

Celebrity Activism for Africa: a critical analysis

The need for a more critical perspective

The presence of celebrities in the political arena challenges the common misperception that the 'stars of popular culture' are about 'entertainment only' (Street, 2007). Africa has long been the popular subject of western celebrity activism, with this phenomenon most marked during the G8 summit and the Make Poverty History Campaign in 2005. The political engagement of celebrities has sparked controversy. For example, Elkus has equated celebrity activism with 'celebrity colonialism' (Elkus, 2007a). However, positive press has tended to dominate. Whilst celebrity activism can have clear benefits, the need to critically evaluate its negative impact has never been more pertinent. This is because the 'good' that has come as a result stands to be outweighed by the 'harm' (Monbiot, 2005a).

Bono and Geldof: the poster-children of celebrity activism for Africa

Despite the involvement of a whole host of western celebrities in this latest 'scramble for Africa', the conduct of their activism has varied greatly (Cooper, 2007b: 115). The focus of this inquiry shall be on Bono and Bob Geldof, the self-confessed 'Laurel and Hardy' of poverty reduction in Africa (Vallely, 2002). Since Band Aid in 1984, their names have become synonymous with celebrity activism for Africa (*Ibid*).

This paper shall analyse Bono and Geldof's activism in 2005, the 'year of Africa' as they were the focus of significant media coverage during this period (Franks, 2005). Although celebrities may have a role to play for Africa, (even the celebrity sceptic George Monbiot concedes that the musicians are 'genuinely committed to the cause of poverty reduction'

(Monbiot, 2005a), I will suggest that the discourse of celebrity activism is in need of revision. In this paper, the 'discourse of celebrity activism' refers to the agenda for action for Africa constructed and propagated by Bono and Geldof specifically.

The negative side of activism for Africa

First, I argue that the discourse of celebrity activism for Africa has served to contribute to the marginalisation, albeit unwitting, of Africans. This is due to how it frames them as passive actors in shaping their own futures (Hagos, 2000: 6). Furthermore, through the manner in which the discourse functions to uphold dominant western elite interests, it marginalises more radical means of addressing problems of Africa. As a result, Bono and Geldof are complicit in sustaining African dependency on the West (O'Neill 2005, Hume 2006).

The critical lesson that needs to be learnt from this analysis of celebrity activism is that the prevailing paternalistic approach to Africa must be replaced with listening to African voices and facilitating African agency over decisions affecting them (Samson, 2007). In this way, Bono and Geldof could help address Africa's problems in a constructive, as opposed to destructive, way.

In the remainder of this paper, the supposed benefits of celebrity activism are considered, followed by a detailed scrutiny of the role played by Bono and Geldof. In particular, I examine 1) how they, as individuals, have come to dominate the discourse on change for Africa, 2) the claim that they are 'representatives' of the poor in Africa, and 3) how they choose to function within the confines of the dominant western discourse of neo-liberalism, as opposed to pushing for radical 'structural transformation' of the political



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system (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2005: 1). I shall then propose a positive framework within which the celebrity duo might better operate.

The strengths of celebrity activism

'Celebrity Politics' has reinvigorated the traditional realm of parliamentary politics by inventing innovative strategies for addressing global poverty (Street, 2004: 436). For example, Andrew Cooper suggests that Bono's Product RED initiative involved the creative usage of entrepreneurship in order to fulfil charitable ends (Cooper, 2007b: 128). Moreover, using popular music for conveying a political message, the Live Aid and Live 8 concerts were instrumental in establishing an alternative blueprint for public awareness-raising on political issues. Cooper thus identifies a 'buzz' in the discourse of celebrity activism that is absent in the discourse of parliamentary politics (*ibid*).

Celebrity activism has also been a tool for political mobilisation on a mass and elite level (Cooper, 2007a: 7). Bono and Geldof's endorsement of the Make Poverty History March in Edinburgh played a significant role in mobilising vast numbers of the public, whilst helping to increase support for charities lobbying for the cause. For example, Save The Children's head of public affairs, Matt Phillips, noted a 'quadrupling' of volunteers willing to 'lobby for Africa' (Beckett, 2006).

