Consumption and Campaigning

Political Mobilisation for Africa and Purchase Politics

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the ways in which Africa campaigns in Britain have interconnected with notions of consumption. It does so in order to tease out an aspect of Africa's representation which relates to the themes of privatisation and commoditisation. The argument is twofold: (i) That, although recently there is a sense that campaigning and popular attitudes towards Africa have become increasingly privatised, we should be careful about assigning a complete novelty to the present. In historical context, privatised relations between Europe and Africa constitute one thread in a broader global political economy of capitalism. (ii) Evaluating the 'high privatisation' of the present-day is not straightforward: although there are some prominent critical points related to the privatisation of African development issues, there are also some possibilities to 'see' Africa in ways that escape the imperialist traditions that have beset Africa's representation in Britain. These two arguments raise a deeper, and less comfortable question: what should we expect from Africa campaigns in Britain and Europe more broadly?

This paper's interest is the representation of Africa in Britain. This remit is extremely broad and covers myriad cultural forms. What all of these forms of representation have in common – and what is crucial to any understanding of Africa's representation – is that they are *mediated*. That is, they are not – and cannot be – 'true' representations of Africa (or a facet of African social life). They are not presentations but *re*presentations; their mediation is performed by various British agencie: media, curation, artistry, research, mission, or campaign.

It is campaigning that we are interested in here. Africa campaigning is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, Africa campaigns

have generated the most widespread and culturally familiar representations of Africa. Abolition, Live Aid, Oxfam, Make Poverty History and so on have generated a powerful series of representations of Africa which I think can be seen collectively as a campaign tradition that has profoundly shaped British views of Africa. Secondly, in contrast to literature or the museum, campaign representation wears its politics on its sleeve. Campaigns necessarily frame Africa as an *issue*, articulating notions of a problem, a solution, and a normative framework. Thirdly, campaigns intrinsically aspire to communicate, engage, and motivate as many people as possible. This means that they aim to speak in global terms – about Africa as a whole, about Britain as a nation, about intervention, about grand aspirations to abolish debt, slavery, poverty and so on. This makes campaigns very much an integral part of the 'development architecture' that has emerged since the end of the Second World War.

CAMPAIGNING AND THE CONSUMER REPUBLIC

Britain's political modernity emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. In the fifty years or so from the late 1700s, the franchise slowly expanded, the mass media emerged, industrial capitalism asserted itself, and British society became a society of mass consumption. This was a period in which mass advertising became a *lingua franca* of public spaces; a time during which consumer goods were infused with semiotics of quality, luxury, and imperial grandeur.

Africa campaigning was an integral part of this transition. The abolitionist movement became a fully-fledged national issue that percolated into the aesthetics of the household, literature, hustings, pamphleteering, art, and the church. And, abolitionism was centrally a consumer campaign.

Abolitionism generated a morality of consumption that was unprecedented. This was the 'slave sugar' boycott. It inverted prevailing consumer ideals in which Britain's global power was expressed through its gastronomic reach: to drink the tea of China, to smoke the tobacco of southern Africa, and the sugar of the New World. Contrastingly, abolitionists rendered sugar metonymically: as the blood, sweat, and tears of plantation slaves. *In extremis*, slave sugar was represented corporeally: eating sugar became an act of cannibalism. The boycott conflated the image of bodily pollution and the evils of the plantation through the association of sugar and blood.[1]

Thus, abolitionism generated a novel consumer sensibility: one in which purchases were morally laden and discretionary. One in which the consuming of goods instantiated complex links between Britons and distant others. Abolitionism contributed to the progressive aestheticisation of consumption but in ways that challenged prevailing imperial norms. It generated debates about consumption – between the so-called saccharites and anti-saccharites – which politicised the choices people made in the high street.

Relatedly, abolitionism also provided an equally historically prominent exemplar of positive or affirmative consumption: the Wedgewood cameo of a kneeling slave under the logo 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?'. Purchasing this cameo was an act of *identification*: a publicising of one's morals and politics. The cameo itself was manufactured as a brooch, hatpin, snuff box, and pendant. Wedgwood lost proprietorial control of the image which was manufactured in other guises (and more cheaply) outside of his Stoke factories and high-end London shop. For some historians, the Wedgwood cameo is one of the earliest brands.

[1] The strength of this metonym has endured: consider the Africa campaign to boycott and restrict the trade in 'blood diamonds'.

The argument here is that the first Africa campaign in Britain contributed pivotally to the creation of Britain's modern consumer republic. It established two enduring aspects of consumer politics: the boycott and the morally-infused brand. These two sumptuary forms of agency – one a refusal and one an assertion, a boycott and a buycott – have pervaded subsequent campaigns regarding Africa and indeed broader campaigns.

