

INTRODUCTION

Batman Saves the Congo



Development aid is not what it used to be with [donor] agencies . . . doing most of the work—it’s now all about collaborations between the private sector, businesses and philanthropists.

—Official in a high-ranking donor agency in Kinshasa,
interview with author, June 15, 2016

Batman Saves the Congo

On March 26, 2015, Ben Affleck, the star of the recent movie *Batman*, arrived at the U.S. Capitol flanked by a new Robin, the founder of Microsoft and prominent philanthropist Bill Gates. In their appearance before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Affleck and Gates sat together at a table of witnesses that also included senior Congo experts (see Figure 1). But the attention of the media and senators was focused on the celebrities. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut tweeted his photo of the event: “Batman testifying before Appropriations hearing on importance of foreign aid (oh, and @BillGates is here too).”¹

Gates was already a well-known disruptor, having changed how we think about information technology by revolutionizing the personal computer. He has since moved on to education and global health at the helm of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, credited with making charity big business (McGoey 2016). Affleck delivered his testimony with self-deprecation, inside jokes, and even a spoiler

concerning his then upcoming Batman movie. But, in his most serious moments, Affleck laid out his own vision of a Bill Gates–style disruption of development aid: complex development puzzles could be solved through *celebrity strategic partnerships* that link players inside and outside the aid sector and are supported by U.S. diplomatic and financial investments.

Rather than discuss the effectiveness of overseas development aid (ODA) in the abstract, the Caped Avenger quickly got to specifics, by drawing on the “case study” of the “transformation” potential of “smart, targeted public and private investments” in the Congo.² Referring to the work of the organization he founded, the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), Affleck described how the “opportunity to revitalize Congo’s coffee sector” had materialized. Partnering with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) (“our government”), the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, and Catholic Relief Services, ECI trained and supported coffee farmers and cooperatives with the help of capital from Westrock Coffee Company. Then, as Affleck explained, “the final puzzle piece was getting this



Figure 1. Ben Affleck and Bill Gates testifying before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee. Photograph by Ralph Alswang.

coffee into American homes, so ECI brought in another investor: Starbucks.”³ The U.S. coffee behemoth would soon acquire coffee beans from the Congo for sale in U.S. markets as part of its reserve collection.

Affleck concluded that the example of U.S. leadership combined with private-sector partners was creating a “transformative impact” in “one of the highest risk environments in the world.”⁴ In ways that benefited both the Congolese and investors, Affleck stressed how these strategic partnerships are “a clear testament to what’s possible for Congo. This isn’t charity or aid in the traditional sense. It’s good business.”⁵ Like any sound “business model,” the example provided by Affleck was meant to be “scalable” and “replicable,” a model of U.S. engagement not only for other regions in the Congo but also for the continent and the entire developing world.

Affleck’s presentation adopts the “win-win-ism” (Giridharadas 2018) heroics of neoliberal discourse, including the “opportunity to revitalize,” the “right partners,” “experts,” “investors,” “transformative impact,” and “donors-as-consumers” (see Marijnen and Verweijen 2016; Lynch 2013; Brough 2012). Affleck takes up an African cause and through his “affective visibility” as a celebrity seeks to brand and circulate an innovative narrative for resolving political and economic crises, a story-line that often replicates colonial and postcolonial representations of African victims and Western saviors (Fadlalla 2019; Mutua 2001). Affleck displays the work of his small nongovernmental organization (NGO) as a disruption to the usual business of development: what kind of business opportunities did “helping” the Congo present for a celebrity humanitarian, and who would actually profit from its disruption?