On an elite level, Geldof's mobilisation of elite decision-makers was observable through his success in enlisting Gordon Brown's support for his Million Man March on Edinburgh. Indeed Brown even hailed it as the 'Long Walk to Justice' (Brown, in Cooper, 2007b: 62). Celebrity activism can thus be a conciliating force between political elites and the masses (Cooper, 2007a: 7).



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In the ever more globalised world in which politics takes place, there is a truism that 'nothing matters that doesn't have a camera pointed at it' (Bowman, 2006), and cameras were pointed at the Live 8 and Make Poverty History campaigns championed by Bono and Geldof. John Ornan therefore contends that in a media-dominated environment, celebrities are valuable tools since they are 'adept at attracting press attention' (Ornan, in Turner, 2004: 133). Moreover, this press attention has been central in keeping the problem of global poverty on the political agenda (Monbiot, 2005a). Whilst these strengths of celebrity activism are significant, its negative impact has been of greater consequence.

Style over substance

Graeme Turner emphasises that the contemporary celebrity is a 'commodity' that has been manufactured by the media industry, whose principal purpose is 'commercial' and 'promotional' (Turner, 2004: 9). As a result of this 'inauthenticity', the subsequent value afforded to the discourse of celebrity activism for Africa is diminished (*Ibid*: 5.).

Thus instead of the public focussing on the important issues implicated in the discourse, there is a preoccupation with the 'image' of the celebrity *per se*. Given the extensive press coverage that Bono and Geldof elicit, the media play a significant role in reinforcing this tendency. This was apparent through how the musicians dominated the headlines in the aftermath of the 2005 G8 Summit (O'Neill, 2007):

'Bono's fight against AIDS and poverty' (Chideya, 2005)

'Geldof, Bono praise G8 for Africa Aid' (MSNBC, 2007)

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In the first instance, Bono is accredited with the role of leader in the 'fight against AIDS and poverty', thus framing him as the exclusive instigator of change. Consequently, the vast range of non-celebrity players involved in combating AIDS and poverty are neglected. Most importantly, the efforts of African grassroots campaigners are marginalized from the discourse, and instead a distorted picture is painted.

Through its focus on Bono and Geldof's judgment on the G8 Summit, the latter headline elevates their verdicts whilst neglecting reactions that were more critical to it. In both examples, how the stars are mentioned at the start of the headline in order to give them utmost prominence is further indicative of the media's fixation with celebrity (Marshall, 1997: x).

The detrimental effect of this, however, is that the scope for detailed policy debate on Africa's problems is marginalized as the 'immediate palatability' of the image of the celebrity takes precedence (Drake and Higgins, in Holmes and Redmond, 2006: 89). This tendency is best expressed by Andrew Simms' judgement on the impact of celebrity activism, through his experience working for Christian Aid - 'it's almost always the case that the celebrity becomes the story rather than shedding light on the story' (Simms, in Cooper, 2007b: 65).

Geldof's one-man show

The British media has hailed Geldof as 'Saint Bob' and 'Mr Africa' (Cooper, 2007: 63). Yet despite expressing that he feels 'uncomfortable' with such titles, he consciously conforms to this image through the language that he employs when speaking on Africa (*Ibid*).



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'I persuaded the prime minister to analyse the economic decline of Africa for the 21st century and to come up with an achievable political and economic plan to stop it' (Geldof, 2005).

Geldof employs the first person personal pronoun 'I' alongside the 'prime minister', the latter evoking strong connotations of power. The implications of this juxtaposition are twofold. First, by placing himself on an equal footing with the British prime minister, the extent of Geldof's influence, owing to his celebrity status, can be detected.

Charles Wright Mills commented that the increasing influence of celebrities was such that they constituted a new 'power elite' (Mills, 1956, in Drake and Higgins, 2006: 87). However, within the discourse of this 'power elite', the efforts of Africans, the African Diaspora and other grassroots campaigners in putting Africa on the political agenda are subjugated (Ligali, 2005: 5). This is because Geldof's status as a western celebrity allows him a wide 'scope of activity and agency' that is withheld from his African counterparts (Street, 2004: 437). The implicit message, therefore, is that Africans are viewed as 'subservient, passive and helpless' in the discourse of celebrity activism (Ligali, 2005: 5). This notion effectively serves to reproduce the colonial binaries of the 'active' coloniser, represented by Geldof and its 'passive' objects, thus strengthening Elkus' claim of 'celebrity colonialism' (Hume, 2006).

