efficient and effective problem solvers. Successful businesses are also good at stimulating consumption. The cultural insecurity of Western consumers *vis à vis* their own standing among their peers paves the way for compassionate consumption as a vector for empowering them within an imagined global community of the needy. If consumption cannot address exploitation and inequality, at least it can do something about tackling disease.

Product RED, as a co-branding exercise involving Apple, American Express, Converse, Dell, Emporio Armani, Gap, Hallmark, Motorola and Microsoft, focuses on compassionate consumption for financing aid. Aid celebrities, in their personal capacity, guarantee its management, the seriousness of the target, the feasibility of the solution and its cool quotient. It has positive spin wrapped all around, and gives the impression that corporations can be major contributors to development aid without suggesting that they pay a larger portion of their profits in taxes. Product RED, a lean network solution to aid financing, takes funds from consumption—not taxation. It is an individual effort, the result of consumer power—not of collective/public will. It can also be tailored to individual significations,⁸¹ and co-produced with consumer feedback through blogging⁸² and focus groups. Product RED brings together AIDS activists and businesspeople, rockers and doctors, but its relations to the producers, unless they are Africans smitten by a deadly disease, remain opaque.

'Shameless exploitation in pursuit of the common good', the slogan of 'Newman's Own' company, might apply to Product RED as well.⁸³ But can one benefit from and challenge exploitative relations at the same time? The representative from American Express who launched the RED card at Davos noted: 'It starts with building a profitable and sustainable product for the consumer, and ultimately that's where our success will lie.'⁸⁴ Clearly commercial success will not be lying three in a bed as in the ubiquitous description of the sufferers in the AIDS clinic in Malawi. Product RED's silence about the social relations of production and exchange that are behind the products it endorses helps shift the focus away from the causes of poverty and disease and towards 'solving' their manifestations. In this context Bono claims that RED is 'reaching parts that traditional activism cannot... It takes lobbyists, activists, *and* consumers to make a social movement of the kind we're trying to catalyze.'⁸⁵

Product RED has created imagery of The Global Fund as being substantially funded by private consumers. Between February 2006 and December 2007, RED raised \$50 million, eight times more than The Fund received from companies and individuals between 2002 and 2006, but far less

than the largest non-governmental contribution of \$650 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It is also less than 0.6% of the \$8.9 billion contributions given to The Fund by governments.⁸⁶ The Global Fund officially ‘warmly welcomes this important new initiative from the private sector’ but the actual percentage of funding it expects from the private sector is minimal. The Global Fund’s statement continues: ‘Through RED and other initiatives, the Global Fund hopes to increase the private sector share of Global Fund income from *less than one percent* currently to ten percent or more in the long term.’⁸⁷ Thus, Product RED, together with all the other private sector initiatives, is slated to amount eventually (and perhaps) to 10% of the total financial needs of The Global Fund.

Pre-1989 critiques of capitalism from the left were occasionally countered from the right with the catchy proposition of ‘Better Dead than Red’. Thereafter much of the critical argumentation on capitalism has been focused on how to soften its rough edges, rather than on how to get beyond it as a system. In this context ‘Better (RED)TM than Dead’ captures the spirit of a moderate project of ‘soft capitalism’. Through Product RED branding something can be done about poverty and against deadly disease without undermining the basic cultural or economic structures of the capitalist system. Consumers can become part of the movement, together with activists and lobbyists—with the implication of politically equal footing.

In this article we have argued that Product RED rescues international development assistance from its dour predictive graphs and disappointing ‘lessons learnt’ and spins it as young, chic and possible. HIV/AIDS in Africa is epitomised as the problem to be solved and The Global Fund is the mechanism in place that can do the job, if enough money is made available. Aid celebrity totems Bono, Sachs and Farmer mediate the relations between the RED cotton t-shirt made in Africa and the ‘women at risk’ from HIV/AIDS who make that shirt. The totemic value of Product RED is that it reconfigures the world of possibility in what might otherwise be rationally impossible ways.

The urgency of consumption is an anti-horizon concept: instead of constantly receding into the future, it is re-imagined as emergent and reiteratively re-presenting the present, the ‘now’. The logic of consumer society is asserting itself in the context of aid: the main duty of citizens in this society is to consume, not to produce or defend the country as in the past. The ideal citizen-consumer is never satisfied. To succeed, consumption must be insatiable. That this translates into notions of ‘sustainable funding’ to combat HIV/AIDS, a disease of global excess, is more than ironic.

Whether Product RED is the precursor of a new generalised mechanism of development financing or simply a parallel option for engaging those who otherwise would not normally engage with aid—those who care but sublimate—will depend on the usual predictor of development success: sufficient and sustainable financing. So far Product RED looks sufficiently different from ‘development business as usual’. Its ‘hard commerce’ sex appeal approach may engage individuals from previously untapped constituencies to finance The Global Fund’s work against HIV/AIDS but, in

doing so, it will perpetuate the disengagement of 'needy' recipients in order for us to become benefactors with bling.

Notes

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- 24 S Huddart, 'Do we need another hero? Understanding celebrities' roles in advancing social causes', mimeo, McGill University, Montreal, 2005.
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- 29 *Ibid.*, p 205.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, p 206.
- 32 Huddart, 'Do we need another hero?', p 54. See also Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*.
- 33 Huddart, 'Do we need another hero?', pp 52–53.
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- 81 The RED homepage includes a section where readers can submit their own videos on 'What does RED mean to me?' in the hope of being featured in a 'video wall' of people, including celebrities, talking about what AIDS is. See <http://www.joinred.com/you.asp>. Also Converse allows people to 'create your own' Converse (Product) RED shoes. See <http://www.converse.com/index.asp?bhcp=1#>.

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