Chapter 8

Constituencies of Compassion: The Politics of Human Rights and Consumerism

Joel R. Pruce

Introduction

From a twenty-first-century perspective, it is standard for film actors and rock stars to lend their fame to human rights campaigns on behalf of Ugandan child soldiers, Afghan women, Tibetan exiles, or Haitian earthquake victims. Celebrities can be useful spokespersons in terms of their capacity to raise awareness and money because of the way in which the audience perceives these familiar faces and voices. This familiarity allows for unfamiliar and distant global issues to be brought into focus. Famous figures even understand humanitarian engagement as a useful and necessary component of their public image. As goodwill ambassadors, telethon phone bank operators, and editorial contributors, popular cultural figures have come to occupy a central position in human rights and humanitarian campaigns—especially with respect to communicating a message to the uninformed and unconcerned spectator. The potential for popular culture to provide a platform for ordinary people to become aware of and involved in human rights is, at first glance, a decidedly positive feature of the contemporary landscape. If scholars and activists take seriously the desire to inculcate a "human rights culture," the ability to reach out to new communities of supporters is essential. And in the 1980s, the human

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rights community did precisely that by developing a series of advocacy tactics that set the movement on a course for mass appeal and originating a strategy that thrives still today.

While celebrities have lent their fame to diverse global causes in the past, including the 1960 Congo famine and the movement to end the Vietnam War, the period discussed in this chapter (1975–88) marks the formalization of a model for human rights campaigns: a routinized set of methods that would become central to public mediation of crisis and disaster. Particularly, the use of the *celebrity-infused benefit concert* by human rights and humanitarian organizations evolved from unique phenomenon to instrumental necessity. Recruitment, advocacy, and fundraising strategies were developed in this period to sustain a burgeoning movement and advance its causes effectively among wider swaths of Western civil societies. Celebrity appearances at benefit concerts provided the vehicle with which such a series of objectives could be met and quickly rose to prominence as a key indicator of a cause's public salience and viability. These types of events were not new per se, but their institutionalization in this era introduced new avenues for popular participation in human rights campaigns.

To reach out to new supporters, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) integrated modes of consumer culture into their campaigns in the form of celebrities, merchandise, and entertainment. In doing so, they attempted to blend the solidaristic elements of human rights and altruistic features of humanitarianism with the egoistic qualities of mass consumption. This proves to be a tense partnership. The structure of consumer capitalism that facilitates and drives commercial pop culture is not fit to serve as a vehicle for collective action and social cohesion. Consumerism encourages self-seeking behavior that reinforces the status quo of power relations and creates willful distractions that anesthetize and insulate consumers from critical thought and engagement. The self-satisfaction experienced by consumers disrupts possibilities for real political change by pacifying the individual into acquiescence with injustice and repression. By situating human rights practice in the realm of the market, advocacy becomes commodified. Commodification inherent in consumer capitalism increases accessibility to human rights advocacy by improving convenience. The commodification of human rights and humanitarianism transforms psychological experiences like empathy, compassion, and outrage into numbing, commercial transactions, thus, rendering impotent the potential for these emotions to have transformative impact in the political world.

Therefore, as human rights advocacy morphs into a convenient form of public action, a critical approach cautions against an unreflective

embrace, and the task of this chapter is to evaluate the supposed benefits of mainstreaming human rights against the backdrop of negative noise and feedback. The current emphasis on consumerism focuses this discussion around the impact of spending and buying in the service of human dignity. How market interactions are utilized in these campaigns reflects the strategy of the campaign and shapes its political content. Ultimately, the role played by consumerism during this period of maturation for the human rights movement suggests that NGOs have sought to make participation more convenient and less political. The objective of this chapter is to go beyond good intentions and to explore the possibilities presented, as well as to expose the proliferation of adverse consequences.

Human rights and humanitarian movements in the 1980s maintained reluctant relationships to politics and power. This tension drove the messaging in campaigns away from direct political challenges in favor of narratives about suffering and injustice that ignored root causes. NGOs sought uncomplicated, uncontroversial explanations for their work that resonated with the audience and evaded Cold War geopolitics. Therefore, NGOs conducted outreach to supporters not as political actors, but by relating to them as consumers—individuals with dispensable income and a predilection for self-indulgence, yet with a sense of moral, socially conscious behavior. In this light, NGOs forged a relationship with their supporters based on a low threshold for commitment that produced positive and long-standing associations with human rights and humanitarian endeavors. By eschewing the political dimensions of indignity and suffering—that is, the ways in which power is exercised through systems and structures to bring about indignity and suffering—NGOs established a conception of human rights that is divorced from a critique of power, which itself is damaging to the long-term viability of the movement.

The details below weave a narrative of events occurring within a discrete time period during which the human rights movement expanded rapidly, particularly due to the strategic deployment of consumer mechanisms in campaign work. This string of efforts contributed to a cultural turn within the liberal mainstream of Western societies that included human rights and humanitarian engagement as an acceptable and desirable component of a modern lifestyle. The first snapshot captures Amnesty International (AI) in its formative years and describes the simple steps that laid the foundation for the strategic model that would emerge. As the preeminent membership-based organization, AI embodies a sensibility that appeals to ordinary people by its targeted focus on case work and adherence to universal values. AI's persona relies on a cautious but relentless relationship to power and politics, as well as a strategy of "naming and shaming" abusers while striving to retain a nonideological posture.

