



Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development

by Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021, xxvii + 299 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development, by Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2021, xxvii + 299 pp.

The idea that celebrities play an influential role in politics was once a marginalized and maligned topic for academics. In recent years, this area of study has been expanded and legitimized as news organizations have increasingly relied on celebrities' political activities to maintain attention in a virtual media environment. The rise of Donald Trump to political prominence has, likewise, caused many in academia to take celebrity influence more seriously.

One important branch of this literature focuses on celebrity advocacy. Already, the literature has demonstrated the ability of celebrities to dominate headlines, persuade audiences, affect public opinion, mobilize elites and create linkages between transnational advocacy networks. In *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development*, Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey ask an important question: what happens when well-known celebrities inject themselves into the politics of development in Africa? More precisely, what happens when Ben Affleck – who had just begun starring as Batman in a series of movies – decided to “save” the Democratic Republic of the Congo? To answer these questions, Budabin and Richey interview and observe humanitarian and development workers and experts from the US to Britain to the Congo and examine documents and celebrity communications. In addition, they analyze these celebrity interventions through the prism of international political economy: in what ways has the influence of neoliberalism transformed sustainability and development in Africa? Moreover, how do celebrities fit into neoliberal models of development?

Traditional aid organizations depend upon public funding and support, and a level of accountability in distribution of that aid. According to Budabin and Richey, there has been extensive humanitarian and development assistance in the Congo. However, Affleck believed that more support could be diverted to the Congo by harnessing business and market forces to engage in “disruptive innovation,” seen as a positive process to challenge previous models of fundraising and service distribution. Thus, rather than working with government agencies or established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Affleck established his own NGO, the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), to offer expertise that he, as a celebrity, did not possess. Then he did what celebrities are good at. Just as he commodifies himself and his creative enterprises, he commodified the Congo as a cause – by connecting traditional agencies to nontraditional actors such as corporations, capital asset management firms, and philanthropies, and suggesting that all would “win” from the arrangement. By simultaneously engaging wealthy and politically connected elites and raising awareness of a country's needs among the general public, he sought to make it “cool” for people to support this cause. Businesses such as the Westrock Coffee Company and Starbucks sold products sourced from the Congo, and people showed their support through their pocketbooks. As expected, Affleck's efforts were rewarded with almost universal media support, and he earned a philanthropist award.

However, Budabin and Richey argue that this new neoliberal model privileges business and the market at the expense of traditional actors and the constituents they serve. While the new model is different, it is far from disruptive in the way that Affleck would describe. Instead, it introduces a new set of elites with less experience and different interests than traditional

actors. Congolese voices are no more likely to be represented under Affleck's approach, and these new organizations are less accountable than the old ones. Indeed, this "Brand Aid" commoditization of causes tends to produce consumers rather than activists, and may reduce support for public funding of aid. These "consumer citizens" believe that they are solving the problem by buying coffee. Moreover, stereotypical imperialist tropes have been used to sell the cause: that Congolese are "backwards" and "other," and that they ultimately need to be "saved" (xxiii–xxiv, 20, 35). Affleck/Batman is the savior figure. Finally, one must question the sustainability of such a model if it is built upon the popularity of a celebrity. When Affleck's star "fell," so to speak, so did the fortunes of his organization, a risk that nearly any brand must face when enlisting a celebrity spokesperson.

For students of celebrity influence, these authors bring a greater understanding of process to a field that has produced much scholarship identifying and demonstrating the power of celebrity. This book may offer the most detailed explanation of how celebrities build organizations and reinforce or undermine transnational advocacy networks. The authors also trace a form of celebrity activism back to the nineteenth century. Given the modern saturation of celebrities and social networks, the analogy is not perfect to contemporary times, but offers some excellent historical context.

For Africa scholars, Budabin and Richey spotlight an emergent pattern in development politics. This book narrowly focuses on Affleck and the Congo. However, the neoliberal development model outlined by the authors typifies a new approach to celebrity advocacy in Africa. Celebrities like Bono, George Clooney, and others have formed their own organizations, connected audiences to raise private funds, and enlisted the help of multinational corporations – desperate to demonstrate their corporate social responsibility – to sell their products in the name of a good cause. It also illustrates how old imperialist tropes persist as celebrities and their NGOs attempt to market this cause.

Overall, this book makes an important contribution to both those who study celebrity and those who are interested in the politics of development in Africa.

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