

THE 'MORAL EMPIRE': AFRICA, GLOBALISATION AND THE POLITICS OF CONSCIENCE

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Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists? Well, it's because we, for as long as we have known you, were capital.

Jamaica Kincaid¹

1. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, New York, GP Putnam, 1989, p37.

In February 2004, less than a year after the invasion of Iraq by British and US forces commenced, Tony Blair launched the Commission for Africa, with 17 members from Africa, Europe and North America. All were apparently working in their 'individual and personal capacities', though most were, in fact, either high-profile politicians or captains of the private sector in Africa. The publication of the Commission's report, entitled *Our Common Interest: An Argument*, in March 2005, coincided with 'Africa 05', a cultural festival lasting several months, led by the British Museum, the Arts Council England and the South Bank centre with several partners, including the BBC.² At the same time, the Make Poverty History campaign - a coalition of several non-profit organisations and charities spearheaded by Oxfam - stepped on to a global stage with Nelson Mandela addressing a huge rally in Trafalgar Square urging leaders of the G8 to recognise that the 'world is hungry for action, not words'. The media was saturated with cover stories, reportage, and programmes on Africa, including a high-profile television series on the BBC which was based on Bob Geldof's whistle-stop tour of parts of the African continent and was narrated by the musician-turned-humanitarian activist. As Iraq reeled into disastrous mayhem, narratives of Africa were proffered as the cultural and political mainstay of the year 2005.

2. Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest: An Argument*, Penguin, 2005. Further references to this text will be given in the body of my essay.

In the raft of cultural texts, policy documents and political declarations that have emerged in the wake of these initiatives and Africa '05 more generally, certain discursive shifts are worth noting. The first is an invocation of 'common' or 'shared' interest which holds that an amelioration of poverty in Africa and elsewhere benefits humanity as a whole (in contrast, for instance, to an earlier rhetoric of 'enlightened self-interest'). Second, and even more notable, is a cautious acknowledgement that the reduction of poverty is an issue of 'justice' rather than 'charity'. And finally, albeit in fragmented and weakly articulated ways, emerges the understanding that politics and economics are not separate entities and that human agency, beyond the abstraction of market forces, must be deployed to effect any change in the situation. Nominal or notional though some of these shifts may seem, there is much about them that is salutary. They are to be read as responses to the global activism and grassroots organising of the last decade which have

3. Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, New York, Norton, [2002], 2003
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, New York, Penguin, 2004.

strenuously interrogated the premises of corporate 'globalisation' as an economic programme. Commentators as diverse as the former World Bank economist Joseph Stiglitz and scholars Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have remarked on the impact that protests in Porto Alegre, Seattle, Davos and elsewhere have had in forcing large transnational institutions such as the IMF and the World Economic Forum to modify policy and practice.³ Meanwhile, campaigns such as the Make Poverty History attempt to transform criticism of corporate globalisation into effective action through political lobbying but more controversially, also seek to work *with* and *within* dominant political and economic institutions. Given the present political conjuncture, this is a move that has implications beyond the pragmatism argued for and intended by its advocates. Coming from Tony Blair, initiatives such as the Africa Commission and Blair's attempt to associate his government with the Make Poverty History campaign, also have a determinate role to play in attempting to seal (off) the fractures and fractiousness created by the unpopular invasion of Iraq by calling for political unity and moral resolution in fighting poverty (elsewhere, of course). Indeed, the famous 'scar on the world's conscience' around which we must rally is categorically *not* Iraq but Africa, in relation to which there can be historical and imaginative distance and so, little sense of direct culpability. Conscience, yes, but responsibility, no.

The role of moral touchstone during crises of European conscience is not a new one for Africa. The late nineteenth-century, when various European powers carved up large swathes of the globe into either colonial dominions or so-called spheres of influence, also saw the emergence of humanitarian movements with international dimensions which in turn had been prefigured by Abolitionist groups in the heyday of slavery. (Indeed, the Make Poverty History campaign's manifesto explicitly claims the anti-slavery movement in Britain for its genealogy.) In his superbly researched and recounted work, *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild has shown how humanitarianism in Europe rose alongside the most venal projects of colonial exploitation and was deployed both to further these projects and to challenge them.⁴ As the Belgian monarch, Leopold, commenced his bloody private takeover of the Congo, he appealed to European moral outrage over 'Arab' slave-traders and called for the formation of an 'International African Association' which would set about 'abolishing the slave trade, establishing peace among the chiefs, and procuring them just and impartial arbitration'.⁵ Later on, when it became clear that Leopold's great humanitarian work had been a cover for some of the most horrific and violent appropriation of human and material resources undertaken by a European, British campaigners, led by impressive figures like E.D. Morel, called for Leopold to be exposed and restrained. But, as Hochschild points out, '[s]uch humanitarians never saw themselves as being in conflict with the imperial project' as such and stressed, rather, 'that Leopold's system of rule constituted a unique form of evil'.⁶ In this way, wealthy and powerful Europeans could be involved in the Congo Reform Association's undoubtedly progressive initiatives to shake the Congo free of

4. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

5. King Leopold, quoted in Hochschild, *op. cit.*, p45.

6. Hochschild, *op. cit.*, pp212-13.

Leopold's bloodied fingers without feeling that their own stake in imperialist projects was being undermined. On the contrary, the sense here was that if 'the moral authority of England were distributed across the earth', it would be possible to 'establish not a world empire in the bad Napoleonic sense, but a Moral Empire of loftier intent'.⁷