Anchored by celebrity-led organizations that link traditional actors (donor agencies) to nontraditional actors (corporations, capital asset management firms, and philanthropists), celebrity strategic partnerships rely on the infrastructure, the expertise, and even the exact same projects as traditional development actors. Celebrities function as elite players in North–South relations (of humanitarianism, advocacy, development, and foreign policy) whose authenticity, convening power, and access are key to the creation of these disruptive partnerships. The contemporary landscape of development is

predicated on “sustainable development through global partnerships,” the theme of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, that make development financing, implementation, and ideals part of a global business model (Mawdsley 2018; Scheyvens et al. 2016; Vaggi 2018; van Zanten and van Tulder 2018).⁶ Thus, celebrity strategic partnerships become the new ways that traditional celebrity humanitarianism (Richey and Brockington 2020; Richey and Budabin 2016; Brockington 2014) is institutionalized as part of the development field. Yet, ironically, celebrity humanitarians loudly claim to be disruptors “working aid out of business” by providing private-sector solutions to local development problems.⁷

Our book analyzes what celebrity strategic partnerships are doing to disrupt humanitarian space by focusing on the relationships celebrities create with other donors, implementers, and Congolese recipients. Our main argument is that while celebrity strategic partnerships claim to disrupt the usual politics of development and humanitarianism, they instead lay bare the practices of elite networking, visibility, and profitable helping that characterize these fields of North–South relations.

Combining ethnography, political economy, and narrative analysis, this study pushes knowledge of celebrity humanitarianism beyond critiques of mediatization or compassion-fatigued donor audiences. Findings from our deep-dive case study challenge arguments emanating from three academic areas of interest. First, international development scholarship would suggest that in these new and “disruptive” celebrity strategic partnerships, celebrity humanitarians on the ground might have acted differently from experienced, old-fashioned, traditional donors and implementers. Instead, our book shows how celebrities and their partners (corporations, capital asset management firms, and philanthropists) are elite players in an elitist field who disrupt very little. Second, studies of celebrity politics would lead us to expect that the institutionalization of a long-term investment and collaboration in celebrity strategic partnerships would make them more accountable than the more commonly found shortsighted celebrity do-gooding. Our book explains why they are not. These forms of celebrity humanitarianism maintain an “affective visibility” to the benefit of elites and traditional aid actors in the field but

are subjected to limited demands for accountability to any constituency. Finally, understandings of global politics might have suggested that celebrity strategic partnerships' ability to bring together a broader range of shareholders to direct the enterprise of development would have led to better representation of Congolese voices among them. This was not the case; instead, the postdemocratic politics of North–South relations was cloaked in the attractive guise of partnership.

While clearly not “working aid out of business,” these partnerships do differ from traditional development in three ways: (1) by bringing in new funding actors from the philanthropic and corporate worlds; (2) by drawing popular attention and the potential of public scrutiny to the work of development and humanitarian agencies; and (3) by successfully disseminating the business model for development to popular and elite audiences. *Batman Saves the Congo* shows how celebrity strategic partnerships bring the benefits of technological innovation, new types of expertise, and new sources of funding along with risks related to privatization, including lack of accountability, diminished transparency, and misaligned objectives. While some readers will question the value of so much research on a small organization founded by a rapidly fading star, this case of a celebrity strategic partnership is about understanding the misfit between the politics of high-risk, innovation-reliant, elite-biased partnerships and the politics of sustainable development that relies on a more democratic agenda. These politics of development are at the center of transnational “helping” celebrity, or otherwise.

This book charts Affleck's disruptive practices to development through a bricolage approach (Kincheloe 2001) combining (1) ethnography (interviews and participant observation with humanitarian and development actors in Washington, D.C.; New York; London; Kinshasa; and Eastern Congo); (2) political economy (analysis of the partners, power relations, and funding involved in the strategic alliance); and (3) narrative analysis (texts and visuals that constitute celebrity humanitarian communications). Specific information about these methods and data collection is provided in Appendix A. Our research design that combines review of media events in the public domain with field research in the Global South will expand knowledge

within the fields of international development and humanitarianism, media and communication, and global politics.

This interdisciplinary study is relevant for understanding the linkages between celebrities, businesses, and consumers in the North who want to “save the Congo” and the complex relationships they support that produce, at best, mixed results for humanitarian helping on the ground—helping the helpers more than the helped. Our book offers a case of the neoliberalization of development through celebrity strategic partnerships, and our example comes from the policy interface between the United States and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (henceforth the Congo). Development and humanitarianism become “neoliberal” when the state–society relationship is organized in favor of business actors and the market is considered the most efficient and most moral provider of public goods. While recognizing that international development or humanitarian interventions have never been predicated upon democracy but have been based on the drive toward modernization (see Brooks 2017), we conclude that these processes involving celebrity strategic partnerships still challenge democratic politics in specifically interesting ways.

