

Product Red: The Marketing of African Misery

by

Teresa Barnes
tbarnes@uwc.ac.za

Teresa Barnes is a Senior Researcher at the Education Policy Unit at the University of the Western Cape, where her current research focuses on higher education institutional change. Her disciplinary background is in gender and colonial history in Southern Africa. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Zimbabwe.

[We wanted to describe] the continent of Africa as an opportunity, as an adventure, not a burden. Our habit – and we have to kick it – is to reduce this mesmerizing, ntrepreneurial, dynamic continent of 53 diverse countries to a hopeless deathbed of war, disease, and corruption.ⁱ (emphasis added)

The Product Red campaign rests on a quartet of mistaken assumptions. The first is that the consumption of commodities in the Western world has no particular relationship to Africa's problems and therefore increasing such consumption is a neutral exercise, free from side effects. The second mistaken assumption is that AIDS rages through Africa at pandemic strength due mainly to a lack of funds for medicines. Next, the campaign assumes that it is permissible to continue to cast the African continent in the role of passive recipient of First World largesse. Finally, Red broadcasts the idea that social change is easy.

The tragedy is that the failure of Africa's nations to look after their own people has created the vast ocean of need into which this showboat campaign has sailed.

More, More, More

Product Red is "simply a business model."ⁱⁱ What has been Africa's role in the global business model? Since the fifteenth century and the onset of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Africa increasingly has been trapped in and by a world economy which has found only its natural resources alluring. For centuries, Africa exported human beings in chains. When that monstrous trade finally drew to a close in the mid-nineteenth century, other trade goods had already developed routes along the same slippery pathways to American and European markets. Scholars of mid-century West Africa have shown that the same middlemen, the same ships and the same trading networks were utilized to export "legitimate" commodities as the slaves who had pioneered these paths of misery over the previous centuries.

As a teacher of African economic history, I ask my students in South Africa to try to assess, in broad terms, whether the continuities between the slave trade and the cash crop trade amounted to a deepening, or a lessening of the relationships of continental economic inequality. They generally project a well-honed, finely tuned, and justified distrust of European motives back in time and declare that the composition of the commodities may have changed but if the profit motive remained the same, and the same networks were utilized for the oil, gold, peanuts exported before the colonial era and the rubber, coffee and cocoa exported after, that the relationships of inequality between Europe and Africa simply deepened in the subsequent eras of trade. Post-apartheid paranoia notwithstanding, it is still a fact that most of Africa's exports are agricultural commodities and natural resources, and most of its imports are manufactured goods. In other words, servicing the needs of Western consumers has played a large part in the impoverishment of Africa in the past. It is implausible that an avalanche of Red-branded jeans, cell phones, and laptops will change that pattern.

Perhaps the only contribution this model could make to lessening African poverty would be to ensure that Red products have a substantial percentage of components manufactured in Africa. But that would be asking too much of the business executives of Gap, Motorola, Apple, Converse and Dell – whose products are most likely, all made in cheap-labour China.ⁱⁱⁱ

Pills, Pills, Pills

HIV/AIDS is a hideous viral disease that is revealing social cancers in the same way that barium displays diseased parts of the body in an x-ray. The poor will die from AIDS, malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition but the rich will not. The weakest of the poor – women and children – will bear the brunt of the disease as they are pushed to the back of the queue in their own national institutions.

In other words, the HI virus spreads and proliferates, and AIDS kills because of the diseased relationships of the social body, not because of the biomedical state of the individual body. Thanks to two decades of research, we know how the virus spreads, and treatment is available to ameliorate AIDS-related suffering. But knowledge and treatment are not getting the job done. The World Bank uses traditional language to explain the phenomenon as one of diseased bodies (rather than diseased relationships) in this way:

New HIV/AIDS infections in Africa are rising. For every person starting HIV drug treatment, which can keep patients healthy for years and prevent the development of full-blown AIDS, another four to six are newly infected... It said more than 60 percent of people living with HIV in Africa are women, and that young women are six times more likely to be HIV positive than young men.^{iv}