Despite the obvious historical and economic transformations that have marked the century or so separating the different Africa initiatives of Leopold and Morel from the more closely connected ones of Blair and the *Make Poverty History* campaign, there are also striking resonances between the two historical moments. Then as now, the technology of modern warfare was used by powerful nations to attain 'the desirable spread of civilisation' with the argument that 'our ultimate end is a work of peace'.⁸ Freeing the native from slavery, 'opening up' regions to trade and establishing 'settled governments' were put forth as arguments for war.⁹ It was then too that international humanitarian crusades came to have distinct political uses. Firstly, vast tracts of African or Asian land and resources could come under indirect or direct command of the benefactor nations leading humanitarian campaigns. An equally significant, though less visible, fact was that the emphasis on situations of extreme degradation had the effect of minimising - and legitimising - other kinds of misrule and violence. Seen in this historical light, it does not seem unreasonable to contend that in the present moment, the sanctioned criticism of globalisation that is emerging from quarters such as the Africa Commission similarly serves the purpose of responding to, disavowing or eliding some of capitalist globalisation's more obvious depredations while saving the project of globalisation itself from rejection by the disenfranchised, the questioning and the restless. It is a project that entails the re-appropriation of the idea of 'common interest' and a rewriting of the fairytale of globalisation - with a 'promise to the poor' at its heart - and Africa is once more the site of this recuperative and redemptive effort.

This essay examines a constellation of three texts which participate centrally in this 'humanitarian' rewriting of the project of globalisation through 'Africa' in diverse and complementary ways: *Our Common Interest*, the manifesto of the *Make Poverty History* campaign subtitled 'How You Can Help Defeat World Poverty in Seven Easy Steps', and Bob Geldof's glossy coffee-table tome, *Geldof in Africa*, which accompanied the BBC television series of the same name.¹⁰ If they are varied in genre - a policy document, a manifesto styled as a 'self-help guide', and a lavish pictorial travelogue - these three texts share not only 'Africa' as theme and trope, but also overlapping authorship and audiences. All are concerned with the relationship of Western 'rich countries' (in a different parlance, the 'metropole') to 'poor nations' in Africa and Asia (the 'periphery'). There is a recognition in all three that the present state of affairs is politically and economically untenable. While claiming that it is important for 'everyone' to be nominally involved in the process of transformation, all three view reform as necessarily effected through the auspices of the powerful - the iconic '8 men in a room' or 'The Magnificent

7. James Morris, quoted in Hochschild, op cit., p212.

8. King Leopold, quoted in Guy Burrows, *The Land of the Pigmies*, London, 1898, extracted in Robert Kimbrough, 'Backgrounds and Sources', in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Robert Kimbrough (ed), New York/London, 1988, p126.

9. John DeCourcy Macdonnell cited in Conrad, op. cit., p125.

10. Geraldine Bedells, *Make Poverty History: How You Can Help Defeat World Poverty in Seven Easy Steps*, London, Penguin, 2005; Bob Geldof, *Geldof in Africa*, Century/Random House, 2005. Further references to these texts will be given in the body of my essay.

Eight' as one Oxfam campaign magazine had it. Yet the three also undertake different tasks in relation to their shared wider audience (an educated and concerned middle-class in Britain and elsewhere in the 'developed' world). If the Africa Commission adopts a relatively analytical approach more suited to policy wonks, business people and academics, the *Make Poverty History* manifesto addresses itself to a hip, if somewhat infantilised, Everyperson, its inner covers adorned with colour photographs of sundry youthful celebrities seeming poutily to pose the sanctimonious rhetorical question: 'What kind of person are you?' Geldof's travelogue, meanwhile, proffers pre-digested vignettes (half an hour each in the television series, short chapters in the book) and large colour photographs of life in Africa, appealing, above all, to the senses and to sensibility. Given the salience of sensibility and affect in these contemporary narratives of Africa, it seems appropriate to begin with this text.

GELDOF IN AFRICA

The desert is an all-devouring rapacious thing. It is alive, and, like a wild, uncontrolled animal, while it is on the move it is not possible to approach it with anything but fear. It invades you ...' (Geldof, p10).

It is hard to miss the echoes of Joseph Conrad in the opening lines of Geldof's lush account of how his travels in Africa awakened his conscience. Like Conrad and his narrator, Marlow, Geldof (who compares himself in passing, peculiarly enough, to the Spanish conquistador, Cortez) speaks of Africa as embedded in his boyhood dreams: 'For all my life I had wanted to stand in that place which represents for us the end of the earth' (p10). As in the opening pages of *Heart of Darkness*, a contrast is made between 'the cold English sun' and the African sun which 'burned everything. It burned so hot it was burning all the continent beneath my feet'. Kurtz's iconic last words in the novella are transformed via Geldof's techno-jargon into Africa's 'horror overload', a 'whole mad evil' (p10). Marlow had discerned, 'in the blinding sunshine of that land', the 'flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly'.¹¹ Geldof's account doesn't, of course, remotely resemble Conrad's in power of formulation, but he too figures the African landscape in anthropomorphic terms, representing the continent's self-destructive tendencies: 'For the sun is indifferent to us. Assume its good intent if you like; it will as much coddle you as it would crush you. It doesn't care ...' (p26). In a nod to the most famous modern reinterpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation set in Vietnam, Geldof describes the African condition as a 'version of the apocalypse' (p10) while the television episode set in the Congo is entitled 'Apocalypse Still'.