This is not an argument that there is nothing novel about the present-day; indeed, we will map out some of these novelties a little later. But, it is to argue that Africa campaigns have reflected the broader construction of civil society and consumption's role therein that were integral parts of an expanding industrial and imperial capitalism in Britain. Africa campaigns were never oppositional to British capitalism. Indeed their popularity often reflected the extent to which campaigns might feed into broader social patterns within Britain's restless political economy of capitalist accumulation, especially the (partially) antagonistic notions of a national and competitive global power, and the liberal missionary sensibility to bring modernity to the rest of the world.

There is one other key campaign framing that we can note here by way of illustration and also in order to glean the proper context for the next part of the paper, and that is the missionary campaign. Abolitionism was not anti-imperial: almost no-one was arguing that Britain shouldn't invade, occupy, and subject peoples to its projects and ideologies. Indeed, abolitionism bequeathed a pro-colonial anti-slavery which saw Britain's colonial mission in Africa as part of a civilising project.

The colonial-civilisational campaign was not focussed in the same way as abolitionism was: it contained within it rivalries with other European nations, an evangelical and missionary Protestantism, a protean humanitarianism, a mercantilist marketing project (latterly embodied in the

Empire Marketing Board) and a racialised paternalism. The facet I want to highlight briefly is the rise of the missions from the mid 1800s.

Missions were not only the foot soldiers of Britain's increasing colonial ambitions; they were also mediators of Africa's image in Britain. Especially after portable photography and projection technology was established in the latter part of the nineteenth century, missionaries would bring imagery back from Africa to congregations. These images, articulated with sermonising discourses, made three cardinal points: firstly to represent Africa as a dark, heathen place (the image of the 'tribal' African); secondly to portray the mission as the means to save Africans through religious tuition and a rudimentary general education (the image of the modern but subordinate African); and to appeal for donations to promote proselytisation and the continuing of God's work (the image of the virtuous Briton).

Although it would be ill-advised to push the point too far for fear of becoming ahistorical,[2] it does seem to be the case that there are sinews of continuity between the missionary appeal, the colonial ideology and the invention of development in the 1950s: a representation of Africa as lacking, of Britain/Europe/the West as the proactive agency/catalyst of modernisation, and most relevantly for us the generation of a conflation of charitable appeals, developmental claims, and campaign issues that can be seen in one form or another in all of Britain's large development NGOs. Missionary talks would mention malnutrition and the provision of dietary advice to 'natives'; the importance of literacy; of the ethos of self-improvement and so on. Analogues of these kinds of desiderata can be found throughout representations of Africa campaigning.

[2] Something that 'postcolonial studies' in particular is prone to.

The point here is to note the close association between Africa campaigning and charity, established by missionaries and reproduced in very different forms through NGOs – especially since the mid 1980s when NGOs grew strikingly and became more proactive in their campaign activism.

The reason why this is relevant is because donations can be seen as acts of consumption: donations are a kind of spending albeit one not directly connected to a commodity. For rational choice economists, donations purchase the utility of well-being. And, increasingly, for NGOs, donations are won from consumers who are perceived as increasingly difficult to capture and who might just as easily spend their money on an iPod. This is not a fatuous example: the whole logic of (RED) is that people will spend money on iPods rather than charity, the latter seen as 'unsustainable'.[3]

In sum, the boycott, the affirmative purchase, and the donation have all been mainstreamed into British consumer culture through Africa campaigns and throughout Britain and Africa's turbulent experiences with an expanding global capitalism. This leaves us with an important question: how can we understand the novelty of the contemporary neoliberal political economy and Africa campaigning's role therein?

THE COMMODITISATION OF AFRICA CAMPAIGNS

So far, we have calibrated our understating of privatisation historically and in the context of Britain's interactions with Africa as part of a political economy of capitalism in which consumption is part of Britain's political modernity. There are a lot of historical high points in Africa campaigning

[3] Even though popular surveys and a general trend in private donations suggests strongly that actually donations-based development action is sustainable

that we have necessarily to skip over (Congo Reform Movement, Anti Apartheid Movement, J2000…) to consider the historic novelty of the present day. And, this requires us to get a clear sense of what we mean by the present. For my purposes, I am loosely considering the period that political economists often label as the age of neoliberalism. This is not a very precise concept, but it is familiar enough and it focuses us on a period from the early 1980s to the present, distinguished by a common sense of laissez-faire, global integration, and a faith in the private sector's ability to generate growth, stability, and some set of socially-just outcomes.

What do we mean by commoditisation, and how does it highlight the historically novel? I think that the way to explore these questions is not simply to note that campaigns – in the present largely enacted by campaign NGOs such as Oxfam and Christian Aid – have become more 'business like' since the mid 1980s when their revenue streams grew significantly.[4] Commoditisation here means something more profound: a shift in the ways campaigns address or 'see' the public and the ways that campaign organisations interact with other social agencies.