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Despite owing their existence to the early Amnesty events, the Ethiopian famine alleviation campaigns of Band Aid, Live Aid, and "We Are the World" present a foil to AI by having crafted a consumer-based movement that resulted in the height of humanitarian consumerism. Devoid of political content and lacking any reference to the exercise of power, these campaigns skirted such discussions in order to widen their appeal and raise the most money possible for famine relief. Requiring nothing more of its supporters than a donation, the movement for famine alleviation in Ethiopia anchored itself in resonant notions of humanitarian neutrality that avoids politics to aid the suffering regardless of culpability. The relationship between consumerism and neutrality is strongly correlated, and this case highlights the more problematic aspects of its correlation. Engagement on human dignity issues during the 1980s developed into a normalized expression of global consciousness as it became commonly integrated in mass media, popular culture, and the market.

By folding this social practice into the individual habits and behaviors of consumers, NGOs were able to accomplish some of their goals without inconveniencing supporters. Instead of committing themselves to the protection of the dignity of others, supporters merely sought their own satisfaction—self-indulgence cloaked in empathy. While limitedly useful, this dynamic presents obstacles to building the kind of human rights movement that can adequately address systemic abuse and structural problems. The context for these events is a decade fraught with contradiction that provides explanatory power as to how consumerism was put to work for human rights. At stake at this auspicious moment is the soul and identity of the human rights movement, as mass movements for human dignity place at odds the traditional imperatives of political advocacy and the seductive features of consumer capitalism.

Amnesty International and the Initiation of the Pop Culture Model

Amnesty International's genesis story is nearing the status of fabled legend: in 1961, Peter Benenson wrote an opinion piece in the *Observer* entitled "The Forgotten Prisoners," which detailed the plight of Portuguese students who had been arrested and imprisoned for toasting to freedom. Much has been said of the organization's evolution, the expansion of its mandate, and its role as international "norm entrepreneur" (see Clark, 2001; Hopgood, 2006; Larsen, 1979; Power, 2001). From its humble beginnings in a barrister's office in London to its ascent as the face of the global human rights movement, Amnesty has undergone an amazing

transformation in 50 years. Yet, the 1970s was a proper moment of growth for the still-young nongovernmental organization (Cmiel, 1999). Every year of that decade witnessed the organization's rapid expansion by all indications. During 1969–76, membership experienced a sixfold explosion, rising from 15,000 to 97,000, and the organization's annual budget expanded by over 1,300 percent from approximately $43,000 to over $579,000.[1] This correlation demonstrates how AI's central administrative body, the International Secretariat (IS), was forced to develop its capacities to keep up pace with demand.

However, the strain on resources was tremendous, not only because of the increasing demand on research, but also due to the global recession during these tough years. Financially, AI was arranged through a mixture of centralized and decentralized governance. National sections were responsible for funding an overwhelming percentage of the IS budget through the direct contribution of its membership dues, while the central body was also involved in generating funds through soliciting donation and sales of its publications. Furthermore, membership dues ranged widely based on the economic wherewithal of the national sections, their local chapters, and the individual members themselves. Nobody was excluded from membership due to nonpayment, and the levels of contribution were flexible. Therefore, when oil crises struck particularly hard or inflation rose dramatically, both of which happened throughout the 1970s, individual contributions were inconsistent.

Trepidations about the balance between growth and capital, between the impulse toward expansion and the financial realities inherent in expansion, were expressed regularly in the annual treasurer's report. While it is presumably the role of the financial officer to voice caution and advocate for incrementalism, the tone of each subsequent year's report communicates a genuine concern for the future viability of an organization growing at such an accelerated pace. Kevin T. White, in his treasurer's report of 1974, articulates this concern clearly:

> [As] the need for AI's work grows, a melancholy fact that is all too evident, there will be continuous calls for the expansion of the organization . . . We may have to consider whether it is better to concentrate on doing effectively within our resources what we can do in a limited field, rather than spread our efforts too thinly over a broad front . . . We may only be building up an expensive machine costing too much to service. (AI, 1974a, p. 151)

At stake in this debate was the reputation AI had worked so hard to establish—for its reliable effectiveness—and the future mission of the organization.

The question of mission has always been a crucial one for Amnesty, which had traditionally framed itself with a limited scope. This much has been emphasized by the institution itself, for example by Thomas Hammarberg, chairman of the International Executive Committee in 1978: "We do not cover a broader spectrum [of rights]. This is not because we ignore the importance of all the other rights, but because we recognize that we can only achieve concrete results within set limits" (AI, 1978, p. 1). Self-consciousness of this degree is not a reflection of shortcomings, but rather of strength. For this reason, debates over growth and expansion are taken seriously and looked upon as propitious moments of opportunity, as well as tenuous points of transition. With this in mind, the architects of Amnesty International during the 1970s slowly created space, within the framework of their organizational mandate, to build on areas of strength and, in a controlled fashion, raise its profile through the production of influential work.

The decade brought the initial launch of AI's Campaign against Torture, the adoption of the death penalty as a central pillar issue, and the first round of country reports, including that exposing Argentina's Dirty War for which the organization was awarded the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize. With these developments, Amnesty International had significantly broadened its scope and burdened itself with an enormous workload during times of increasingly tighter budgetary constraints. Amnesty was compelled to dig deeper and seek out new ways to fund its growing enterprise. Out of this simple and mundane scenario emerged a strategy for attracting people to the cause of human rights, building a membership base, and raising significant amounts of money for the movement.