If manhood were not something that had to be proved on the bodies of women, we would not have a pandemic. If at the first sign of illness, a sick person received care, attention and the best scientific treatment, we would not have a pandemic. If societies cared enough about the lives of young girls to protect them from older predators, we would not have a pandemic. If misogyny were just an ugly myth, we would not have a pandemic. If the strong had not been taught to despise the weak and to glory in pushing their faces into the mud, we would not have a pandemic.^v

James Lees, a colleague at the University of the Western Cape, taught me about this way of looking at the pandemic. He tells the story of how a street kid in India told him something that made him realize that hierarchies of knowledge (i.e. who knows about condoms, sex, abstinence, etc. and who does not) are not the crux of the matter:

...I [had] kept my eyes focused on the disease, learned all I could about it, focused on sexual behavior and how to change it...I hated the virus and I hated the diseases associated with it. I learned everything about my enemy that I could. I was locked in a personal war against HIV, and though I avoided ever being a savior, when I failed to save a young person's life from AIDS and sat with them as they died, I became a martyr. Eventually, my eyes still focused on my enemy, I was exhausted – exhausted until a hot afternoon in what was still called Bombay, when an eleven year old boy who I was trying to teach about HIV and AIDS said something that changed the direction of my eyes, my work and my life. “We know about AIDS,” he said, “much more than the uncles who are supposed to care for us and try to teach us about it. But if you don't care about yourself,” he went on, “it really doesn't matter how much you know about HIV and AIDS, you are still going to put yourself in situations where you will probably get it.”^{vi}

This profound insight, literally from the mouth of a babe, is far removed from the quick fix Red mantra. According to the Product Red manifesto,

You buy (Red) stuff. We get the money, buy the pills and distribute them. They take the pills, stay alive, and continue to take care of their families and contribute socially and economically to their communities. If they don't get the pills, they die. We don't want them to die. We want to give them the pills. And we can. And you can. And it's easy.^{vii}

But pills alone cannot address the problem that the eleven-year-old “street kid” explained so clearly: “If you don't care about yourself, you'll put yourself in situations where you'll probably get it.”

It could be argued, however, that pills can address restricted biomedical aspects of the disease. Yet Product Red has no such limited ambitions. Instead it proclaims that buying its jeans, cell phones, tennis shoes and greeting cards will, “help eliminate AIDS in Africa.”^{viii}

Let us then continue on down to the next level of campaign plausibility. Admittedly, a critic of Red might be silenced by the argument that even if pills are not the sole answer and even if their use will not “help eliminate” AIDS in Africa, they will alleviate the suffering of HIV-positive people who would die without them. In South Africa, where the goal of treating and beating back the disease has been indelibly and probably fatally marked by official viral denialism at the highest levels of government, this, finally, is a compelling argument. Even as societies continue to prey on the weakest of their members, and even if nothing is eradicated by palliative medicine, at least daily relief will come to those who are not being served by their national institutions. If the Red spin matched this goal more precisely, the campaign would be more palatable.

Gim(me), Gim(me), Gim(me)

From down here at the corner of burdensome old Africa, I sometimes sigh: if only human celebrities were as far away as the twinkling stars after which they are named. Instead, they flash past us like comets, with trails of pills, tennis shoes, sunglasses, and adoption forms in their wake. Celebrity philanthropy is premised on the idea that anybody with billions in royalty payments can do some good in the world by attaching his or her name and a big check to an underfunded issue. In return they are assured of receiving endless adulation. Thus, when Africa has nothing else to give, its gratitude will do nicely, thank you very much.

This harsh assessment is warranted by the prominence of the cult of the name. On the Red website we can read “A Message from Bono” and “A Note from Bobby.” Why must the egos of the rich be continually stroked by the poor in this way? Gim(me) the love, should be the motto of these circuses.