An 'apocalypse' is defined in Biblical terms as a 'revelation', but is used more loosely in contemporary parlance to denote a cataclysmic endpoint, a disaster of incomprehensible proportions. The term allows Geldof's

11. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd edition, Robert Kimbrough (ed), New York/London, 1988.

reading of the African condition to emphasise the dimension of inexplicable, even metaphysical, evil, a raining down of plagues, wars and famines with no apparent human agent. Geldof's Africa is unmoored from the rest of humanity, lost and plagued in so many ways that its condition denotes nothing less than the defeat of reason itself. In the face of this 'unremitting catalogue of misery', only an affective response is possible; analysis, the act of 'making sense', of finding explanations, will yield nothing: 'But it was too big' (pp10-11). As Bernard McGinn has suggested, apocalyptic literature is characterised precisely by a refusal of 'discursive, rational presentation ... it's deeply emotional, in its appeal'.¹² This is significant for the reconfiguring of globalisation undertaken in different ways by all three texts: if, on the one hand, there is a refusal of complex causal analysis in favour of schematic bullet-point solutions, there is on the other, an unmistakable privileging of the affective. Simple feeling rather than complex thinking is to win the day.

It should be said, however, that one of the striking features of Geldof's account is the persistent emergence of tensions between the affective and the analytical despite the push towards the former. In some ways, this is very much a postcolonial travelogue, keenly aware of colonial discourse and eager to be self-reflexive in that regard: 'This journey was not some jaunt into a personal heart of darkness nor was it a dilettante's voyeuristic dip into the pitiless pain and degradation of others' (p12). The 'African holocaust', Geldof admits, shows 'humanity laid bare and shaped by its own malignant hand' (p12). Nevertheless, he is keen to distance himself from 'explanation and justification [...] questioning and rationalisation', stressing instead the importance of 'impulse and action'. The shambling 'Bob' persona with its elaborate aw-shucks self-deprecation, its colloquial speech sprinkled liberally with four-letter words and schoolboy sexual humour, allows the erstwhile Boomtown Rat to fashion himself into the ideal subject for this affective voyage - as artist, as man of 'sensibility' and, significantly, as a postcolonial Irishman who was raised Catholic in the 'glaring poverty' of Dublin. Even as he shrewdly deconstructs the cultural assumptions of *National Geographic* magazine, 'the Black Baby box' at church and his own missionary teachers, Geldof makes an impassioned argument for 'sensibility' as saving grace. For all that they can be 'missionary, pious or blind in their zeal', both religious and aid workers 'are extraordinary people who thought their lives best lived in imitation of God's example or in accordance with their personal morality' (p19).

The invocation of personal morality is, of course, particularly troubling in the wake of the war on Iraq and the insistence of those like Tony Blair that their own (distinctly religious) sense of right takes precedence over democratic accountability. Nevertheless, it seems proper to acknowledge that Geldof's call to reflect on shared humanity has ethical force. The musician is also emphatic in his attempts to rewrite Africa, transforming it discursively from the 'dark continent' into a 'luminous' space, arguing that the stereotyped images of famine and war have to do with ingrained perceptual habits; in 'refusing to see the many other Africas we bring our own darknesses to bear'

12. Bernard McGinn, cited on <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/resilience.html>> accessed on 7/05/06.

(p27). Yet, this recurrent emphasis on the attitudinal, the purely affective also marginalises historical and causal analysis in ways that undermine Geldof's own transformative aspirations. It is striking, for instance, that for all the repeated exhortations to other Westerners to sensitise themselves to the plight of their fellow human beings and for all the elaborate display of postcolonial self-reflexivity, Geldof has little to say about Africa's recent colonial past. This silence cannot be attributed solely to the form of the narrative - which is structured as a series of fragmented vignettes, barely marked for space and time, held together only by the narrator's sensibility. When Geldof does don the mantle of the historian, his articulations are as instructive as his silences.

In a vignette entitled 'The Forgetting Tree' (flanked by a gorgeous colour portrait of a baobab tree with a little naked boy walking towards its base), Geldof conjures up a file of shackled slaves stumbling, gagging and chafing their way towards waiting ships. Keening, moaning and wailing, they are made to walk seven times around the tree of forgetting, symbolically leaving behind the memory of land and loved ones. But the sorrow remains pent up inside the tree, an 'intolerable burden of stored pain' (p122). As though to undo this forced amnesia, Geldof then proffers 'the complex, unexpected story of slavery' which begins with the defensive assertion: 'It had been going on for a long time anyway before the white man showed up ... Everyone was at it' (p138). The 'unexpected' in Geldof's account is not just a reminder of what scholars already know and acknowledge: that slavery pre-existed European incursions into Africa and that Africans played a culpable role in the European slave trade. Slavery in Geldof's account is figured as a *primarily* African phenomenon, with Europeans playing the role of benign middlemen who placate the Ashanti with boatloads of slaves when the latter get tired of cloth and nails. In one of the longest historical chapters in the book, precisely nine sentences are devoted to the European slave-trade, described in passing elsewhere to have been on an 'industrial scale'. In a text which clearly equates 'development' with advanced capitalism, there is no discussion of the role of the triangular slave trade in the emergence of European capitalism - the vast sugar and cotton plantations, for instance, which provided capital for nascent industries and commodities for growing markets. Walter Rodney's observations resonate here: 'To ease their guilty consciences, Europeans try to throw the major responsibility for the slave trade on to the Africans ... [suggesting] that Europeans merely turned up to buy the captives - as though without European demand there would have been captives sitting on the beach by the millions'.¹³

Once again, the emphasis returns to the affective as Geldof uses slavery to explain what he calls the 'lingering fatalism at the heart of African psychology', despite which Africans remain 'Unbowed. Dignified. Proud... What an amazing people. We owe them a lot' (p142). But not, evidently, a reckoning of the spoils. Though it proffers a quick litany of African's historical troubles, including colonial dispossession, 'the puppetry of the

13. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington DC, Howard University Press, 1982, p81.

