

Review - Celebrity Humanitarianism

Written by Carlo Piccinini

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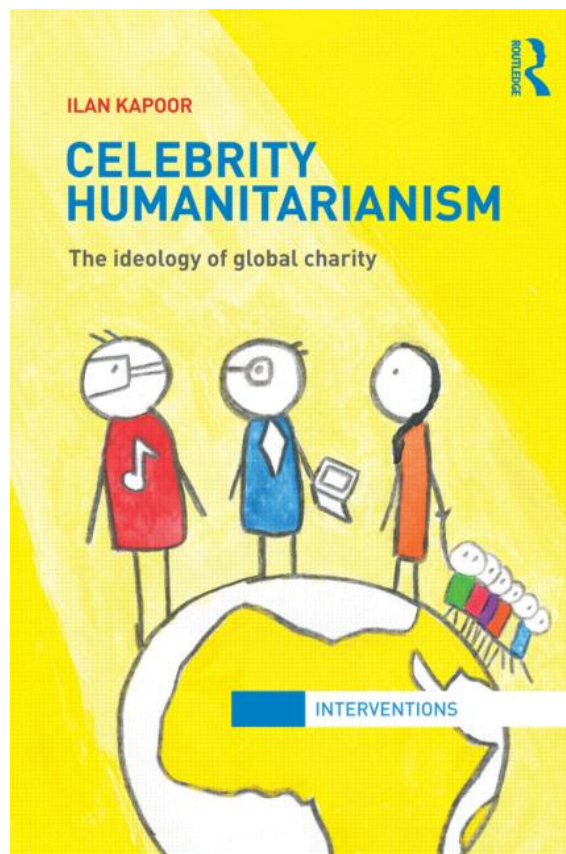
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CARLO PICCININI, JUN 3 2013

Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity

By: Ilan Kapoor

New York: Routledge, 2013



The book critically analyses the humanitarian work of three contemporary types of celebrity humanitarianism – namely entertainment stars, philanthropic billionaires and NGOs that for their spectacular reputation and highly mediated character have become celebrities in their own right. It develops around two interrelated arguments. First, their humanitarian work is contaminated and ideological because they are entrenched in the global capitalist Order. The author argues that their humanitarianism only tackles the symptoms of global problems and does not challenge the capitalist system seen as the root cause of global injustice and inequalities they seek to redress. It is a ‘spectacle’ that covers up the wrongs of capitalism, thus enhancing it, and reinforces the status quo, thus guaranteeing their survival. Making their performance look good, the show also gives the advantage of downplaying their failures. Expression of the ‘postdemocratic liberal politics’, these unelected elites often decide for the suffering receivers, and ‘depoliticise’ the choices of decision-makers and givers by eliminating public scrutiny and debate, with the bonus of being unaccountable to both. Second, sensitised by celebrities’ appeals, some people show their support to

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humanitarian causes. Others, thrilled by the offer of charity goods, engage in an individual solidarity activism and open their wallets mesmerised by the opportunity of contributing to the global humanitarianism through the 'enjoyment' of charity shopping. They are aware of their slick experience. However, in their everyday life they feel reassured that someone they trust is doing something to alleviate those people's hardship, and happy to delegate their humanitarian action with a little support and contribution. This brings them to overlook that behind the face of caring for the 'Excluded' and giving back to help them, 'decaf' or humanised capitalism remains deeply rooted in the ruthless business practices and in the production of global inequalities and injustices.

Drawing on Žižek's work, the book introduces the reader to the ideology critique. This exercise consists in uncovering what is in plain view but is not seen and heard, and detecting the contradictions, exclusions, imperfections, and things taken for granted that obscure the 'Real'. Applied to each of the three contemporary types of celebrity humanitarianism, the book uncovers the gaps between what it presents as the harsh realities of today's global humanitarianism and charity work, that are visible but people do not see, and their showy surface performed by celebrity figures and institutions, that they simply look at.