*Ben Affleck, the Eastern Congo Initiative,
and Strategic Partnerships*

Ben Affleck is a well-known Hollywood figure. He has been featured in more than fifty films and has earned major awards for his work as a screenwriter, director, and producer. His personal life has made him a popular figure for tabloid scrutiny, especially his dating life and marriage (now ended) to fellow actor Jennifer Garner. He has also been active in various causes and charities, from voting to cancer awareness to support for veterans.⁸ In 2016, Affleck took his turn playing the wealthy Bruce Wayne turned Gotham superhero Batman for the Warner Bros. DC film series. According to media reports, it was around 2007 that Affleck began thinking about becoming more intentional with his philanthropy, “with both a renewed reputation and abiding political aspirations at stake.”⁹ He got advice from fellow celebrities and contracted with a strategic management consulting firm to lay the groundwork for an NGO that would provide him

foreign policy expertise. These elite contacts are just one part of the story.

In 2010, Affleck launched the Eastern Congo Initiative, an NGO with offices in Washington, D.C., and Goma. From the start, ECI was presented to the American public as a “disruptor” that would change how humanitarianism and development would be “done.” The organization takes a two-pronged approach as both an advocacy organization and a grantor, thus straddling political and humanitarian objectives. Moreover, these activities take place across two sites—the United States and Eastern Congo. ECI’s structure and approach have been considered innovative by experts and observers in the field.¹⁰ Affleck’s organization operates with special access, diversified funding, and significant support of elite actors within philanthropy, development, and humanitarian circuits.¹¹ These attributes set ECI apart from other development organizations in its potential for influence and impact. Results include Affleck’s repeated invitations to speak before the U.S. Congress, leading one blogger to ask: “Can Batman Save Congo?”¹²

Aside from a few snide remarks about Affleck’s lack of expertise and his connection to the Batman series, there have been no publicly voiced objections to his work or that of his organization. To the contrary, there has been a wholesale embrace of his work by development and humanitarian circles; endorsers include the Borgen Project,¹³ *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*,¹⁴ and the Global Philanthropy Forum.¹⁵ He was given a Global Child Advocate Award by Save the Children (alongside Tony Blair)¹⁶ and an honorary doctorate degree from Brown University that, in addition to his artistic accomplishments as a director, filmmaker, and actor, recognized his contributions as a humanitarian advocate.¹⁷ Affleck has also received extensive friendly media coverage for his organization and has had his own writings published in the *New York Times*, *Politico*, *Time* magazine, and the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁸ These connections and public endorsements form the basis for his credibility and have their roots in connections from williamsworks, the strategic management consulting firm that he engaged to support his humanitarian activities. One outcome of this elite network is the four invitations Affleck has received to provide witness testimony at congressional hearings (see

Appendix B). The other outcome is his access to financial capital that supports a series of interventions that reach their pinnacle in the use of celebrity strategic partnerships.

With advice from experts and consultants, Affleck has avoided many of the missteps of previous celebrity humanitarians. Some academics and Congo experts have been cautiously enthusiastic about Affleck's work. Kate Cronin-Furman, an expert in mass atrocities and human rights, sees Affleck as "the rare celebrity who has gotten involved in advocacy in a careful, productive way. He educated himself on the issues, hired good people on the ground and doesn't run his mouth on stuff he doesn't know about."¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Africanist expert Laura Seay finds more to criticize in congressional hearings themselves than in Affleck's remarks: "What we see in [his] testimony is someone who clearly understands the issues at hand, who has a smart staff that has briefed him well and, more importantly, who isn't afraid to admit when he doesn't know the answer to a question."²⁰