In this environment arose the question of *how* and *where* to raise the funds necessary to maintain, as well as expand, Amnesty's capacities. The International Secretariat tasked national sections and local groups to begin generating additional funds with renewed urgency. In the newsletters that served as the main method for the transmission and dissemination of directives, the IS solicited for fund-raising ideas to be submitted and reprinted in the monthly communications. "Sections and groups are invited to submit successful techniques they have used for raising funds for AI . . . Group 2 of Pinneberg, West Germany, for example raised 1,300 marks (about $250) during the 1972 Prisoner of Conscience Week by the simple device of preparing a huge cauldron of hot pea soup and dispensing it to passers-by on a cold Saturday morning" (AI, 1974b). Two months later, it was announced that "Group 4 of the Norwegian Section raised 20,000 Norwegian kroner last November in a one-day sale of antiques, paintings, sculpture, books, and other works of art. Group Number 2 of the Danish Section raised 900 Danish kroner with an evening of folk

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dancing which was combined with a fashion show at which sandwiches, coffee and second-hand clothes were sold" (AI, 1974c).

The addition of these local attempts at resolving the budget crisis presented themselves as cultural gatherings, at which supporters of AI could donate small amounts and contribute to a larger cause. In 1976, however, the United Kingdom section tread a similar path, but on a grander scale, using its own national cultural resources and setting into motion a trend that would define the period.

At this point, Amnesty International's coffers were essentially empty, and the organization teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, while facing enormous pressures to produce results (Biskind, 2004, p. 44; Harrington, 1986). Peter Luff, then assistant director of Amnesty International, received a check at the AI-UK office from an individual donor signed "J. Cleese" (Scheinman, 2008). The check was from John Cleese of Monty Python's Flying Circus, and Luff considered the possibility that Cleese would want to be involved in fund-raising in a more central capacity. The possibility of hosting an event featuring high-profile comedians would raise the exposure of Amnesty International itself and the general awareness of human rights, as well as much needed funds. Cleese, collaborating with music and television producer Martin Lewis, founded the events known collectively as the Secret Policeman's Balls. "A Poke in the Eye (with a Sharp Stick)," as the first official show was called, was held in 1976 at Her Majesty's Theater and raised $40,000 for Amnesty by bringing together Cleese and his comedic comrades (McCall, 1991, p. 46; Harrington, 1986). The first three events have become known as landmark events in the history of British comedy because they assembled, for the first time ever, two legendary comedy troupes, Beyond the Fringe and Monty Python, on one stage. The third annual show, for the first time termed "The Secret Policeman's Ball," broadened the entertainment to include composer John Williams and guitarist Peter Townshend of The Who. As the years went on, the shows grew in prominence, were better attended, and became more lucrative.

Despite its success, the event remained a British phenomenon. In 1981, however, its profile was elevated once again by the inclusion of hugely popular musicians, like Sting, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, and Bob Geldof. Performers, drawn to the event by its humanitarian impulse, donated their services for no compensation. The Secret Policeman's Ball was a key impetus for the mass benefit concerts to follow, including Geldof's Live Aid. The live events were recorded and sold as record albums and movies to a larger audience, beyond that which could possibly fit in the intimate theaters where the events were held. Harvey and Bob Weinstein, at the time unproven American film producers who would go

on to found Miramax Pictures and to become highly influential figures, distributed *The Secret Policeman's Ball* for the American audience. Screening the film at a popular Los Angeles festival in 1982 catapulted the series to higher levels and went on to generate $6 million in revenue (Biskind, 2004, p. 46). It is unclear how much of that Amnesty International ever saw, but, as Martin Lewis has said, "What they'd [the Weinsteins] said to us was that the theatrical was going to generate more publicity and heat for the home video and TV. Was Amnesty unhappy? Our expectations on this were minimal, zero. Amnesty was thrilled beyond words" (quoted in Biskind, 2004, p. 46). The franchise spun off comedy and music albums and in-theater and at-home versions of the stage show, all of which sold remarkably well. Having surpassed their modest goals, these benefit events went on hiatus until their re-emergence in 1987.

In the meanwhile, the US section of AI was feeding off the success of the American exposure to the Secret Policeman's Balls and sought to capitalize on the public fervor around humanitarian issues. In 1984, following a large donation by U2 derived from the proceeds of a December 3 show at Radio City Music Hall in New York, AIUSA executive director Jack Healey began pursuing the young Irish rock band to headline a future concert tour to celebrate Amnesty's twenty-fifth birthday (McGee, 2006). By August 1985, Healey had a commitment from U2 to headline a tour set to stop in six American cities, named "The Conspiracy of Hope Tour," and would feature The Police (reunited), Peter Gabriel, Jackson Browne, Lou Reed, and Joan Baez (who first performed for AI during the 1973 launch of the antitorture campaign in Paris), among others. For Bono of U2 and Sting of The Police, the root of their affiliation with Amnesty was their association with The Secret Policeman's Ball, Bono as a viewer and Sting as a performer (Fricke, 1986, p. 99). The purpose of the tour was to enlist 25,000 new American members to commit to write one letter a month for one year toward the release of six prisoners of conscience (POCs) (Morley, 1986, p. 56). When the dust settled on this first spectacular event, AIUSA had matched its annual budget in revenue ($3 million raised), tripled its membership (45,000 newly enlisted), and released four of the six POCs (McGee, 2006). This concert tour idealizes the kind of success the synthesis of the benefit concert format, popular culture, and political action can produce.