The aims of the book are to highlight these gaps, take people on a journey revealing the 'Real', and inspire the only exit strategy it sees possible. This is not an attempt to re-adjust the wrongs in the global capitalist Order. It is a go-for-it revolutionary change that seeks to attack the system directly and from within, with the objective of dismantling it and consequently eliminating the root causes of global inequalities and injustice that give reason for the global humanitarianism.

The book relates to current debates doubting the genuine and real added value of celebrities' activism, criticising capitalism, and calling into question the effectiveness of agencies' humanitarianism. Its critical analysis of celebrities as one of the most visible expressions of global humanitarianism and charity work enhances the understanding of this phenomenon, and contributes to better outline their role in the humanitarian efforts. Exploring more in depth the ambiguities intrinsic in the symbiotic relationship between celebrities and audience, it also adds knowledge to the parameters of our complicity with the system and our activism on the cheap that characterises our current engagement with humanitarian causes. Comparing to other studies investigating NGOs' humanitarianism, the book expands on some disturbing outcomes of their humanitarianism linking their interventions to their complicity in scouting for new capitalist opportunities.

The book is thought-provoking, enjoyable to read, and develops in a well-structured manner. However, some readers might remain with few open questions. In line with its guiding theoretical and analytical framework, the book conceptualises stardom humanitarianism as immersed and entangled in the capitalist Order. However, "the fact that the star system has prospered in nearly all countries and at all social levels – even among groups which adopt a Marxist perspective" (Alberoni 2007) can make some readers wonder whether this view remains unchallenged for lack of its exploration in non-capitalist countries, while others might feel eager to read about research evaluating the differences.

The book depicts celebrities as a uniform force. It also downplays differences in their humanitarian role suggested by other researchers arguing that they disregard what is in plain view, that is what binds all celebrities is their complicity with the global capitalist and postdemocratic system. However, a number of readers can remain unsure of whether viewing celebrities, anyway, as 'all powerful ideologues' is not a one-image-fits-all approach that denies the differences by categorically stating their absence.

Its critical stand on NGOs' 'spectacle' in publicising humanitarian crises allows few readers to ponder whether alternative low-tone communications would not provoke harsher criticisms about their failure in fulfilling their institutional roles such as raising awareness of people's hardship, turning forgotten crises into known emergencies, and pushing for appropriate political, economic and humanitarian responses to the crisis at hand.

The last and biggest doubt concerns the exit strategy. As it is reasonable to assume that the ultimate objective of dismantling capitalism cannot be achieved within a short timeframe, a reflection on the impact of this transition on suffering populations appears relevant. The global capitalist Order is simultaneously the cause of people's suffering,

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and the source providing the means to alleviate its symptoms. Attacking the former has an impact on the latter. By choosing that it is better to do nothing than to get involved and assist the maintenance, expansion, and smooth running of the Order, the Others might be paying the price for the lack of means to alleviate their suffering while working to achieve the ultimate objective. The book emphasises that the transition does not entail to ignore people's suffering (political withdrawal), but to resist to (strategic withdrawal) the 'knee-jerk elicitation to save the Other' and the 'interpellation to be active, involved and donate', that Žižek considers the *modus operandi* of today's ideology. However, it remains vague on how the two reconcile. In other words, it does not make fully clear to what extent resisting the elicitation and interpellation does not equate to ignoring peoples' suffering. Furthermore, it avoids the question that by choosing this path, the Third World remains once more subordinated to a decision taken by the First World. It is unquestioned that celebrity humanitarianism is becoming out of control, and that there is a need for an exit strategy. However, the doubt remains that the approach to venture forth to challenge the antagonisms of our current global order and to 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' in the name of a meaningful humanitarianism might come at the expenses of the beneficiaries of such humanitarianism.

The book is certainly relevant to those investigating celebrities and humanitarianism. It will also be of interest to NGOs, although it might raise some eyebrows. Being in a state of 'permanent emergency' regime that makes reflection a luxury, they might find helpful to know how they are perceived to address some of the criticisms.

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References

Alberoni, F., 2007. The powerless elite: Theory and sociological research on the phenomenon of the stars. In S. Holmes & S. Redmond, eds. *Stardom and celebrity : a reader*.