Political actors have been delighted at the attention drawn to the Congo. According to the Global Philanthropy Forum, media coverage of Affleck's work has reached 500 million viewers across the world.²¹ The U.S. special envoy to the African Lakes region, Russ Feingold, said admiringly, "Ben's group and the people involved are one of the few who are really helping make it obvious to the American public that this requires our attention."²² This warm reception has led to high-level access for Affleck and ECI (see Appendix B). As Rajiv Shah, Administrator of USAID, recounts, "They've been in to see the president, the secretary [of state]. Their efforts have made a huge difference."²³

In addition to drawing attention to the Congo, as is expected of a celebrity humanitarian, Affleck has promoted the use of celebrity strategic partnerships, reinforcing development trends that favor neoliberal interventions. In his most high-profile partnership to date, Affleck assembled the *Kahawa Bora* project, a four-year project to support coffee farmers in Eastern Congo with funding from USAID and the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, loan capital from Westrock Coffee Company, implementation by Catholic Relief Services, World Coffee Research, and ECI (on which we elaborate in chapter 5). The

vision promulgated by Affleck during the Senate hearing in 2015 became a reality the following year. Starbucks launched its first single-origin specialty coffee from South Kivu in 1,500 stores across North America and online. A high-ranking donor in Kinshasa explained, in the quotation with which we began this chapter: “Development aid is not what it used to be with [donor] agencies . . . doing most of the work—it’s now all about collaborations between the private sector, businesses and philanthropists.”²⁴ USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah has called this a “new model of development,” one that relies on high-impact partnerships “to harness innovation and scale” as described.²⁵ With his convening power as a celebrity figure, Affleck has built strategic partnerships with players like USAID Administrator Shah (see Figure 2) inside and outside development including foundations, philanthropists, and corporations. This power is called out by other humanitarian workers on the ground in the Congo, as we demonstrate in chapter 6. Reflecting on the personal relationships between celebrities and authorities in the development world, one aid worker in Kinshasa explained: “If the celebrity said that



Figure 2. Ben Affleck and USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah at the conference Child Survival Call To Action held in Washington, D.C., in June 2012. Photograph by USAID.

something was going to happen, then it would, regardless of if it's the right thing to do."²⁶

Congo Context: Batman's Roots in Empire and Colonialism

The site of Affleck's intervention is Eastern Congo, known in many Northern advocacy, development, and policy-making spheres as a region plagued by political instability, a crisis of governance, and fighting between security forces and armed militias. As a country, the Congo maintains prominence on the world stage due in large part to its supply of ivory, gold, rubber, and other valuable minerals. Despite its rich stores or in spite of its resources, the Congo is today one of the least developed countries in the world, and its status has worsened over the past decade, dropping from its rank of 167 in 2006 to 179 in the 2019 Human Development Index.²⁷ On the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) list of fragile countries, the Congo is fifth from the bottom, with continuing deterioration in its security and political dimensions.²⁸ Because of atrocities committed in the name of natural resources from slaves to coltan, the Congo also has a history as a "land of humanitarian interventions" (Kabemba 2013). In particular, Eastern Congo has long been a site of externalization that has been on the receiving end of a parade of "helpers" and "do-gooders," including development and advocacy NGOs and celebrities.

We follow Robert van Krieken by situating "a critique of celebrity humanitarianism as an exercise in contemporary colonialism in the context of the history of colonialism itself" (2016, 190). Many trace the origins of the Congo's descent to the fragile Congo Free State created during the colonial period 1885–1908 under King Leopold II of Belgium, whose legendary exploitation of the region instilled a patrimonial system mimicked by later leaders. Exploitation of the Congo's resources and land acquisition was accompanied by grave human rights violations such as killing, rape, and mutilation, among other humiliating practices (Hochschild 1998, 166). In particular, a rubber boom ensued when demand rose rapidly for wiring and machinery

and, later, for transportation purposes for bicycles and the automobile (Pavlakis 2016, 8).