Geldof has further been accused of exploiting his celebrity influence by acting unilaterally on occasions. Firoze Manji, co-director of the African social justice group Fahumu claims that a network of African NGOs had strategically orchestrated an awareness-raising concert to be held in July 2005 in one of the townships of Johannesburg (Hodkinson, 2005). The principal aims were to enable mass attendance, particularly of the most

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underprivileged citizens, and to empower local people (*Ibid*). This grassroots initiative, however, was over-ridden by Geldof's staging of a Live 8 concert in Johannesburg, which instead attracted only a narrow range of attendees (*Ibid*). Nonetheless, Geldof ensured that it was '*his* voice, *his* agenda and *his* vision of Africa' that was heard above all others (Pambazuka, 2005). Koki Mawuli Klu of the Forum of African Human Rights Defenders has thus condemned Geldof for overtly 'usurping the place of Africans' (Cooper, 2007b: 65). The discourse of celebrity activism therefore served to displace valuable African voices, as Geldof's own ideas became the dominant focus. As one of the key organisers of the Live 8 concert in London, Geldof has provoked similar criticism for his near total exclusion of African artists (BBC News 24, 2005a).

A concert for Africa, without Africans

Many were quick to notice the marked absence of African artists at the main Live 8 concert in London's Hyde Park in July 2005. Remarkably, only one ethnic minority performer featured on the 'Anglo-centric' line-up of the concert (Cooper, 2007b: 96). In justifying this absence of African artists, Geldof made the following claim: 'It was not a concert; it was a political device. It was not about music, it was about poverty' (Geldof, 2005).

Geldof's claim that the concert was a 'political device' remains unsubstantiated. This is due to how African voices were marginalized, even though the Live 8 concerts were intended to be part of an 'agenda specifically focussed on Africa' (Ligali, 2005: 6).

Thus, Ligali (a Pan-African non-profit organisation) contend that if the concert was genuinely intended to be a 'political event aimed at empowering Africa', African artists as 'spokespersons' of the African people would have been involved on an equal basis with western ones (*Ibid*: 33).



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Nonetheless, for Geldof the 'marketability' of the artists took precedence to this political objective, since he defended the Live 8 line-up along the practical assertion that 'African acts do not sell many records' (Geldof, 2005). The harmful consequence of this, however, was that the 'message' behind the concert was not about Africans acting themselves to combat poverty, but about presenting wealthy western celebrities as heroic and 'helpful' to the cause (Ligali, 2005: 5). Had the concert genuinely been a 'political device' for poverty reduction in Africa, commercial considerations would not have taken precedence over political ones.

This evokes a Frankfurt school critique of celebrities as icons of popular culture. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno concluded that 'mass culture functions to promote the ideological deception that real human needs are fulfilled by the consumption of culture reduced to entertainment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, in Simons, 2003: 171). Geldof was complicit in sustaining this 'deception' through overstating the political significance of Live 8 as an anti-poverty device.

In reality, the concert amounted to little else than a re-run of the model of 'white celebrities saving the black world' established by the 1984 Live Aid concerts (Franks, 2005: 134). This formula, whereby western celebrities are venerated as 'messiah figures' rescuing vulnerable and dependent Africans highlights the main flaw of with the discourse of celebrity activism for Africa (Elkus, 2007b); the notion of 'saving Africa without Africans' (Zimbabwe Standard, in Cooper, 2007b 101). This notion is also observable in Bono's claims of 'representing' Africa.

Bono, voice of the poor

'I represent a lot of people [in Africa] who have no voice at all...they haven't asked me to represent them. It's cheeky but I hope they're glad I do' (Bono, in O'Neill, 2007).

Bono's claim of 'representing' the African people is somewhat arrogant. Mike Samson of the charity African Initiatives highlights how there is a fundamental contradiction between the symbol of the western celebrity and who it claims to represent - the supposedly 'voiceless' Africans (Samson, 2007). The crux of Samson's argument is that the western celebrity represents 'the contradictions between poverty and its major causes of over-consumption, economic inequality and climate change' (*Ibid*). Bono's representative claim is thus unfounded and potentially damaging since it undermines the need for African self-representation (O'Neill, 2007).