Cold War' and more ambiguously, 'the disastrous and enthusiastic mistakes of independence', Geldof's narrative offers nothing remotely close to an evaluation of European or even 'Western' responsibility in producing the African 'apocalypse'. We are offered a predictable excursus into the 'excesses' of Leopold's regime in the Congo (as though colonialism were not always already an excess) and the familiar reading of Africa as catalyst and mirror of Western depravity: 'Conrad didn't write about Africa. He wrote about us ... the wild animal in us, the forgotten savage' (p298). This pathologising of the Western psyche (in terms of the 'savagery' that only Africa seems to bring out) is not only reminiscent of manifold psychologicist readings of *Heart of Darkness* but also underscores the evacuation of history from Geldof's account of Africa. As Hochschild has pointed out, 'European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place'.¹⁴ The specific, racialised brutalities represented by Conrad's Kurtz (possibly based on the figure of the unspeakably bloodthirsty Captain Rom) are converted by Geldof into a generic prototype for evil on the continent, various warlords and tyrants who are 'the new Roms out there ... In the exact same place where Kurtz lived, they are still there' (p298).

14. Hochschild, op. cit., p143.

The 'luminous continent' inexorably generates its own troubles:

There have been and still are many darknesses here. The Belgians and their beheadings, whippings, amputations on children and cannibalism. Mobutu's massacres and slavery and lootings; the uranium used in the first atomic bombs that came from the soil of this place; the AIDS that sneaked out of its forests; the armies of amoral children; the genocides, the warlords; and, finally, the lunatic self-appointed 'generals' and 'commander' militia paid for by outside interests and nations to rape, torture, brutalise, mutilate and kill. Out there in the trees' (p298).

As a rhetorical technique, this kind of listing results in the elision of historical specificity and the conflation of very different events. (Even death-dealing American militarism is somehow African in origin). Yet, so compendious a list not only carries no reference to colonialism, slavery or forced labour beyond Belgian 'extremities', but also manages to forego any reference to ongoing depredations by multinationals like Shell in Nigeria or Kerr-McGee in Morocco. Diverse phenomena are clumped together in this text as just so many indigenous 'madnesses'. So it is that very different political figures from Yasser Arafat (scandalously dismissed as a 'mad old trout') to the undoubtedly bloodthirsty Commander Jerome of Stanleyville are all depicted as part of an undifferentiated African megalomania. Indeed, few of these figures are given name and place; a tranche of literary titles seal them into generic prototypes: 'The Latest President' or 'The Beautiful Warlord'. Africa's politics and politicians all exist in a kind of Carrollian Wonderland that requires no

situated understanding. Similarly, Africa's conflicts are allowed no history; they are essentialised into '[enmities] of immemorial duration'. Even African borderposts are, for Geldof, particularly absurd inventions, 'three sticks plonked arbitrarily somewhere'. Clearly, in the West, borders have an obvious rationality entirely unsuitable to these 'barren shitholes'.

One might be inclined to dismiss these observations as the faintly puerile musings of a 'rockstar with a cause' if it were not for the extent to which Geldof's account of Africa is imbricated in a larger, powerful constellation of ideas about how to 'integrate' Africa into global(ising) modernity. The discussion of Somalia as a 'failed state' rehearses several problematic, even racist assumptions, principally the idea that Africa is constitutively fragmented through tribalism and clannishness: 'It is a huge empty slab of land in the Horn of Africa that has been parcelled up *for centuries* by competing clans. These clans are in an almost permanent state of feud over land, water, goats, camels (the big one), trade, whatever' (p35, my emphasis). Such claims make starkly visible the failure to contextualise and to acknowledge the pervasive legacy of colonialism. As Mahmood Mamdani has shown in a complex analysis of civil society and state in sub-Saharan Africa, the indirect rule that was favoured by colonial administrations often entailed 'the closeting of the subject populations in a series of separate containers, each under the custody of a Native Authority said to be the rightful bearer and enforcer of an age-old custom and tradition'.¹⁵ Colonial rule in Africa racialised and tribalised not only the state, but civil society itself; moreover: 'European rule in Africa came to be defined by a single-minded and overriding emphasis on the customary' depriving custom itself of its usual heterogeneity and dynamism.¹⁶ Geldof's comments on fights over land are particularly ironic given that it was colonial administrations which, unable to understand the idea of multiple rights over, or lack of ownership of, land, extended the 'customary' to include proprietorship of land, thus excluding migrants - defined in tribal terms - from right of access to land. In many places, boundaries were redrawn, with the effect of the loss of pastures and livestock: 'Border areas between countries were declared no-man's land, a *cordon sanitaire*, as each "tribe" was allocated a country and asked to stay put in it'.¹⁷

Within the framework of multinational capitalism, that once useful tribalism is now a problem. Precisely where he wishes to enact a chastening self-reflexivity, Geldof unwittingly ends up revealing the unexamined assumptions that govern liberal European discourse on Africa:

The truth, I suspect, is that in our own world, we only know how to deal with entities that resemble our own. We may be incapable of negotiation with anything that doesn't fit our pattern. How does Britain complete a trade agreement with several different clan groups with different interests who will start arguing and killing the minute they feel they want more or they've been hard done by or whatever? It's kind of pointless insisting on

15. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p49.

16. *Ibid.*, p50.

17. *Ibid.*, p166.

Statehood when the traditional state is anarchy and the gun. Sort of like Afghanistan without the heroin (pp35-38).