Following the enormous success of Conspiracy of Hope, Healey set his sights higher, hoping to broaden the scope of the project, while readjusting the project's goals. Instead of quantitative thresholds, Healey shifted his language toward a more abstract agenda: "This was always planned as a consciousness-raising event, not a fund-raising one" (Henke, 1988, p. 15). Therefore, the 1988 "Human Rights Now!" tour, coinciding with

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the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration, set out to travel the world over a six-week period, visiting major European cities such as London, Paris, and Budapest, as well as those in India, Zimbabwe, and Brazil. However, a project of this scale would be an overwhelming undertaking even for the ambitious Healey, and shortly after development had begun, it became clear that the financial cost of the tour was unsustainable. Therefore, AI sought a partnership to help underwrite the tour and settled on Reebok, a producer of athletic apparel who agreed to fund 50 percent of the total cost ($8 million) and front overhead as well ($2 million); the other approximately $9 million would be recouped by ticket prices, merchandising, and the sale of broadcast rights (Henke, 1988, p. 15). It is estimated that 1.2 million people worldwide attended the concerts and witnessed performances by Sting, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, and the Senegalese sensation Youssou N'Dour, as well as local featured artists (Rolling Stone, 1988, p. 118). Without question, the Amnesty International profile had never been grander. The human rights movement ran away with the concept of the benefit concert and executed its plans effectively. Despite its ambitions being considerably larger than its budget could withstand, Amnesty's ability to internationalize the benefit concert, coupled with the request for membership dues and the demand for political action, proved to be a winning formula for the accomplishment of its objectives.

Live Aid and the Emergence of the Mass Benefit Concert

The Amnesty International benefit events that began on a modest scale expanded quickly from theaters and concert halls to arenas and stadiums; and even wider audiences were targeted through the secondary marketing and sales of films and albums. This transition, from intimate shows to mass events, is a crucial transformation in the history of "charity rock" and is largely attributed to one person: Sir Bob Geldof. Before The Secret Policeman's Ball, George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh in 1971 was the one predecessor that had set the tone for the larger concerts to bloom in the 1980s, as a singular event staged to generate funds for disaster relief in southern Asia. With this model in mind and inspired by his personal involvement with Amnesty, Bob Geldof set off on his own humanitarian expedition prompted by a BBC report by Michael Buerk on October 23, 1984, which described a "biblical famine" underway in war-torn Ethiopia. In now-infamous imagery, a young, British nurse was surrounded by thousands of starving people, clamoring for rations (Elliot, 2005). For

the Western audience, imagery of famine was not novel. According to Gill (2012):

> After a Save the Children Fund report on hunger in northern Ethiopia in early 1983, a television appeal in Britain raised almost £2 million. In July 1984, more than three months before the Buerk reports, ITV had shown a full-length documentary *Seeds of Despair* shot over many weeks as famine tightened its group. Another public appeal was then launched which raised almost £10 million. (p. 37)

Yet, when Geldof saw this particular report on television, he was motivated to do something grandiose to bring relief to those Ethiopians suffering from easily remediable circumstances, so he began to assemble the organization that would become known as Band Aid and the concert, Live Aid.

Band Aid and Live Aid rivaled in spectacle the news report that spawned their existence. In December 1984, Band Aid, composed of UK rockers Phil Collins, George Michael, David Bowie, Boy George, Queen, U2, Duran Duran, and others, released the perennial holiday hit "Do They Know Its Christmas?" A lamentation on inequality, the song launched during the holiday seasons in the United Kingdom and United States and played on themes of altruism familiar to the mainstream audience. The lyrics contrasted the spirit of giving, of warmth, and of happiness that accompanies the Christmas season in the West with the negligence and desperation of Africa. Gill (2012) states, "As Ethiopians have pointed out ever since, they did of course know it was Christmas because the starving were mainly Christians" (p. 12). Furthermore, in the dawning era of Music Television (MTV), the music video captured the arrival of the artists at the studio and the recording of the single. Yet, in the music video for this monumental song, there was no imagery of famine—only a behind-the-scenes look at pop stars rehearsing and carousing with one another. This visual presentation suggested an intentional detachment of the donor audience from the recipients of humanitarian aid, facilitated through popular culture; this alienated linkage focused attention on the celebrities as conduits of the humanitarian message while maintaining the audience at a safe emotional distance from the victims' suffering.

Simultaneously, Geldof was in preparation for Live Aid, a massive concert to be held six months later in cities in three different countries—Philadelphia, London, and Sydney (Ullestad, 1992, p. 41)—which also boasted satellite concerts in Moscow, Cologne, Yugoslavia, The Hague, Holland, Vienna, and Norway (Hillmore, 1985). The events were broadcast to a worldwide audience of between 1.5 and 2 billion people, with

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syndicated telethons in 22 countries that asked viewers to give of themselves to assist those less fortunate (Coleman, 1990). Despite modest projections, the initial take from these megaevents reached $67 million (Garofalo, 1992, p. 27), and the subsequent sale of books and miscellaneous merchandise eventually topped $120 million (Ockenfels & Tannenbaum, 1990). This money was earmarked for specific development projects, such as "the purchase of water-drilling rigs to help with irrigation; various agricultural projects, including reforestation; medical aid; and the purchase of trucks and trailers for transportation of food and supplies" (Garofalo, 1992, p. 28).

