

BOOK REVIEW

Alexandra Cosima Budabin and Lisa Ann Richey, *Batman Saves the Congo: How Celebrities Disrupt the Politics of Development*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2021. 330 pp. \$27.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0759-4.

Batman Saves the Congo would seem rather tongue-in-cheek as the title of Alexandra Cosima Budabin's and Lisa Ann Richey's monograph. Celebrity intervention can only go so far. Its impact can and is very often overstated. This is the conclusion to be reached after a close reading of this deeply immersive work of cultural and political diplomacy. The ludic import of the monograph's title, which is evoked in the generally fictional ambiance of Gotham City where Batman resides, becomes obvious in the context of the modest gains made in the lived experience of the supposed beneficiaries of the interventions in the Congo. The claims of success and of doing things differently would seem more rhetorical and aspirational than achieved.

The monograph focuses on so-called celebrity humanitarianism with origins in the 1950s Cold War era "jazz diplomacy" of the State Department that sent celebrities abroad as part of the effort of endorsing and bolstering the democratic credentials of the United States. It pivots around the star power of Western public figures and pop culture icons.

Drawing on a three-pronged mixed-methods approach that combined ethnography, political economy, and narrative analysis, the seven-chapter monograph is an extensive exploration of how Ben Affleck, a celebrated Hollywood actor, director, screen writer, and producer, started humanitarian work; his vision for and the processes that led to the establishment of his Eastern Congo Initiative (henceforth ECI), a part-grantor and part-advocacy body, that conferred legitimacy on his charitable work and cemented his reputation as a celebrity humanitarian. His role as the eponymous superhero, Batman, in the 2016 Warner Bros. DC film is the inspiration behind the title of the monograph, which is a case study of the nongovernmental organization through which the actor entered the world of celebrity humanitarianism. He postured as a "disruptor"—that is, an outsider to humanitarianism—with the self-proclaimed aim of doing things in a different but more dynamic and goal-oriented way.

This disruptive template, with its market-driven neo-liberal imprints was built around so-called strategic partners that were drawn mainly from the private sector—big business investors, corporations, and philanthropists all working with the celebrity partner as the figure head and driving force of the partnership. It is a unique US business model that is both valorized and championed for its ability to be scaled and replicated in other parts of the global South.


Targeted at exploding the orthodoxy of the aid sector, celebrity humanitarianism adopts an “all winner” approach that discourages passive aid-dependency. It is a model of do-gooding that, supposedly, has something for everyone, including the helper and the helped. As Budabin and Richey make clear, however, celebrity humanitarianism is nothing but a commodification of charitable work—a form of an unequal, colonial relationship in which rich donors offer support in exchange for, say, primary products that are branded and marketed among the consuming public of the global North.

An example of this, for the ECI, was the four-year *Kahawa Bora* project that offered training support to coffee farmers and cooperatives in Eastern Congo with funding from a consortium of partners that included USAID and the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and loan aid from the Westrock Coffee Company. The implementation of this project was done by the Catholic Relief Services and World Coffee Research. All of this effort achieved their intended objective when Starbucks launched its branded coffee, sourced from South Kivu, in 1,500 stores across North America in 2016.

In offering private solutions to the challenges of governance and mass poverty, celebriitized humanitarian work puts control in the hands of private enterprises and individuals. Its mantra will seem to be less government more business. But in spite of its claim of doing things differently, this form of charity work relies still on the structures put in place by established donor organizations and development experts for the propagation of their ideals. Ultimately, the operations of celebrity humanitarianism are neither sustainable nor are they of much avail to those who need them.

They are, in fact, of far more benefit to the celebrity humanitarians and their big business partners than the mass of the deprived people. Even the affective power of the celebrity’s popular appeal becomes ineffectual and fails to meet desired expectations over time. The attention that celebrity-led organizations bring to humanitarian work is, furthermore, undermined by the opacity of their operations that complicates accountability and their suppression of the voice of the underdog. The above findings are among the most significant insights that *Batman Saves the Congo* brings to the study of celebrity humanitarianism.

The main strength of this study is its deep-dive focus on the operations of one of the most successful celebrity humanitarian organizations ever to emerge from the West in recent years. Its deep-dive approach gives the reader a peep into the complexity of managing this and similar organizations. The strength of the study is ironically also its weakest point. It all looks like so much work was expended on a small organization. Yet when placed on balance, the merit of the study far outweighs any real or perceived shortcoming.

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