Beyond the egregious claim that anarchy and violence are 'traditional' features of African life (with the equally pernicious comparison to heroin in Afghanistan), Geldof is almost touchingly artless in his question about trade agreements - one of the many occasions where he unwittingly connects his travelogue to the larger agenda of integrating Africa into corporate globalisation. In a polemic against 'cynicism', for instance, Geldof outlines causes for optimism about Africa's future that might have come straight out of a manifesto for corporate globalisation: 'a growing middle-class', 'a new entrepreneurship', the spread of new technologies like the mobile phone, cash remittances from the diaspora, 'private enterprise', 'economic growth', and the emergence of 'trading blocs' over political ones. Postcolonial transformation must have a fairytale trajectory: 'like Ireland leapfrogged from an agricultural to an informational economy ... Africa too will experience some unthought-of changes' (p284). For all the ritual deprecation of how 'we' 'find it difficult to accept how anyone would want a life different from ours', it turns out that what Geldof's Africa needs, in order to 'come in from the past' is precisely 'to plug into globalisation', a phrase reiterated verbatim in *Our Common Interest* (Geldof p316; *Common Interest* p279).

How can one quarrel with this firmly teleological vision of a shimmering continent and its luminous future without cathecting the space of the occupationally cynical, those who are mired in the belief that 'Africa is fucked' and would allow it to stay thus, morbidly sealed off from the 'winds of change'? We can acknowledge that in a purely affective sense, if there is such a thing, Geldof's moral insights are worthy ones: we are obliged to acknowledge shared humanity, we are culpable of turning our eyes away from the suffering of others, and we must exercise what agency we have in transforming an unacceptable state of affairs. And yet, it is precisely because such sentiments provide a common platform for transformational critique that we can interrogate his other assumptions and observations, both implicit and visible. For instance, despite what he self-reflexively describes as his 'champagne socialist' critique of the role of the IMF, the World Bank and various NGOs in 'a different form of colonisation', Geldof pays attention neither to the historical legacy of colonialism nor to the possibility that globalisation as he envisions it might not, in fact, do anything to transform radically either that legacy, or the current state of affairs. Globalisation is very much the solution: 'Why is Africa poor? Because it does not trade enough. Look at the history of the world over the last century and you'll see that it is trade that drives economic growth' (p290).

Indeed. But we also know that the trade that characterised the economic growth of the last century was of a very particular sort, that it took place within the framework of mercantile and financial capitalism which, if it led to growth for some people and some regions, produced immiseration for many others.

One of the more pernicious and pervasive tropes about Africa's condition is that it has somehow been 'left behind', 'excluded' or kept 'separate' from the rest of the globe, and that integration is the obvious solution. In point of fact, of course, the global economy has been profoundly and increasingly interconnected to the point where complete exclusion is not an option. Geldof writes at one point that European trafficking in the Congo brought 'trade and commerce and immiseration in equal measure' (298), as though the pairing of the two was an unfortunate coincidence. Both 'trade' and 'growth', in Geldof's account and in the other literature, are treated as neutral terms when, in fact, they have specific historical and political resonances. As Walter Rodney reminds us in his powerful polemic, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, international trade has never been an innocuous institution:

From the beginning, Europe assumed the power to make decisions within the international trading system ... [T]he so-called international law which governed the conduct of nations on the high seas was nothing else but European law. Africans did not participate in its making ... for the law recognised them only as transportable merchandise ... Above all, European decision-making power was exercised in selecting what Africa should export - in accordance with European needs.¹⁸

18. Rodney, op. cit., p77.

Rodney's powerful interrogation of the premises of dominant economic regimes in the wake of decolonisation reminds us that terms such as 'underdevelopment' describe not so much a condition, in the first instance, as a relationship, 'namely, the exploitation of one country by another'.¹⁹ This insight asks questions of the rhetoric of 'rich' and 'poor' countries with the adjectives deployed in absolute rather than relational terms.

19. Ibid., p14.

The loss of agency for decolonising nations within the framework of global capitalism where the rules have already been set in favour of the metropole has contemporary resonances. Even within the occasionally progressive frameworks of the three texts examined here, the terms of transformation are firmly set by and within the existing order. The campaign to make (African) poverty history is also vulnerable to the contradiction between an expressed aspiration to economic justice, and the constitutively unequal framework within which this is to be achieved. The oddity which Edward Morel noted on the docks at Antwerp (and which fuelled his monumental investigation of Leopold's bloody transactions in the Congo), where 'the value of the rubber, ivory, and other riches coming to Europe each year ... was roughly five times that of goods being shipped to the Congo that were destined for Africans' may seem anomalous and shocking but unequal exchange is, of course, endemic to capitalism itself. During the colonial period, this meant that 'colonies and semi-colonies tended to exchange increasing quantities of indigenous labour (or products of labour) for a constant amount of metropolitan labour (or products of labour)'.²⁰ Although in the wake of decolonisation, it was an indigenous bourgeoisie that was able to appropriate some control of capital

20. Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London, Verso, 1993, p345.

and profits, it remains the case that capitalism itself is defined by 'the exchange of unequal quantities of labour'.²¹ Similarly, unequal exchange continues to take place on a global scale whereby a commodity worth 100 working hours is exchanged for a commodity (or equivalent) containing 10 working hours.

21. *Ibid.*, p351.

MAKING (AFRICAN) POVERTY HISTORY

It is the belated recognition of this fact that inspires the undoubtedly salutary movement within liberal quarters towards 'fairer trade'. 'Trade justice' is one of the main planks of the *Make Poverty History* manifesto which argues that poor countries are 'disadvantaged by trade rules written for the rich' (p33). Free trade, it argues with admirable asperity, is not necessarily fair trade; it also calls for 'laws to stop big business profiting at the expense of the people and the environment' (p40). The Africa Commission similarly asserts that the industrial world has 'been a wilful obstacle' to African trade, primarily by subsidising their own agriculture and thus depressing world prices for these commodities. As does Geldof, both the *Make Poverty History* manifesto and *Our Common Interest* take positions that are critical of forced liberalisation as a condition of receiving aid, arguing: 'If they are to be accountable to their own citizens African governments have to be allowed the space to make their own decisions' (p23).