Despite the panoply of critiques against which Live Aid was vulnerable (some of which will be explored below), there was a deliberate decision to frame the purpose around emergency aid for suffering people. "Long-term aid is less exciting than the Seventh Calvary arriving with food to bring people back to life," admitted Geldof (Garofalo, 1992, p. 28). Live Aid became a seminal moment in the history of popular culture and politics because of the wave of copycat events it inspired: Farm Aid, Fashion Aid, Sports Aid, Hear'n Aid, Visual Aid (Pareles, 1985), Comic Relief, Sun City, and USA for Africa—all programs that began or occurred by the end of 1985 and served some social purpose. The integration of popular culture and cause campaigns saturated the 1980s, becoming ubiquitous features of prime-time television and penetrating mainstream public consciousness.

USA for Africa was the American rejoinder to Band Aid. Coordinated by prodigal producer Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie penned the anthem "We Are the World," communicating a latent cosmopolitanism and concern for the welfare of those suffering from malnutrition and starvation in Africa. This organization emerged after release of the song and was designed as a short-lived, but lofty, operation "to meet immediate famine relief needs in Africa, to provide necessary materials and supplies to the destitute people in Africa to enable them to become self-sufficient, to provide funds for long-term economic development, . . . to provide emergency food, clothing, shelter and medical relief to needy people in the United States." This description included its domestic work, constituted by 10 percent of its budget, which resulted in the Hands across America campaign to combat homelessness and poverty in the United States (Scott & Mpanya, 1994, p. 3). From the proceeds of the song alone, in 1985, USA for Africa raised $50 million, which would rise to a single-year figure of $98.6 million by 1989, its final year of full operation (p. 57). The sheer fact of having generated numbers of this magnitude from the production of one hit single is staggering and in significant ways builds on the success of previous events. Production of

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the cause song "We Are the World" signaled a new approach to marketing human rights that combined thoroughly commercial approaches to outreach with traditional measures. Celebrity presence at events such as Live Aid spawned a relationship between humanitarian causes and the rich and famous that to us today seems natural. Through this process, however, politics dropped out of the campaigns, favoring an apolitical, charitable appeal.

A Tense Partnership: Human Rights and Consumer Culture

Despite its pragmatism, the consequences of mainstreaming human rights expose deep contradictions within this movement pertaining to the way in which it relates to power and politics as such. To the extent that human rights organizations express their affiliation with a specific set of universal norms and position themselves to be the voice of the voiceless and the defenders of human dignity, they project an image of being outside of and above politics. Perhaps this is a wishful approximation, but it is historically salient that the human rights movement is born from the depths of the Cold War at an intentional distance from the ideological polarization of the period, without "building blocks" or prerequisites for membership; one need not belong to a certain faith group, caucus with a specific political party, or subscribe to any prescribed system of beliefs (Hopgood, 2006, p. 7). Universal human rights were expressed as a middle ground to pursue social justice while avoiding particularistic entanglements, geopolitical and otherwise. Despite this desire, the content of human rights claims requires negotiating with political actors and political structures in political contexts. Criticizing the conduct of a government is an overtly political act, even if it defends universal values and lacks explicit ideological commitments.

Amnesty International embodies this tension and consistently projects itself as an apolitical organization—that is, nonideological, nonpartisan, and unaligned. Regardless of this design, political calculations are indeed crucial elements in human rights struggles. Human rights organizations may not take sides in an armed conflict or advocate on behalf of candidates for elected office, but human rights remain a political matter as their advocates engage in challenging arbitrary and unjust exercises of power. Even in these early benefit concert events that revolved around celebrities and entertainment, Amnesty maintained its emphasis on political action by focusing on enlarging membership and directing supporters to write letters. Letter writing has been at the core of AI's platform since its inception. Dues-paying members organized into local chapters "adopt"

prisoners of conscience and respond to urgent action alerts with letters to foreign heads of state. Membership dues are a simple way to invest activists in the organization, as well as generate funds for the central operation. The possibility of building a permanent, standing human rights movement was paramount in the minds of the architects; thus, the membership model was their way of articulating the necessity for investment and commitment. It was not sufficient for the members to merely serve as donors. The letter-writing campaigns evidence the participatory nature of Amnesty International. AI's model suits its identity and its purposes and has proven to be an effective structure.

Executing campaigns for human dignity as simple expressions of crude consumerism and celebrity idol worship relegates the political dimensions of crisis. The evidence suggests that the deployment of popular culture in the campaign for famine alleviation smoothed the edges around a complicated problem and unfastened the political from the economic. Because consumption was utilized as a mechanism for attracting supporters, the deeply political situation in Ethiopia was obfuscated by the cries of rock stars for donations. I contend that the emphasis on consumerism and commercialism squeezed out political concerns in favor of simplistic narratives of innocence, suffering, and resource depletion when, in fact, a war was underway.