The argument here is that Africa campaigning has interacted with a broader transition towards a neoliberal culture of consumption. The coordinates of this culture are an increasingly reified notion of the individual consumer, the celebration of consumption as a social act, the rise of marketing and advertising, an occlusion of production and the social relations of production, financialisation and the expansion of consumer credit, and the infusion of images of globalisation into social life. These social trends have had a profound impact on campaign organisations and in turn campaign organisations have fed into and

[4] This happened more or less across the board after Live Aid/Band Aid and led larger NGOs to employ personnel from financial management, human resources and marketing in ways that changed the institutional culture.

enabled these trends. They give us a sense of historic novelty, even if it is difficult and probably foolhardy to draw too distinct a line between one period and another. And, these coordinates provide us with a critical compass: a sense of how we might evaluate the commoditisation of Africa campaigns.

Let us start by noting the key aspects of change that have taken place within Africa campaigning under neoliberalism.

1. Marketing. Campaigns have communicated their issues through increasingly commercialised forms of address. Personnel from marketing companies were brought into campaign NGOs in the 1980s, and subsequently larger campaigns and appeals have been contracted out to PR companies. As a result, campaign materials have come to resemble advertisements. Imagery and messaging has been simplified – often to a single picture and a 'strapline' phrase. Marketing companies see campaigns as products; their humanitarian and charitable features are seen as 'unique selling points'. NGOs are seen – and see themselves – as brands. As one marketing professional puts it: 'On the face of it, charities are brands as much as Guinness, Starbucks and Adidas.' (Griffiths 2005: 121) One brand marketing agency estimated Oxfam's brand value at £172 million in 2006.

2. Messaging. Campaign messaging has become broader and shallower – to capture as much of a market as possible. This is achieved through the resources invested in marketing and more concerted relations with the media (who might reduce fees for advertising space). But, the messaging itself has changed in ways that conform to a broader marketing grammar. Most striking is the deployment of irony and wordplay in messaging, and the aspirational feel of advertising. Another salient facet of messaging – although not one that is entirely novel – is the simple and close connection between issue and solution which commonly runs as follows:

perform a single easy act and make a big difference. In the 1970s and 1980s, the simple and direct message was reserved for famine relief advertising; in the present-day it also addresses itself to complex issues such as poverty, malnutrition, and HIV/AIDS.

3. Celebrity endorsement. Campaign organisations have mainstreamed celebrity endorsement into all campaign messaging. Larger NGOs have a dedicated celebrity relations member of staff, and NGOs draw upon celebrities for photos, sound-bites, and short films. Like branding, celebrities are chosen, briefed, and portrayed in ways that reflect the 'feel' that an NGO wishes to disseminate. In a sense, celebrities have become part of brand building exercises.

4. Campaign networking. Campaign NGOs have a distinct identity: they are non-for-profit, they don't provide commodities, and they are driven by a developmental and humanitarian agenda. But, their distinctiveness is attenuated by increasing integration with other public address agencies, especially companies and government. It is noteworthy that private companies have developed a range of Africa campaigns themselves – most prominently under the Product (RED) brand, but also through visible support for other campaigns. Orange produced a controversial cinema ad that tied in with Make Poverty History; a range of companies visibly endorsed and financially supported Live 8; Oxfam has developed 'tie-ins' with various companies such as M&S and eBay and so on; it also has its own branded credit card. This comingling has produced an epistemic shift within campaign circles towards celebrity and private philanthropy.

One could add to this list of trends in Africa campaigning, and a fully representative picture would need to note other influences and changes – not least the impact of the emergence of a global social justice movement. But we have here a good sense of how a neoliberal consumer culture has

affected Africa campaigns and also a sense of a historically novel trend. How might we evaluate this?

EVALUATING CONTEMPORARY AFRICA CAMPAIGNING

1. Commoditised campaigning tends to draw attention increasingly towards the act of consumption – as a purchase or a donation – and the agency or identity of the consumer and away from the complex and substantive issues of poverty, AIDS etc. The marketing logic is primarily focussed on the appeal to the consumer; the issues themselves are not absent, but they are conditioned on an effective market pitch. As a result, we can see a tendency to portray consumption as a magical act. That is, consumption is represented as creating large and remote effects; the connections between acts of purchase and their results is not delineated, but rather the 'heroic' aspects of consumption are emphasised as a kind of mystical vector for change. This was the premise of Make Poverty History: a series of consumer-like mobilisations which would end global poverty. Much of this focussed around the purchase of white wristbands. Other aspects of the campaign – notably the connections between debt, aid, and trade and mass poverty – were only minimally addressed by campaign NGOs and were not present at all in the PR company's mass advertising campaign.