To some extent, the most significant shift in humanitarian discourse about Africa (and other former colonies), from Morel's and Conrad's time to our own, has to do with this treatment of postcolonial agency; there is a keen awareness in these texts that it is no longer acceptable to impose a moral and economic order on the subject of transformation - or, at the very least, it will not do to be seen to be doing so. Hence, *Our Common Interest* is insistent that change must come from within Africa and be led by Africans. This new emphasis on the agency of those on the periphery whose lives must be transformed is accompanied, however, by a curious rewriting of metropolitan agency. If, on the one hand, it is necessary to acknowledge that 'developed nations' bear some responsibility for the condition of Africa, on the other, it becomes necessary to demarcate the severely limited extent of this responsibility. 'Rich countries' are largely culpable of sins of omission - of failing to 'consider' the poor when writing skewed trade policies and of being 'reluctant to lift the onerous debts which add to Africa's daily burden'. Pertinent criticism is tentative: 'And their aid policies have often *seemed* designed to support the political and industrial interests of the rich countries as much as to reduce poverty in Africa' (p8, my emphasis). Moreover, the production of wealth itself has no apparent agent: the world is 'awash with wealth', claim the document's opening lines: 'Growth and globalisation have brought higher living standards to billions of men and women' (p4). Africa has been left out of this general enrichment and it is this omission that must be rectified. African 'distress', similarly, has no agent as such; it is *force majeure*: 'There is a tsunami every month in Africa ... It is not dramatic and it rarely

makes the television news'. The rich world is culpable of *knowing* about this state of affairs and failing to act rather than contributing to the situation itself: 'In years to come, future generations will look back and wonder how could the world have known and failed to act?' (p70).

What is at stake in this tale of an ocean of global prosperity jolted by a tsunami of poverty accompanied by a call to rescue where the rescued are figured not as victims but agents? *Our Common Interest* explicitly offers itself as a narrative of Africa ('We try in this report to tell a story') but it is as much a rewriting of narratives about globalisation by its anxious votaries (p11). Joseph Stiglitz begins his own sympathetic critique of globalisation by announcing that 'something has gone horribly wrong'; the Africa Commission speaks of 'broken promises' (p9). Their document is shaped by an awareness that globalisation has profoundly undermined its own mythologies and that without some kind of responsive reconfiguration, its programmes are vulnerable to large-scale resistance and rejection. Thus, for rich nations, it is not only 'moral duty' but 'a powerful motive of self-interest' that calls for a return to Africa as project and as trope (p12). In a moment of frankness, the Commission confides:

Inaction brings another danger. Those new African leaders who are committed to change have put in place reforms - on the economy and on combating corruption - that have been politically difficult. Those leaders could be evicted from office if their people do not see returns ... Other leaders might be deterred from venturing down that same path. That is why supportive action by the developed world is urgent (p27).

Those 'reforms', of course, smooth the way for corporate globalisation.

The re-invention of Africa here begins with an account of what *Our Common Interest* calls the 'lost decades', which are not, it turns out, those of the colonial era. On the contrary, Africa apparently finds itself in fairly good shape at the end of formal colonial rule; its problems apparently begin in the 1960s, during the period of decolonisation and nation-building. When 'former colonies across the globe began in the 1960s to prepare themselves for independence, no one was that worried about Africa ... All the doomsday scenarios were centred in India and points East' (p16). After independence, emergent African nations made a curse of their blessings as they began fighting over vast natural resources. The sole allusion to the pre-Independence colonial expropriation of 'these high-value natural resources' is proffered as a curious apologia for failing to provide Africa with the same kind of railway network that a benign colonialism bestowed on India. The reiteration of the familiar self-congratulatory chestnut about the benign conferral of nationhood on India through the railways is reminiscent of another of Rodney's acerbic observations: 'Means of communication were not constructed in the colonial period so that Africans [or Indians!] could visit their friends' (209).²² India and other Asian regions are repeatedly invoked as examples, firstly, of how

22. Rodney, *op. cit.*, p209.

colonialism did not necessarily have a deleterious effect on the economic present of postcolonial regions and secondly, of the miraculous powers of globalisation if 'development' is undertaken by the book. The Asian 'doomsday scenario' has been transformed by the meticulous application of a developmental recipe: expanding the area of land under irrigation, investing in 'rural roads and power, new crops, and science and technology' and exporting a high percentage of manufactured goods. Asia 'has developed the industrial infrastructure, skills and learning culture which Africa lacks' (p19).

This potted formula for how to win the 'race for development' would be less odd if it weren't for the staged interrogation of the term 'development'.²³ To the charge that 'development' is currently defined in terms that privilege the 'rich world' and its material interests, the Commission responds by shifting the argument to the terrain of 'culture'. A series of civilisational clichés (also rehearsed by Geldof) is trotted out: 'In the West development is about increasing choice for individuals; in Africa it is more about increasing human dignity within a community' (p28). But the respectful invocation of cultural difference and (apparently) greater communitarianism in Africa does not necessarily undermine the economic monoculture of capitalist globalisation. On the contrary, the framework of liberal multiculturalism (and its language of 'diversity') allows precisely for the presentation of quietly constrained options within a monolithic economic framework as a smorgasbord of 'choices'. This is made explicit in the discussion of religion as a 'a way to plug into globalisation' (p31). Though it evinces a slight discomfort at the fact that 'religious movements are gaining a new attractiveness', the report is quick to suggest that there is opportunity here: 'Religion can be a model for the state. If the African state is to become more effective it needs to understand what it is about religion that builds loyalty, creates infrastructure, collects tithes and taxes, fosters a sense that it can deliver material as well as spiritual benefits' (pp31-32). In a quintessentially Blairite ideological move, it argues: 'Religion can, of course, be misused but it can also be a partner in development' (p31).