That there was a civil war raging in Ethiopia during the famine was a key fact conspicuously absent from all campaign messaging. Not only was the war occurring contemporaneously, food was also being used as a weapon of war. But in the humanitarian campaign, there was no discussion of the politics of the famine or the way in which food was being leveraged by Colonel Mengitsu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, who was engaged in battle with separatist groups from Eritrea and Tigray. Alex de Waal argued that the 1984 famine was not the product of drought at all but that drought merely accentuated circumstances on the ground—namely, "the bombing of markets in rebel-held areas; restrictions on movement and trade; the forced relocation of population; and finally the manipulation of relief programs" (1997, p. 117). The final element on de Waal's list is the most scandalous when one considers the impact of humanitarian aid. In order to gain access to rural populations and mediate the flow of money, the United Nations Emergency Office for Ethiopia made arrangements with Mengitsu and subsequently defended his policies of military bombardment and resettlement so as to certify the UN's in-country presence (pp. 123–24). "There is no doubt that this relief program supported President Mengitsu militarily and politically. In Tigray, very few rural people and very many soldiers were fed by the relief. The humanitarian effort prolonged the war, and with it, human suffering" (p. 127). This

conclusion supports a central thesis of this chapter with respect to negative externalities: the absence of politics in the humanitarian campaign for famine relief permitted the warring parties to manipulate the aid relief.

Furthermore, in light of de Waal's credible analysis, we may hypothesize about counterfactuals. If the masses of supporters, who were so moved by the impassioned pleas of Geldof, Bono, and company, were all more attuned to the political realities of Ethiopia, perhaps there could have been a sustained call for an investment into a durable peace to end the war and with it to end the starvation. Had the appeal been to write letters, attend rallies, and employ direct-action tactics targeting elected officials, perhaps Western political will could have been motivated to intervene in a sensible and meaningful way. This is one alternate history.

But this reality never took shape as the central force of the messaging emerging from the campaign. Instead of confronting the facts of the war and the way in which food aid was being used as a device utilized to execute a massive resettlement plan, the humanitarian movement focused on the famine and its "natural" causes. As Geldof himself wrote, "This was what the concert was all about: . . . hunger. About hunger, about drought, about famine. About despair" (Hillmore, 1985, p. 40). The central premise informing the movement was that suffering in Ethiopia was "all for want of food," which of course was true in a certain sense, but it also obscured the actual nature of the crisis and complicated relief efforts (p. 42). When provisions began reaching Ethiopia in greater volumes as the pop culture campaign ramped up, the aid itself was strategically placed and then moved to suit Mengitsu's military objectives. In order to undercut support for the rebels, he sought to relocate hundreds of thousands of civilians from the Tigray and Wollo regions. Not only was the resettlement program a hindrance to the distribution of food aid, but the distribution centers were set up as a destination for those Mengitsu wished to resettle; relief provisions were also withheld until after the resettlement program concluded (Human Rights Watch, 1991). The deliberate manipulation of global humanitarian actors for the purpose of domestic counterinsurgency is an essential fact of this conflict that was lost on the Live Aid crowd. Rather than seeking a peaceful reconciliation to the conflict and therefore easing the transfer of aid and mitigating famine conditions, the campaigners maintained a narrative that avoided political questions of power and war in favor of apolitical humanitarian neutrality.

This position relied on a specific and limited set of tactics that flow directly from this neutral assessment of the crisis: people are suffering from a lack of resources; therefore, more resources will alleviate their suffering. The sole purpose of Band Aid, Live Aid, and USA for Africa was

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to generate money and put that money into the hands of those who could make a difference. Again, Geldof wrote, hoping to compel the compassionate to do more than just care: "What is needed now is more money, lots more money. That's so much more important than sympathy and sorrow" (Hillmore, 1985, p. 46). The only modest political angle in this equation was the way in which these movements mobilized Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom to devote national resources to the aid effort in the form of donations, as well as logistics and command throughout the delivery process. Geldof, in fact, was not shy about articulating the need for state support of humanitarian efforts and engaged in a famed shouting match with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher over the weakness of the official British response (Garfield, 2004). Despite this tenacity, there did not appear to have been any call for states or civil societies to engage the crisis in Ethiopia politically or diplomatically—to end the war or at least to protect civilians.

Another plausible alternative would have been to design a campaign calling for political intervention in the internal affairs of Ethiopia for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of innocent civilians. In this case, it would have led to a clash of 1985 Cold War geopolitics and would have extended Western countries into areas that stretched or conflicted with national interests. From an advocacy perspective, this would have been a taller task that would have required greater commitment on behalf of supporters (precisely the kind witnessed in the movement to end apartheid in South Africa). Due to the complexities of the political route, humanitarian neutrality permits a quick entry into the crisis and creates space for emergency response. But it would not have been out of step to think about famine as a complex humanitarian emergency. "In 1984, the year of the big Ethiopian famine, the World Food Council of the United Nations pronounced, 'Hunger today is largely a man-made phenomenon: human error or neglect creates it, human complacency perpetuates it and human resolve can eradicate it'" (Hillmore, 1985, p. 3). Yet, humanitarian movements are inherently ill equipped for action that confronts state interest and are not disposed toward challenging global structures of power, such as neoliberal capitalism (Müller, 2013). Rather, humanitarianism, as a mode of ethical action in the world, folds neatly into preexisting structures and magnifies and multiplies prevailing forms of authority.