Affleck's twenty-first-century celebrity humanitarianism has historical roots in early twentieth-century campaigns to "save" the Congo. To coerce change by the Belgian authorities in their colony, a movement coalesced that included public awareness campaigns, witness accounts, media coverage, atrocity photographs, and celebrity humanitarians. What was the determination to "save" the Congo a hundred years ago has today become the endeavor to "solve the Congo," sustaining an inexorable moral impulse that links Northern do-gooders to complex humanitarian situations in the South, particularly Africa (see Fadlalla 2019). The role of the celebrity humanitarian can be placed in the nineteenth century as part and parcel of empire; as van Krieken argues:

as European empires expanded, the contact between Europeans and indigenous populations intensified, provoking increasing violence and abuse, stimulating greater concern among those with a particular Christian morality about the treatment of other human beings, in turn, requiring the mechanism of celebrity to influence public opinion and official policymakers. (2016, 206)

In the colonial Congo, it is therefore unsurprising that celebrities were key figures among the many do-gooders who waged their own type of "intervention" to correct the mistakes of Belgian colonialism. That these celebrity humanitarians emerged from colonial powers like Britain makes their efforts on behalf of an indigenous population a tainted affair. Many twenty-first-century celebrity humanitarians will be no less circumspect in considering chains of responsibility for "empire" or "Western hegemony" that both enable and justify their interventions.

The radical reform movement to save the Congo evolved over many decades. In the 1890s, firsthand accounts of the violence that accompanied rubber extraction began to trickle out through missionaries and journalists (Hochschild 1998, 306). The first full exposé of the conditions in the Congo was an "Open Letter to King Leopold II

of Belgium” published in the *New York Herald* by the Black American lawyer and author George Washington Williams. As a model for future op-eds on human rights issues, the piece was a “public accusation armed with measured and detailed testimonial account” (Sliwinski 2006, 338). Following a 1903 parliamentary debate, the British House of Commons dispatched a British consul based in the Congo to gather evidence. Roger Casement produced a series of reports indicting King Leopold, rebutting the “humanitarian” and “civilizing” motivations that had led him to take control of the Congo as his personal property. Casement’s diary registered his unwavering judgment: “Infamous. Infamous, shameful system” (Hochschild 1998, 203).

A precursor to the celebrity strategic partnership promoted by Affleck can be seen in the work of the Englishman E. D. Morel at the turn of the twentieth century. In the heyday of linking fame to good causes overseas, the Victorian era saw a number of Britons like Morel gaining acclaim for campaigns against slavery, missionary activity, and imperial conquest (Brockington 2014, 56–58). Morel, like Affleck to follow, became one of the “white men trying to stop other white men from brutalizing Africans” (Hochschild 1998, 207). He used facts and figures available to him in his capacity as a clerk in a shipping line company to connect the dots between the Belgian King Leopold, Congo collaborators, and corporate allies that resulted in forced labor abuses (Hochschild 1998, 177–85). Morel quit his job, began to work as a journalist, and created a publication, *West African Mail*, to begin what we’d call now a “name and shame” campaign, wielding evidence to make a case against a perpetrator in the court of public opinion. His targets included King Leopold in Belgium and his allies, along with corporations and the Congo administration. In 1904, Morel founded the Congo Reform Association (CRA), with chapters in Europe and the United States to exert pressure on the Belgian, British, and U.S. governments. He mobilized public endorsements from a network of celebrities from across sectors—political, religious, and literary—that included members of Parliament; the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England; and the writers Joseph Conrad, Anatole France, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Mark Twain (Hochschild 1998, 207). In a parallel to later

celebrity humanitarianism, Morel amassed both fame for himself (he was later elected to Parliament) and support for his campaign against the Belgian Congo from a public that was receptive to the notion of bringing “civilization and progress to other parts of the world” (Brockington 2014, 56).