Bono legitimates his claim to represent the African people by announcing without hesitation that they 'have no voice at all' (Bono, in O'Neill, 2007). Contrary to what Bono believes, however, it is not that Africans are in actual fact 'voiceless', but rather that African voices are unheard because celebrities like himself dominate the discursive space Africa (Elkus, 2007b). Through insisting on acting *for* the African people, Bono in effect entrenches this marginalisation of African voices (Graves, 1998).

Moreover, as a consequence of Bono speaking in place of African voices, it is regrettably the case that authentic African voices are 'structurally written out of the bourgeois narrative' on Africa (Kilburn, 1996). Somewhat paradoxically, Bono's very act of attempting to represent Africans has the result of suppressing their own voices, and instead privileging his own. Therefore, for many Africans, this is more than just 'cheeky' of Bono.

Experts on Africa

Bono's claim to 'represent' Africans extends further through presenting himself as somewhat of an expert on African issues. For example, in an interview where he attempted to justify the level of attention that he and Geldof receive in both the media and the political sphere, Bono insisted that 'we know what we're talking about and we're very well-versed in these issues' (NPR, 2007). Geldof went further to declare how his knowledge on African issues has reached such heights that it now 'bores' him 'profoundly' (Studemann, 2005).

Whilst these celebrities complacently flaunt the discursive space that they enjoy within the debate on Africa, knowledgeable African voices are unduly 'silenced' (Ligali, 2005). Instead, the 'eurocentric perspective' conveyed by western celebrities is propagated (*Ibid*). Geldof is aware that 'Africans in Britain would rather speak for themselves' (Geldof, in Ligali 2005: 20). Nonetheless he continues to exploit his greater discursive power as a celebrity to make only his own voice heard (Marshall, 1997: x). Accordingly, Elkus comments on how Bono and Geldof assume the roles of modern types of 'missionaries', determined to rid Africa of its troubles (Elkus, 2007a).

Evident from this is how celebrity activism is grounded on the paternalistic premise that celebrities 'know best', and thus Africans are subjected to an enforced type of dependency on these 'self-appointed politicians' (O'Neill, 2005). For many campaigners, this kind of 'missionary posturing by a capitalist, non-African boys club' is simply unacceptable (Ligali, 2005: 42). Hence, they have sought a departure from this tendency towards the empowerment of Africans (Samson, 2007).



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The co-option of a radical agenda for Africa

Lobbying before the G8 Summit, NGO's such as Ligali were demanding that leaders 'dismantle the disempowering capitalist policies impoverishing innocent people in Africa', (Ligali, 2005: 17). Such organisations thus advocate a full 'structural transformation' of the existing political system, grounded upon reform of the major International Financial Institutions and Trade Justice (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2005: 1).

The discourse of celebrity activism, however, operates counter to this objective by setting its agenda within the already established framework of neo-liberalism (Elkus, 2007a). A key illustration of this is Geldof's espousal of Aid and its associated conditionalities as the 'solution' to the problem of African poverty. For example, in supporting conditionalities attached to Aid contributions, Geldof declared: 'You have to lay down the conditions, otherwise you have no counter to the argument that without them, the Africans would just blow the fucking money' (Vallely, 2002).

Geldof's support for the conditionalities attached to Aid by the 'unholy trinity of the World Bank, IMF and the World Trade Organisation', is condemned by supporters of the social justice movement (Jagger, 2005). They cite these policies of 'enforced liberalisation and privatisation' as standing in the way of actually 'Making Poverty History' in Africa (Jagger, 2005). Whilst bolstering western economies, these conditionalities not only marginalize Africa's control over its domestic economies, but they further reinforce economic dependency on the West (Daley, 2007). Thus in promoting such policies, the discourse of celebrity activism perpetuates 'core-periphery' relations as expressed by Dependency Theory (Robertson, 1993: 133). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that some NGO's have expressed concerns about their radical agendas for Africa being 'hi-jacked'

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by the discourse of celebrity activism, since it appears simply to reiterate the prevailing thinking of western governments (Street, 2007).