'Culture' has, of course, been deployed at other times in Africa and elsewhere in the colonial world in ways that mask contradictions between democratic rhetoric and profoundly authoritarian governance. 'The policy of mock respect for African culture' has been criticised as a form of paternalism which 'reached its highest expression in South Africa in the notorious Bantu Education Act of 1953'. Criticising the likes of Albert Schweitzer for operating a 'dirty unhygienic hospital ... under the guise of fitting into the African culture and environment', Rodney argues that the colonialist move to preserve ' quaint and intriguing' features of African life 'merely succeeded in cutting African life off from the potentially beneficial aspects of the international world'.²⁴ As though anticipating this argument, the Commission distances itself from what it calls the 'fallacy' of assuming that 'culture is ... the expression of unchanging tradition'. On the contrary: 'History shows African cultures to have been tremendously adaptive, absorbing a wide range of outside

23. A.M. Babu's observations on 'the assumptions handed down to us by our exploiters' are pertinent here: 'Step up exports, increase aid and loans from the developed countries, and arrest growth in population'. 'Postscript', in Rodney, *op. cit.*, p285.

24. Rodney, *op. cit.*, p250.

influences' (p32). The 'vivid example' chosen to illustrate this adaptability is significant: mobile phones which enable data collection and small businesses to 'satisfy their customers' needs and developing the entire supply chain' and 'prepaid phonecards as a form of electronic currency' (pp33-34). Culture's adaptability allows it to be 'an agent of economic and social change' to the extent that it supports capitalist globalisation; at the point at which it might act as a bulwark against some of globalisation's depredations - as indeed it has in some contexts - it is vulnerable to charges of being 'unchanging'. The challenge, argues the report, is 'to harness the cultures of Africa to find workable hybrids for the rest of the continent' (p35). Postmodern hybridity, it reminds us frankly, is the logic of late capitalism.

If parts of the document celebrate heterogeneity and calls for working with 'the grain of African ways of doing things', elsewhere, particularly in the unambiguously titled chapter, 'Getting it Right', it is more explicit about the uniform ideological vision for integrating Africa into globalisation. Calling for the building of 'strong' states in African nations, the document defines the function of the state in simple New Labourite terms: 'the ability to design and deliver services' (which in the 'rich world', of course, is increasingly delegated to the private sector by a shrinking state). Indeed, the understanding of 'governance' is so profoundly monolithic that the Commission feels empowered to deploy the language of pedagogy: 'African parliamentarians need training and mentoring from nations with strong parliaments' (p41). If the first half or so of *Our Common Interest* is replete with ethical and political pieties on democracy, accountability and justice, the second half is determinedly more forthcoming with regard to the economic and ideological agenda which shapes and drives the 'argument' on 'common interest':

If people are to feel safe about investing their money in a country they need to feel confident about a whole range of things - that the law will be upheld, that contracts will be enforced, that business regulations will not be imposed merely to secure an endless stream of bribes for corrupt officials. They also need stable economic policies, good public financial management systems, predictable and transparent taxation and effective competition laws (p77).

Unwittingly, perhaps, 'common interest' becomes synonymous with interest rates and what the Commission calls 'investment climate improvements' (p77).

The point is not that *Our Common Interest* is a litany of pernicious recommendations. There is no doubt that several of its suggestions are, however notional, germane to transformation in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World, including the 'control of small arms', 'better behaviour by foreign companies' (though arguably, the behaviour of foreign companies is more than just a question of commercial etiquette), 'Education for All', a

better and cheaper supply of pharmaceuticals, the elimination of preventable disease, expanded access to water supply and sanitation and a far greater international commitment to fighting AIDS. However, the document is committed to and implicated in a deeply reactionary discourse that, for all its vaunted reformism, fails (and how can it be otherwise?) to address the history of poverty and the extent to which both colonialism and globalisation are implicated in perpetuating what it calls the 'terrible logic of poverty' (p72). Addressing the relationship between rich and poor not in causal terms where each constructs the other, but as absolute categories between which there must be a relationship of 'trust', the report, in the final instance, perpetuates the myth that what is required is mainly an attitudinal and affective transformation rather than structural change. The language of growth, 'leaving no one out' and 'broken promises' suggests that globalisation can be good for all, if only trust could be restored all around. Written out of the story of 'the poverty that lays eggs' and the emancipation promised by globalisation is the logic of capitalism itself, relying as it does on the transfer of surplus in specific directions and the concentration of capital accordingly.

The myth of 'economic growth' without the exploitative extraction of labour has already been deconstructed by a famous African novel. In a fantastical 'dream' episode from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's brilliant satire on colonialism and neo-colonialism, *Devil on the Cross*, a departing ruler, worried about losing his riches when he returns to his own country, calls his slaves and servants to him. He promises them that he will 'return with lots of money and many banks and ... bring you more armoured cars and guns and bombs and aeroplanes, so that I shall always be with you and you with me'.²⁵ To each of his servants, he gives a certain amount of capital, enjoining them to 'increase and multiply' it. Most dutifully find ways to make profits by buying cheaply from producers and selling dearly to consumers. But one servant decides to test out his master's claim that money 'grows' money: 'So he went, and he put the 100,000 shillings in a tin, and covered it well, and then dug a hole by a banana plant, and buried the tin there' (84). A year later when the master returns, he is pleased by the 'fantastic rate of profit' that most of his servants have managed to show. But the would-be harvester of capital has made an unpleasant discovery: 'I went and buried your money in the ground to see if your money would yield anything without being fertilized by my sweat or that of any other man. Behold, here is your 100, 000 shillings, exactly as you left it. I now give you back your capital'.²⁶ The hurt and shocked master, insisting that 'black people are incapable of such rebellious thoughts' blames a more familiar enemy: 'You must have therefore been misled by communists'. It is his own commandments that must ultimately prevail: 'For unto the man of property more will be given, but from the poor man will be taken even the little he has kept in reserve'.