In an early version of commodity activism, links were made to consumer responsibility by raising awareness to Northern dependence on rubber. With the visceral invocation of bleeding, Morel’s book *Red Rubber* (1906) connected the newfound commodity to the brutal extraction processes, a precursor to the “blood” or “conflict diamonds” of 1990s advocacy campaigns. In its review of *Red Rubber*, the *Daily Chronicle* extended the mantle of complicity: “Rubber black with promises broken before the Powers of Europe and the United States, rubber red with blood, rubber which should stink in the nostrils of the Englishmen who—to their shame—grow fat on the profits of shipping it home.”²⁹ Yet, unlike other goods, such as sugar and cocoa, that spurred principled boycotts as part of antislavery campaigns, rubber was considered integral to the British economy, and no boycott was ever called for (Pavlakis 2016, 8). Likewise, in chapter 2, we will see how conflict minerals campaigns in the Congo that attempted boycotts would give way, later on, to buycotts (Kothari 2014).

Photographic evidence played a pivotal role in the Congo reform movement and contributed to a visual grammar of humanitarianism. The Congo reformers signaled the “first nongovernmental, humanitarian campaign to use atrocity photographs to mobilize sustained, international protest” (Grant 2015, 65). The English missionary Alice Seeley Harris furnished photographs of atrocities that were included in the *Red Rubber* book and in press coverage and were also shown as lantern slides in lecture tours that crossed the United States, England, and Europe (Hasian 2015). The photos show posed Congolese, children too, gazing at chopped-off feet and hands lying next to them or looking solemnly into the camera’s lens.³⁰ As Susie Linfield writes, “the Congo reform movement’s ability to force its audience to visualize Leopold’s cruelty . . . was a new and powerful tool” that not only stirred emotional responses among audiences but also “moved to action” (2007, 22). These atrocity photos encouraged “the belief

that the liberation of strangers' suffering was in the hands of distant spectators" (Sliwinski 2006, 356). The slide lectures, argued organizer John Harris, "appeal to the popular mind and . . . give people an idea of how the thing works out without laboring their minds with a burden of detail" (quoted in Pavlakis 2016, 189). Included in the Harris lantern slides was a photo of E. D. Morel (Figure 3), circulating and connecting his image to the campaign. Sitting at his desk in Africa, Morel gazes not at the camera but on distant space, a celebrity humanitarian pose that is familiar to us as one of heady contemplation and sense of purpose.



Figure 3. E. D. Morel sitting at a desk in a photograph from the Harris lantern slide collection. Anti-Slavery International. Photograph by Panos Pictures.

In their wide diffusion, the photographs and narratives from the colonial Congo era became iconic. Nancy Hunt explains: “some images from Leopold’s Congo traveled and were recycled, repackaged, and reframed, over and over again” (2008, 222). Sharon Sliwinski describes how the stories of a few subjects came to stand in as universal experiences; for example, “maimed children’s stories were obsessively repeated at hundreds of thousands of meetings (although usually without proper names)” (2006, 352).

Other aspects of the colonial repression, however, did not come to the fore. Charlotte Mertens has shown how eyewitness accounts and stories that had been buried in the archives offer evidence of practices of “sexual abuse as constitutive of colonial power,” but these were not included in movement narratives (2016, 8). Due to charges of prurience, Kevin Grant argues, “the reformers carefully gendered their displays of atrocity” (2015, 66). We see how humanitarians in the Victorian era struggled with encapsulating atrocity in ways that garnered support for and not rejection of the messengers.

With its “modest” goals that did not include taking on the larger structural systems of oppression, the Congo reform movement did reap some returns. The Belgian parliamentary committee affirmed the evidence laid out in the Casement Report in 1905 (Deibert 2013, 17). Three years later, King Leopold handed over authority to the Belgian parliament, and the country became the Belgian Congo. But the scramble for the Congo’s mineral wealth would continue—as the demand for rubber waned, the first diamond was discovered on the territory.