2. The sense that I draw from large campaign imagery is that virtuous consumption can solve the problems of Africa. Africa's poverty and agency is residual to the mass appeal to the British consumer which is framed in ways that can be located between aspirational and narcissistic. One of the original suggestions for the Make Poverty History campaign coalition was

'Be GR8'. Make Poverty History itself emboldened the words 'make history'. Oxfam's 'I'm in' and 'Be Humankind' campaigns also appealed directly to an aspiration sense of personal value and empowerment.

3. These tendencies are enhanced by the increasing comingling between NGO campaigns and the ersatz campaigning of private companies. The best example here is (RED), which presents itself very much as a campaign although it is at heart a highly-branded advertising campaign. Other companies have evoked the discourse and imagery of campaigns in order to feed off the positive 'feel good' emotional relays of campaign ideals. The overall result is a public space, generated by advertising companies, in which NGOs and private companies evoke the same public sentiments – personal engagement, a feeling of progressiveness, cosmopolitan aspirations – to 'sell' their products. The issue that might underlie these advertisements is extremely weakly figured, and the connections between acts of consumption and effects is obscured. One can see the integration of campaign NGOs and other agencies in the construction of a kind of campaign epistemic community: the intercourse between campaign managers within NGOs, celebrities, certain politicians, and marketing professionals. This was very salient during the Make Poverty History campaign.

4. The increasing integration of NGO and privatised campaigning leaves NGOs with a less distinct institutional and political identity. It tends to set campaigning within short timeframes, and it tends to eviscerate campaigns of their 'contentious' politics – a key feature of movements for global social justice. Commoditised campaigning is not fighting against anything: campaigning tends positive-sum. It has little space for structural relations, and as a result it tends to simplify and trivialise phenomena like mass or chronic poverty: for example as amenable to being solved by 'Eight men in a room'. Seen in historical perspective, the most successful Africa campaigns have endured through many years and involved quite complex

engagements with issues, often explicitly political and antagonistic. Inasmuch as campaigning becomes commoditised, one would expect the 'movement' model of campaigning to weaken.

5. Again, relatedly, the networking of campaigning has led to a certain degree of capture by celebrity and philanthropy. The endorsement and blurring of campaigns as spectacles or grand gestures by the super-wealthy tends to associate wealth and virtue in a way that is problematic for any perspective than connects any of Africa's poverty-related issues with global inequality.

6. But, we should be cautious in condemning *tout court* the commoditisation of campaigning. In the first place, we are assessing a tendency, not a *fait accompli*. Many Africa campaigns continue to articulate longer-term and more complex goals – for example in regards to trade or biofuels. For many campaign staff, campaigning has become something of an institutionalised double standard in which campaign appeals to a mass public are purposefully simple and aspirational, following the marketing template in order to gather a simple discrete response from millions rather than tens of thousands. This consequentialist approach – the ends justifies the means – is perhaps an effective way of 'using' the public space – a (vague) sense of national virtue – for specific purposes such as a summit. Other campaigns for the 'engaged' can carry on with their lobbies, boycotts, and letter-writing. The question underlying this campaigning schism is: what can one reasonably expect campaigns to do? Is it the case that we expect campaigns to mobilise majorities of European publics to longer-term developmental causes in ways that appeal to them outside of the aesthetics of consumption?

4. Another point of nuance – and one that is more positive – is that the 'new media' that has been propounded by marketing and especially

marketing through the internet, has created possibilities for new forms of representation and campaign mobilisation. In my research, the major critical theme for Africa campaigning pretty much throughout the last 200 years has been the weak, abstract, or scatological imagery of Africa and Africans. African 'voice' in British Africa campaigning has been weak or even absent, apart from perhaps a sound-bite from Nelson Mandela or Desmond Tutu. More politicised campaign NGOs now have web clips taken by Africans in the NGO's project areas, and YouTube sites with speeches from African intellectuals. Website design has become very sophisticated, drawing visitors from striking imagery and phrasing into more information-rich case studies, human stories, and statistics.

CONCLUSION

How might one make sense of all of this? Seen in historical perspective, the recent commoditisation of campaigning seems to reflect the shifting social identity of the consumer, an identity that is wholly integrated into the cultural hegemony of capitalism. The problematics of representation, consumption, and Africa campaigning are all based in something broader and more obviously material: the modern inequalities that pervade Britain's interactions with Africa. The organisation of African development around the two metanorms of Africa's lack and Britain/Europe/the West's aid produce a backdrop against which campaign organisations will find it extremely difficult to escape the framing of Africa as a distant place that needs well-motivated Britons to spend money in order magically to solve historically-embedded problems.