This brings us to the way that Africa is continually figured as the passive, silent-or-whining, burdensome female to the terse, cowboy-talking, pill-dispensing Marlboro Man of the West. The connection is crystal clear in Motorola’s advertising campaign for its Red cell phone: “Desire Meets Virtue.” Where does Africa figure? Well, let’s put it this way: the subaltern is definitely not speaking:

Prior to the official launch [of a new Red-linked store in Chicago], Michigan Avenue was filled with spectators on Thursday morning as Bono and Oprah strolled down the magnificent mile with special celebrity guests joining along the way. Once they hit MOTO (PRODUCT)^{RED™} Chicago, hip-hop superstar Kanye West welcomed them – showing off the bright red MOTORAZR V3m. Oprah joined the karma revolution and purchased ten phones just for her.^{ix}

“Desire meets Virtue”? How about “Greed Meets Need”?

Africa has been portrayed as a sexualized opportunity for Western adventure since at least the day of King Solomon's Mines. The advert for a cosmetics venture in special Africa issue of Vanity Fair, with a shiny, bronze beauty in the process of baring her bling-laden breasts refers.^x Is it not possible to signify Africa in any way other than as a good ride?

Easy Easy Easy

Finally, Product Red promotes itself by proclaiming that doing good is easy. We all shop, right? We all choose, right? If we make different choices at the hypermarket, we can change the world, right? It's easy.

If one begins to entertain the notion that the current plight of the people who are dying of AIDS in Africa (and elsewhere) is due to a very long chain of complex historical processes, the Red claim for easy change becomes more and more farfetched. On a planet drowning in waste and pollution, for instance, will weaning Americans off their gas guzzlers, fast food, and the frenzied pursuit of fad/fashion/fetish in all things be easy? No. Will putting the voices, bodies, and needs of their poorest citizens – rural women and children – at the top of the agenda of Africa's governments be easy? No. Will reversing the tides of centuries of economic and social marginalization be easy? No.

In conclusion, Product Red is a bad idea disguised as a good one. The glitzy perpetuation of the symbols, phrases and networks of inequality cannot destroy inequality. This is not an HIV/AIDS denialist, pro-garlic-and-beetroot argument, such as the South African Minister of Health has made. Rather, it recognizes that what the people of Africa need most is lightening the burden of inequality in the relationships formed in their homes, streets, schools, workplaces, and, of course, internationally. "The pills" * although crucial for the prevention and alleviation of suffering and the promotion of wellness – run second.

Notes

ⁱ Bono. 2007. "Guest Editor's Letter," in *Vanity Fair*. July. p. 32.

ⁱⁱ "The (Red) Manifesto." 2007. *Vanity Fair*. July. p. 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ And other nations, for instance the GAP has a relationship with the garment industry in Lesotho:

http://www.gapinc.com/red/progress_article_2.html

<http://www.agoa.info/?view=.&story=news&subtext=124>

http://www.gapinc.com/public/Media/Press_Releases/med_pr_GapProductRed100906.shtml

^{iv} Reuters. 2008. "World Bank shifts HIV/AIDS focus in Africa." May 14.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/feedarticle/7516902>, accessed 19 May 2008.

^v See Epstein, Helen. 2008. *The Invisible Cure: Why we are losing the fight against AIDS in Africa*. New York: Picador.

^{vi} James Lees. 2007. "Toward a Different Future: South Africa, AIDS, Development and Us; Re-Thinking AIDS in Africa," (unpublished seminar paper). September.

^{vii} Condé Nast Publications. 2007. *Vanity Fair*. July. p. 139.

^{viii} www.joinred.com accessed on 19 May 2008.

^{ix} "Motorola paints Chicago (RED): Where Desire Meets Virtue,"

<http://www.motorola.com/content.jsp?globalObjectId=7775>, accessed 19 May 2008.

^x "Every cent of the selling price of Viva Glam VI Lipstick and Lipgloss is donated to the M-A-C AIDS fund..." 2007. *Vanity Fair*. July. p. 35.