We will see how the environment that Affleck entered in the 2000s sustains many tropes of the colonial era to address conflict and crises in the Congo. This includes first of all the circulation of dominant narratives that paint the Congo as a site in need of humanitarian intervention by foreign entities. Claude Kabemba regards this historical practice of external engagement as “directed by an imperial/colonial mindset that sees the Congolese as backwards and ‘other’ and therefore as inferior and needing intervention” (2013, 140). The Congo reform movement revealed the conditions surrounding the extraction of rubber in the manner of fair-trade narratives that focus on the site of production of a commodity (Lekakis 2013), an

extraction coordinated by myriad actors such as the Belgian government and army, companies, and native armed groups. Second, the influence and access of the early movement was due in large part to celebrity figures such as Mark Twain and E. D. Morel working in partnership with political actors such as the British consul to the Congo Free State. Celebrities were key in engendering both emotional responses as well as political support among popular audiences (Sliwinski 2006, 344). Third, the campaign's use of testimonies and photographs was a forerunner to the "name and shame" methodology that has become standard practice in human rights work (Orentlicher 1990). Yet the narrative circulated by the movement was limited, narrowly constructing ideas about the effects of colonialism in the Congo that were tailored to the audience.

Overall, the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed the muddled politics of addressing empire and capitalism. The Congo Reform Association focused on the extraction practices as violating inhabitants' property and human rights. Notably, though, the Congo movement was a movement to reform, not decolonize. Morel was not antibusiness: indeed, he was a supporter of free trade, believing that "what was good for the merchants of Liverpool was good for Africa" (Hochschild 1998, 189). This patriotic stance shifted during World War I, when Morel became one of the few Britons to criticize the war and what he called "secret diplomacy"—a rare example of a celebrity humanitarian who turns his indignation inward toward domestic targets and causes.

Thus, a wholesale condemnation of "the business of empire and colonialism" and the larger structural imbalances of global trade practices was lacking. This history can contribute to contemporary debates that seek to unravel the connections between burgeoning celebrity humanitarianism and the persisting practices of empire and imperialism (see Kapoor 2013 and Biccum 2016). The rest of this book discusses how celebrity strategic partnerships draw on these legacies of colonialism and "helping" in ways that reflect and advance neoliberal logics, particularly as they link to privatization in development and justify external engagement to "save" and "solve" the Congo.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1, “Celebrity, Disruption, and Neoliberal Development,” presents the main concepts that anchor this book. We introduce and underscore the configuration celebrity strategic partnerships as neoliberal artifacts. We review the history of celebrities as political actors who have long been deployed as ambassadors for states and international institutions but now are headlining NGOs and corporate campaigns for causes, bringing about shifts in communication practices. We situate our case study of Affleck and ECI’s disruption as it reflects trends around deepening ties between corporate actors and traditional players in development and corporate social responsibility (CSR). We argue that the neoliberalization of development depends not only on strategic partnerships but also on market-based solutions that rely on the public, and thus on celebrity figures, to “sell” ideas of “helping” to both mass and elite audiences. We briefly introduce Eastern Congo as the fragile site where Affleck brought his neoliberal intervention, through unaccountable practices that are based on and further entrench elite politics in development.

Chapter 2, “Narrating the Congo: Dangerous Single Stories and the Organizations That Need Them,” lays the background for external engagement in the Congo by celebrity humanitarians and advocacy organizations. We draw on narrative analysis as a means for capturing the ways in which ideas about how to “save” and “solve” the Congo are circulated. We give a historical overview of recent interventions in the Congo involving both humanitarian relief and advocacy as transnational practices that emerged from the cycle of crises in the late 1990s. We argue that this terrain in the Congo has been slowly overtaken by (new) elite actors in political, cultural, and economic spheres in ways that produce and reproduce hegemonic narratives. This process has had mixed results, leading to increasing attention and funds to a neglected conflict but also refracting the country through narrow lenses. We explore the political economy of this terrain as resources—including celebrity humanitarians—were distributed across a handful of NGOs that came to dominate thinking about the Congo while Congolese organizations struggled to promote alternative narratives.

Chapter 3, “Choosing the Congo: How a Celebrity Builds a Development Organization,” situates Affleck and his organization within elite networks in development. We introduce Ben Affleck and trace his creation of a development NGO as a multimandate organization that was originally focused on poverty and conflict in Eastern Congo. We show how, with the help of an elite cadre of consultants, politicians, and development experts, Affleck styled himself as a different type of celebrity humanitarian and the Eastern Congo Initiative as a disruptive organization. What celebrities typically do in development is advocacy and fundraising, but Affleck is also engaged in implementing and promoting development initiatives that contend with dominant narratives about the Congo as well as prevailing approaches. We argue that Affleck’s ability to distinguish himself and his organization by his choice of the Congo, an approach grounded in advocacy and grant-making and the fast assembly of financial and political capital, reflects the elite nature of development, where Affleck was confirmed with relative ease as a legitimate player. Despite the presence of a celebrity founder, ECI’s approach and secure funding precluded the need to mobilize public support.