This idea was further supported by Geldof and Bono's comments on the achievements of the G8 Summit. Geldof boldly stated that 'a great justice has been done...on aid, ten out of ten, on debt, eight out of ten; ...Mission accomplished frankly' (Geldof, in Monbiot, 2005b).

Bono further echoed these sentiments when he declared how 'the world spoke and the politicians listened' (Hodkinson, 2005). Not everybody, however, was so generous with their praise. Demba Moussa Dembele, economist for the African Forum on Alternatives, warned that 'people should not be fooled by the celebrities, Africa got nothing' (Dembele, in Hodkinson, 2005). A closer analysis of the G8 proposals reveals that they were 'part of a broader international consensus' and merely reaffirmed measures previously endorsed by the British government (Ben-Ami, 2005). In light of this, Bono and Geldof's emotive rhetoric amounted to little more than a 'parroting of the governments own proposals' (*Ibid*). The effect of celebrity activism in this instance, was that it 'left campaigners with an uphill struggle' in pursuing a more ambitious agenda for change (Hodkinson, 2005). Bono's involvement in the 'Product RED' campaign has also been criticised along similar lines.

Naomi Klein remarks how 'the Bono-isation' of activism has relegated the debate on Aids and poverty reduction on Africa to a 'much safer terrain' (Klein, in Delaney, 2007); in the case of Product RED, addressing Aids and poverty reduction in Africa through consumerism (*Ibid*). Through this initiative, a proportion of the profits from sales of 'RED' brand products are channelled towards projects working to help reduce Aids in Africa (Cooper, 2007b: 125). Whilst appearing groundbreaking, the RED campaign disguises two crucial factors producing poverty in Africa; first, that it is largely a



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consequence of over-consumption in the west, and second, that it stems from the current 'unregulated free market' (Walker, 2006). In fact, the Product RED initiative hinders meaningful poverty reduction through its strategic failure to focus on the reality that 'the market is the problem, not the solution' to poverty reduction in Africa (Walker, 2006). Despite these realities, Product RED illustrates how celebrity activism ultimately functions to preserve unreservedly the 'late capitalist society' of which contemporary celebrities are a 'direct product' (Marshall, in Holmes and Redmond, 2006: 87), even if this obstructs poverty reduction in Africa. Whilst the social justice movement strives to confront the unjust economic framework that fuels poverty, the discourse of celebrity activism instead strengthens it (Delaney, 2007). Bono's message is clear - 'business as usual'.

Pally with power

Among people and organisations campaigning on Africa, there is a widespread consensus that leaders of western nations have played a significant role in exacerbating African poverty (Daley, 2007). For example, Ligali emphasise how western leaders have intensified poverty through means such as 'economic and political sanctions, military force and corporate finance enabled corruption' (Ligali, 2005: 12).

In light of this, many activists have an antagonistic relationship with those in political power (Jagger, 2005). The most concerning feature of celebrity activism therefore, is its total absence of any challenge to established power (Monbiot, 2005a). It has used its agenda-setting power to instead ensure that any critique of political power is excluded from the discourse of celebrity activism (Lukes, 1974: 21). Bono and Geldof's unprecedented praise for both Blair and Bush's policies towards Africa has demonstrated this tendency. Bono has declared that 'Bush deserves a place in history' for

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his policies towards Africa (Jagger, 2005), and Geldof has dubbed Blair as having been 'brave' and 'radical' in his policies (Vallely, 2002). Veiled by such statements, however, is how the US remains the lowest contributor of aid to Africa in the western world (Jagger, 2005). Similarly, when in office, Blair and the British government were prominent in encouraging public services in Africa to privatise, despite its resultant increase in poverty in many African countries (Jagger, 2005). Bono and Geldof's public endorsement of these political actors, however, implicitly legitimises the very abuse of political power that grassroots campaigners strive to contain (Monbiot, 2005a). Bono's approach of exploiting photo opportunities with elite political leaders has also been criticised for the relationship with power that it suggests. The following image is illustrative of these criticisms.