Ngugi's novel was written in the late seventies, in Gikuyu, while the author was in prison in Kenya and was translated by the author into English a few years later. Deploying the rhetoric and simple didacticism of the very parables

25. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross*, Oxford, Heinemann, 1982, p83.

26. *Ibid.*, p85.

from the New Testament that had been used to spread Christianity in Africa, *Devil on the Cross* is explicitly formulated as an exposé of neo-colonialism and its mythologies. Dated and simplistic though its use of satire, fantasy and fable may seem to a reader bred on the sophistication of magical realism, the text poses a question that cannot be evaded by sophistry, economic or literary: How is wealth produced? If wealth cannot 'grow' out of nothing, then what element is missing in narratives of 'growth for all' and 'leaving no one out'? Why, as the economist, Ernest Mandel asks, do corporations prefer to invest in 'South Africa, Malaya or Persia, instead of in Britain'?²⁷ What indeed is the nature of the covenant between 'rich' and 'poor' if, materially and discursively, each term constructs the other?

27. Mandel, op. cit., p356.

The two have nothing to do with each other, asserts the manifesto formulated by the campaign to Make Poverty History, a massive coalitional effort by several charities and non-profit organisations. The document offers itself as a seven-step self-help guide for the average British citizen - of which, apparently, 'Buying this Book is Step One'. Though a sense of concern and commitment is essential, the refutation of responsibility is categorical:

Economists are always reminding us that wealth is not a zero sum game: in other words, you are not part of the rich world because a poor world exists. Poor countries are poor because they're caught in a poverty trap. We have to find a way of integrating them into the world economy. Which will eventually be better for everyone. By making everyone richer, we also make everyone safer (p44).

If this diverse constellation of texts shares a distilled ideological vision, their own mythology, this is it. Firstly, poverty is an accident of history. Secondly, there is no agent in this situation other than poverty itself, hence the simple tautology of the 'poverty trap' which claims that poverty causes poverty. Finally, globalisation is the solution: integrating everyone into the global economic order ameliorates poverty and makes for a better and safer world. In other words, it is not the economic order itself, but one's distance from it that causes poverty. Africa is the protagonist of this narrative, as 'she' was in the days of Leopold and the Scramble, but refurbished for the twenty-first century: the spunky survivor of a tragedy with no cause or human agent; the would-be heroine of the fairy-tale of globalisation defined as 'making everyone richer' (p45).

28. *The Art of Self-Defence for Oxfam Supporters: How to Rid the World of those Annoying Myths about Oxfam ...*, Oxford, Oxfam, 2005. Further references to this text will be given in the body of the essay.

MYTHMAKING AND THE ART OF SELF-DEFENCE

Profoundly aware of having to stake its claim amidst competing narratives, Oxfam, one of the leaders of Make Poverty History, recently produced a colourful illustrated booklet for its supporters entitled *The Art of Self-Defence: How to rid the World of those Annoying Myths about Oxfam ...*²⁸ The goal is to brandish it when 'harangued by a cynic' who might raise questions about

Oxfam and its doings. (This particular 'cynic' received her copy with the routine mailings she gets as a regular Oxfam donor.) 'Annoying Myth#9' is the 'cynic's' claim that 'Oxfam is too close to the Government to criticise its policies'; we can demolish it by pointing out that the Make Poverty History coalition 'has already helped persuade world leaders to take vital first steps to overcome poverty'. The real criticism is not, of course, that an activist organisation might choose to undertake 'constructive engagement with decision-makers' but that it can fail, so constitutively, to address the history and causality of poverty in a global frame. The Make Poverty History campaign's successes are praiseworthy: it brought tens of thousands of young people to at least a minimal awareness of 'Third World debt' and so-called free trade as issues. But there is also no doubt that the very success of this mobilisation has relied on a discursive enactment of concern accompanied by an insistent and comforting disavowal of material implication.

As with Afghanistan and Iraq, so with poverty. Those trapped in the 'prison of poverty' must be 'set free' but with no accounting for how they got there in the first place. Indeed, in the repeated genealogical invocations of the anti-slavery and anti-apartheid campaigns, the point emphasised is that campaigners were not themselves implicated in the problem they identified; they fought for 'the rights of another people, of another colour, on another continent' (p16). While it is entirely salutary to make the ethical claim that 'human beings [have] the capacity to care about others', it is less valuable when accompanied by an insistence that this will and must not cost much: 'the effort required of the rich is indeed ... slight' (p30).

What does this have to do with the world after Iraq? It would be crude to suggest that the crisis in Africa was *intended* to replace the happenings in Iraq as the focus of 'Western' soul-searching. But it is certainly the case that the quest to bring Africa 'in from the past' relies on a particular form of engagement with history and colonialism that simultaneously turns our gaze away from ongoing colonial depredations and rewrites the histories of colonialism and global poverty. The child injured or killed in Iraq is scripted as sad collateral in an unspecified humanitarian and liberationist intervention; the iconic swollen-bellied African child on the television screen has greater moral claims on us. She requires us to bear witness, not to our own implication or even, ultimately, to her own condition, but to our almost mislaid conscience. Britain can take its place, once again, at the heart of a self-regarding Moral Empire.