Ultimately, the humanitarian movement for famine relief designed and executed a deliberate, focused strategy: if masses of ordinary people are made to feel compassion toward suffering Ethiopians, then they may be compelled to contribute to the alleviation of this suffering; if sufficient awareness is raised about this suffering, and if sufficiently low demands are made of the audience, then overall participation and output will be high.

I believe that this formula drives the humanitarian movement to this day and also explains its deep, profound connection to celebrity, popular culture, and consumerism. Context and details—those that most closely and accurately mirror the truth and portray crisis in the most factual way—are sacrificed at the altar of expediency. In the process, misguided advocacy strategies drive misinformed and malignant interventions. As Ethiopia became the monumental event in the history of humanitarianism that we now know it to be, many lessons were learned. However, the negative unintended consequences of campaign appeals based in patterns of mass consumption continue today, relying on sheer volume to outweigh the downsides of the messaging.

The paradox inherent in deploying celebrity spokespersons for humanitarian causes is clear to the audience member, forcing the presenters to continually justify their tactics. Indeed, it became a task in itself to foreground the entertainment of Live Aid, while also concentrating the audience's attention on the famine, and the concert's official communication exerted effort to emphasize how charitable the artists were in donating their time for this important cause. For instance:

> In between one of his exits, David Bowie introduces a specially made video about the famine in Africa. He decided at the last minute to drop one of his songs in favor of the video. A rock star without an ego? This day is certainly unique. After the noise, a sudden hush and stillness falls over Philadelphia and Wembley, and in millions of homes. More money is received at that moment than at any other point of the day. (Hillmore, 1985, p. 128)

The juxtaposition of egotistical rock star and desperate famine victim is ever present in mass appeal campaigns, and this contradiction sits with awkward tension. Why should middle-class television audiences be asked to donate small change while these celebrities could wipe malnutrition away forever with the stroke of a pen? Bono and his wife, following Live Aid, did voyage to Ethiopia to work at a feeding center, in order to allay his own "uneasiness at U2 benefitting commercially from their participation in the historic Live Aid gig" (Gill, 2012, p. 13). This gesture notwithstanding, the class implications of the relationship constituted at the nexus of celebrity-audience-recipient demonstrates the gross inequality in wealth distribution and calls into question self-evident notions of global economic justice. However, instead of challenging unjust resource distribution or the system of consumer capitalism that facilitates it, audience members are lulled by entertainment and celebrity seduction. With consumerism as conduit, the movement and its adherents

are limited in their ability to explore and address root causes—root causes of famine in Ethiopia or systemic origins of resource scarcity and underdevelopment.

While human rights problems are complex and require sophisticated remedies, there is no space for this kind of analysis within the framework of consumer culture. Stories are presented without contradictions, with clearly identifiable causes and correlated solutions. This is demonstrated most clearly in the famine-alleviation projects, where the root problems were obscured in favor of a slogan that communicated how the ability to help was within reach. The audience needs to hear such a thing in order to buy in. Because who wants to fight an uphill battle that may not be winnable? Who wants to become entrenched in local political conflicts with ethnic dimensions when the same issue can simply be glossed over as a symptom of natural calamity? Retreating from complexity to simplicity, from solidarity to charity, and from politics to neutrality are symptoms of an advocacy strategy that relies on the mass appeal of consumer culture. The seductive individualism of mass consumption marginalizes radical acts of social practice that threaten persistent power structures from which human rights abuse originate.

Conclusion

It is clear that new doors opened for human rights during the 1975–88 period. The deployment of popular cultural artifacts undeniably extended awareness of human rights to enormous numbers of people. Funding for human rights initiatives exploded as campaigns in the defense of human dignity gained mainstream popular appeal. Membership in human rights organizations rose significantly, enabling the expansion of casework for political prisoners and other issues. The market became a realm for conscious consumption that benefited human rights interests, while simultaneously satisfying individual desires. The channels through which human rights emerged were unique and groundbreaking. Average citizens were concerned with and invested in the welfare of other people, who might differ from them and whom they would never meet. This point cannot be overemphasized: the attempt to establish a global, grassroots movement permanently assembled for the protection of human rights everywhere is a novel occurrence in human history and was facilitated, in part, through patterns of mass consumption.

The 1980s exist in the popular imagination as a time of excess, as the "go-go" decade of Gordon Gekko, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and the yuppies. Donald Trump, T. Boone Pickens, and others personify the

hegemonic image of a society of excess, luxury, and status-based consumption. In the United States, financial deregulation and the rise of personal finance transformed this image into a reality for Wall Street traders and real estate tycoons. However, as the upper echelon reaped the benefits from transformations in the market, personal debt among home owners and consumers rose to new heights, widening the gap between rich and poor. The reality of the 1980s for the average person was more accurately reflected by stagnant wages, attacks on organized labor, and unemployment than "champagne wishes and caviar dreams."

The contradictions within consumer capitalism express themselves socially and culturally by influencing the desires of lower classes and projecting elite lifestyles as preferable and attainable. In this sense, trends in consumerism in the 1980s were injected with a forceful relevance that human rights organizations capitalized on in campaign design.