Chapter 4, “Marketing the Congo: Products That Sell Development,” examines celebrity representations of market-based solutions as ECI partnered with TOMS shoes and Theo Chocolate in an ongoing cultivation of business partners that marked a shift in their approach. We argue that celebrity convening power was instrumental in marshaling the financial capital of corporate partners as well as designating a newfound need for consumer publics. We demonstrate how Affleck and ECI came to rely on the “transformative” potential of celebrity strategic partnerships as a more workable and scalable solution to development after it became clear that the security sector was not amenable to swift policy changes. We then explore how Affleck brought these market-based solutions before Congress to promote the idea that “giving” farmers access to the international market to advance social and economic development is “neither charity nor aid, . . . [just] good business.”

Chapter 5, “Saving Congolese Coffee: Celebrities and the Business Model for Development,” lays out the political economy of the Kahawa Bora Ya Kivu (KBYK) project to promote coffee as a “change

agent.” Compared to the projects we analyzed in chapter 4, the coffee project involves more partners, higher media visibility, larger stakes, greater reach, and more political advocacy to support economic investment. From work including original qualitative research done with coffee farmers’ cooperatives in Eastern Congo, we argue that the expansion to strategic partnerships with both public- and private-sector partners is dependent on the convening power of a celebrity humanitarian, who, drawing on political capital, is able to promote the partnership to both mainstream and elite political circles. Affleck acts as an expert technical link and a humanitarian affective link to the Global South in appearances on news shows and at elite gatherings in places such as Aspen, before the U.S. Congress, and at the Clinton Global Initiative, together with corporate partners. Meanwhile, ECI staff have appeared on Tedx with the slogan of “driving aid out of business.” This additional focus on political and financial elites exposes the stakes of the coffee project, which promotes a narrative in which the business model is a political solution rather than a way to increase public participation.

Chapter 6, “Celebrities and the Local Politics of Development: As Seen from Kinshasa,” offers a uniquely grounded perspective of Affleck and ECI’s activities in the Congo. Based on field interviews and participant observation, this research explores how development and humanitarian actors see the donor landscape and interventions by the U.S. government, humanitarian agencies, and celebrity humanitarians. This chapter argues that celebrity engagement in development has both opportunities and costs, involving funding and expenditures, authority, and accountability that are more related to Northern than to Southern spheres. Celebrity humanitarians and the strategic partnerships they convene remain important for promoting the work of traditional actors in development who remain under duress from funding cuts and lack of public support.

Chapter 7, “Conclusions on Celebrity and Development: Disruption, Advocacy, and Commodification,” reflects on the previous analysis considering how Affleck and ECI’s strategic partnership signals increasing privatization of development with both prospects and pitfalls. We argue that postdemocratic politics are solidifying Northern and elite power through the investment of celebrity capital in ways

that may or may not benefit local recipients in Africa. Celebrity strategic partnerships are an innovative means to raise awareness and funding for otherwise neglected causes such as peacebuilding in Eastern Congo; they also draw elite and public attention to the work of development and humanitarian agencies. Despite these benefits, celebrity strategic partnerships signal a troubling trend in an environment of unaccountable elite leadership in North–South relations. Celebrity humanitarians like Affleck are occupying the public domain yet not engaging meaningfully with any public—they are an unruly bunch of new actors and alliances in development who amplify business solutions by amassing political and financial capital for their partnerships. Understanding how “the dark superhero” Batman saves “the dark continent” in Eastern Congo helps us to explain the power of celebrity strategic partnerships and the development contexts of rule by the benevolent elites they create.

NOTES

Introduction

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