[Image taken by Paul Morse, 2006]



Bono's physical intimacy with the US President Bush indicates his readiness to engage with political elites (Cooper, 2007b: 38). Bono claims that such an approach is favourable to the anti-poverty campaign, since it targets powerful decision-makers (*Ibid*). Nonetheless, a consequence of this is that he symbolically 'lends legitimacy to power' (Monbiot, 2005a). For example, Bono's hand gesture has the effect of conferring his 'seal of approval' for Bush, thus overlooking the harmful policies towards Africa passed by the US.

Also problematic is how the 'insider' approach to power that Bono pursues contradicts the approach taken by many other activists (Cooper, 2007b: 42). As I have discussed, western political leaders like Bush are considered by



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global justice campaigners as being the 'enemies' of poverty reduction in Africa (Jagger, 2005), due to how their neo-liberal policies have aggravated Africa's economic difficulties (Monbiot, 2005a).

Nevertheless, through collaborating with these figures, Bono appears to validate their actions. A further consequence of Bono's close alliances with political elites is that it stands in direct opposition to 'more confrontational and engaged forms of activism' promoted by activists such as Naomi Klein (Klein, in Delaney, 2007).

In the image above, Bono physically distances himself from this type of direct action, instead assuming the role of a more conventional 'diplomat' (Cooper, 2007b: 39). With just cause, therefore, Monbiot protests that Bono appears to be 'working for the other side' (Monbiot, 2005b).

Despite its claim of representing a qualitatively new agenda for Africa, it is more likely, therefore, that the discourse of celebrity activism has 'embraced and been embraced by the state elite' (Cooper, 2007a: 4). It is, in reality no more than a reproduction of the mainstream political discourse on Africa, albeit through the more compelling medium of the celebrity. The discourse of celebrity activism thus serves not as a tool, but as a further obstacle for grassroots campaigners (Monbiot, 2005a).

Celebrity activism reassessed

In this analysis, three principal flaws in the discourse of celebrity activism for Africa have emerged, which stand to negate its successes if not addressed. First, it has been illustrated how vital attention can be diverted away from African issues, as the image of the celebrity itself dominates in the media (Drake and Higgins, in Holmes and Sean, 2006: 89). This problem can be addressed through celebrities like Bono and Geldof taking on a less

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predominant role in the debate on Africa. Instead they could act as 'force-multipliers', using their power to strengthen existing activist infrastructure (Elkus, 2007b). A useful measure would be for celebrities to forge partnerships with African organisations, or those more qualified to pronounce on African issues, and instead redirect media attention that they rouse as celebrities to 'give *them* the TV time and headlines' (Bishop, 2008). Don Cheadle's alliance with John Prendergast in order to raise awareness of the Darfur genocide is an example of this idea in practice (Cooper, 2007b: 118). Elkus explains how Cheadle as a celebrity 'draws the cameras', whilst Prendergast, with his knowledge on African issues (through his work with the International Crisis Group) offers his ideas (Elkus, 2007b).

The representative claims made by the discourse of celebrity activism constitute a further weakness. Through claiming to 'represent' Africans, Bono and Geldof propagate a 'flawed form of agency' (Cooper, 2007b: 114). This is because the very idea of celebrities as representatives of African people suggests that solutions to African questions 'lie in the hands of celebrities', and not in African communities themselves (Bishop, 2008). A positive step here would be for Bono and Geldof to exploit the public space that they occupy in order to 'introduce the public to Africans who can then speak in their own voices' (Elkus, 2007b). In this way, the discourse of celebrity activism would cease to construct Africans as victims, and instead present them as active agents in addressing African problems (Samson, 2007).

Finally, it has been revealed how the discourse of celebrity activism can be counter-active to organisations pursuing a radical agenda for Africa, through its endorsement of harmful policies and power structures (Monbiot, 2005b). It is clear, therefore, that Bono and Geldof need to engage in stronger analysis of what underlies African poverty (Jagger, 2005).

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In the meantime, rather than spending their time commending politicians and exploiting photo opportunities, Bono and Geldof could involve themselves in the more onerous and 'unpopular' task of lobbying with grassroots activists to demand the structural reform of institutions and policies that exacerbate poverty in Africa (Elkus, 2007a).

At the root of the problems with the discourse of celebrity activism, however, is the need for a fundamental shift in paradigm; away from the idea of activism 'for' Africa, towards that of activism 'with' Africa.

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