A generational effect also played a crucial role in the emergence of this phenomenon. As the baby boomer generation reached middle age in the 1980s and profited from the changes in personal finance, they were drawn to mass consumption, while retaining their 1960s cultural memory. The same cross section that invested in money market funds and stocks had been engaged in grassroots struggles 20 years prior. The generation that had rebelled at Woodstock, Stonewall, and Selma, maintained social consciousness, while being attracted by materialism. For this reason, charity rock registers such impact as the perfect synthesis of radical political culture and consumerism. Charity rock is the mass version of protest music but on a grander scale and with explicit emphasis on consumption as a mechanism for social change.

Yet, Herbert Marcuse and other intellectuals associated with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School warned us about the co-opting and commodifying effect of consumer capitalism on forces for social change. The concept of "one-dimensionality" suggests that the impact of mass consumption on culture and politics condemns radical alternative perspectives to the fringes of society and renders them ineffectual. To quote Marcuse on the influence of consumerism: "It solves this contradiction by closing all avenues of escape, protest, refusal and dissociation, by absorbing or defeating all effective opposition, by closing itself against qualitative social change, namely the emergence of qualitatively new forms of human existence, and by suffocating the need for social change" (2001, p. 88).

Consumers are submerged in the notion that any problem can be alleviated through the purchase of goods and services, thereby making it unnecessary to *politically* challenge power structures. The misery and pain of daily life can be ignored when consumers are pacified by the newest

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home entertainment system or blockbuster action film. Radical challenges to the status quo are relegated and the society of mass consumption becomes ultimately devoid of nonconformist perspectives. "And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves?" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 50). One-dimensionality is the collapse of multiple, contrarian perspectives in favor of a singular, flat vision for society.

In our terms, the concrete implications that arise from commodification suggest that locating human rights advocacy in commercialized terrain has a negative effect on the political capacity of the movement. It is my assertion that commodification affects political capacity by eliminating barriers to access and transforming human rights advocacy into a social practice that can be performed conveniently. On the face of it, this conclusion may seem counterintuitive: the crowning achievement of this period, from a human rights perspective, is how masses of ordinary people became aware of and involved in activism and action. By introducing pop culture tools into the strategic repertoire, human rights became a universe no longer reserved for lawyers, diplomats, philosophers, and professional advocates. By broadening the base of supporters for human rights and humanitarian campaigns, NGOs leveraged the grassroots effectively for the purposes of raising money and executing actions. However, by reducing obstacles to participation, by simplifying messages, and by articulating human rights as a practice that fits with affluent lifestyles and mainstream values, the movement projects an image of human rights divorced from politics. Building a movement founded on convenience cultivates consumers rather than activists, for whom political struggle is depicted as an entertaining pastime with quick fixes. Instead of an incremental battle waged through self-sacrifice and commitment, by challenging the exercise of power in a direct and confrontational way, convenient methods take the effort out of human rights struggle. The commodification of human rights advocacy transforms a political act into an economic transaction.

Finally, consumerism constrains the political capacity of advocacy campaigns from the outset by focusing on symptoms of structural abuse rather than on the structure itself. In its attempt to communicate simple messages and straightforward remedies to the audience, NGOs obscure the nature of problems themselves and obstruct the origins of abuse. When solutions are delimited by the official explanations, opportunities to address the deeper, structural tensions are in turn curtailed. Ultimately, the ready-made solutions for human rights abuse and humanitarian deprivation only address problems on the surface and do not require

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significant investment of time, energy, or money. These tactics do not require personal sacrifice, and they do not entail compromising convenience or comfort. Securing structural change and provoking institutional transformation take time and involve challenging entrenched power, prevailing culture, and dominant social relations.

The events in this chapter presented glimmers of the promise wherein market trends were infused with ethical substance, in many ways predating twenty-first-century commodity currents that identify goods as "fair trade," "green," or "cruelty-free." Solidarity with suffering people and on behalf of emancipatory causes can be expressed through shopping, but this equilibrium is easily upset, as self-indulgence lacking concern for others is a seductive feature of consumerism. It is difficult to imagine a truly radical movement emerging from the commercial sphere, but one that prioritizes political action and engagement is within the realm of possibility. And, perhaps, a "radical movement" is not what we should expect or desire. After all, it is more realistic (and maybe preferable) to imagine a broad base of civilians engaged in human rights and humanitarian campaigns only in a limited fashion. Undoubtedly, the human rights community should be lauded for its ability to expand moral boundaries and create linkages across political borders, even if they are forged by mass consumption and sentimentality. A central takeaway from a look into this history is the marked progress in making human rights engagement easier for ordinary people to participate in.

Recent incarnations of this model have fallen into similar pitfalls of superficial coverage and fleeting response, such as in the 2010 Haitian earthquake, when a new band of performers literally rerecorded "We Are the World" to bring attention and raise money for reconstruction. As the human rights movement continues to mature, the struggle to attract masses of people to the cause will morph to reflect changing cultural trends. Integrating political action into the lives and daily habits of otherwise unengaged people is not a simple task, nor does it lend itself to easy fixes. Sustaining the attention of audiences on the welfare of strangers on the other side of the globe is nearly an insurmountable objective and not an activity for which Westerners are particularly well suited. Even if it were, addressing the structural determinants of famine or stopping genocide are unimaginably complicated, notwithstanding the vast resources of states and international organizations. Leveraging citizen consumerism in the service of human rights protection has helped accelerate the advancement of norms over a relatively short period of time, but the process by which this has been accomplished also contains the seeds of its own undoing.

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Note

1. Based on this author's calculations from data in AI annual reports.

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