

Bono and O'Neill's African tour: low farce against a backdrop of human tragedy

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The ten-day African tour by Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U2, and US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill attracted widespread media attention. Journalists from the broadsheet financial press accompanied *MTV* and *Rolling Stone* magazine as the two men with their secret service escort swept through foreign aid projects in Ghana, Uganda, South Africa and Ethiopia. The itinerary included AIDS clinics, schools, clean water schemes and orphanages. O'Neill, Bono said, is “the man in charge of America’s wallet...I want to open that wallet.”

The tour was a carefully crafted public relations operation, in which even the disparity between the two men—one a 65-year old businessman and politician in a sober suit, the other a rock star in his wraparound shades—was milked for all the publicity it was worth. Bono distributed T-shirts printed with the motto, “The Odd Couple Tour of Africa 2002.” The media lapped up this ready-made imagery.

O'Neill was occasionally happy to give the impression that he was ready to listen. Recalling a visit to an AIDS clinic in South Africa, he described a baby “in a pink sleeper.” He said, “She was so sweet and trusting and her eyes were ... big and sparkling... If you really want to change my mind about anything, just give me a baby and talk to me about whatever it is you want!”

In general, however, O'Neill made clear that America’s wallet would not be opened very far and only for those deemed worthy. He never missed an opportunity to lecture aid workers and African politicians on their profligate spending, and freely tossed out homespun solutions to the devastating social problems that plague the continent—nostrums that inevitably entailed very little in the way of US financial assistance. Visiting a clean water project in Uganda, O'Neill did a swift calculation on the back of an envelope and announced that the whole country could be provided with water for \$25 million.

“It sounds to me like the clean water problem could be solved ... in less than a year,” O'Neill declared.

The former ALCOA CEO’s more absurd and arrogant statements occasionally created conflicts between the two men. Responding to O'Neill’s statement on water purification, Bono replied that this was “an example of why we need big money for development. And it is absolutely not an example of why

we don’t. And if the secretary can’t see that, we’re going to have to get him a pair of glasses and a new set of ears.”

Aside from such well-publicised spats, the two resembled a vaudeville team, with Bono as the clown and O'Neill as the straight-man, as, dressed in native costume, they mugged for the cameras.

For all Bono’s radical posturing, there remains a large measure of agreement between the rock superstar and the treasury secretary. While they may differ on the amount of money that is required, they both advocate a capitalist market solution to Africa’s problems. Indeed, Bono has established a close working relationship with the Bush administration.

At the United Nations Financing for Development conference in Monterrey, Mexico earlier this year, it was Bono who stood beside President Bush when he announced that the US was to increase its foreign aid budget by \$5 billion between 2004 and 2006. In what he termed a Compact for Global Development, the US, Bush said, would eliminate poverty worldwide.

The singer’s appearance gave this announcement much more credibility than it would otherwise have had. Not only is \$5 billion a minuscule amount of money in comparison to the problem, but the real sum on offer is far less than this. Bush’s announcement was not of an extra \$5 billion a year, but that total US aid would gradually increase to this amount.

In great measure, the purpose of the speech was to pre-empt a similar European aid announcement, and Bono’s presence played no small part in making the US offer look the more generous of the two.

O'Neill made clear at the Monterrey conference that the money is only on offer to countries with “good governance and sound economic policies” which “advance economic freedom” and “enhance productivity.” Rather than giving to those countries in most need, O'Neill said, “We ... have an obligation to plant our resources where they will yield growth, rather than squandering precious seeds in unfertile soil.”

None of the media commentary challenged O'Neill’s credentials as the apostle of “good governance” and “sound economic policies,” which says a great deal about the cowardice and cynicism of the press.

The Bush administration, after all, came to power by illegitimate and undemocratic means. It is associated with

business practices, such as those at Enron, that involve corruption on a scale that dwarfs the petty embezzlement of the African regimes. O'Neill's definition of "good governance" is what best serves the interests of US corporations.

Far from promising peaceful economic development for Africa, after decades of conflict associated with the Cold War, Bush's plans threaten to make Africa the scene of a new rivalry between Europe and America.

Bono's support for this programme reflects a change in attitude among many of the aid agencies, which are increasingly advocating a "free-market" approach. Oxfam, the UK-based relief agency, recently issued a report entitled *Africa at the Crossroads*. Like the Bush speech, it stressed the need for "good governance" and suggested that political incompetence at the local level—not the ravages of imperialism and neo-colonialism—was the root cause of Africa's poverty.

The report called on Western governments to remove subsidies, especially for agriculture, and open their markets to African goods. While Africa accounts for only two per cent of world trade, the continent's exports earn ten times what it receives in aid. A small increase in trade, the aid agencies argue, would have a large economic effect.

DATA, Bono's lobby group, is pressing the industrialised countries to lift quotas and cut duties on African exports. Africans, says Bono, "don't want to spend the rest of their lives on the nipple of aid."

Watching Ugandan workers labouring under the hot sun in the fields where they cultivate flowers for the European market, Bono enthused that this was "globalisation at its best."

The possibility that the US will lift protection on agricultural imports is slight, since the Bush administration has just proposed record levels of subsidies to agribusiness. It is, however, a useful stick with which to beat Europe over its own level of subsidies.

One can infer some idea of what is planned for Africa from the fact that Bono prepared for his trip with O'Neill by making a similar journey with Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs is the economist who advised the ex-Stalinist bureaucrats on the reintroduction of capitalism in the former USSR. Sachs and Bono picked out aid projects for O'Neill to visit that just happened to be in countries considered the most attractive for transnational investment.

Ghana is viewed as a relatively stable country on the oil-rich west coast of the continent. Only the month before Bono and O'Neill's trip, Peter Watson, president of the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation, was in Ghana. Uganda is among the front-runners in the competition to win manufacturing investment. Textile manufacturers are considering it as a potential location. South Africa, with its developed manufacturing base, sophisticated infrastructure and large work force, is already favoured by the transnationals.

Oxfam and the other agencies suggest that transnational companies investing in Africa can be forced to observe human

rights and directives on working conditions. UN protocols or the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises, they argue, would be adequate safeguards.

The promise of regulated capitalism is as fraudulent as the promises of a "social market" that were made when the USSR collapsed. Capitalist companies exist to make a profit. The biggest of them have turnovers that dwarf the national incomes of African states. The idea that, from this position of power, they would voluntarily limit their profits in the interests of human rights is a fantasy.

Working conditions in the flower growing industry that Bono praises so highly, for example, are notorious, with workers exposed to pesticide poisoning. In Madagascar, where the clothing giant Gap has invested in the textile industry, an increasingly bloody struggle for political control has broken out among the island's elite.

Most importantly, transnational investment does nothing to free former colonial countries from their relationship of dependence. On the contrary, the effect of the new US aid policy and similar proposals from Europe is to increase the subservience of African countries to international capital.

The charitable aid agencies are being drawn into an increasingly commercial environment as competitive aid providers, whose performance is closely assessed. To a great extent they accept this change in their role. The ethos of the capitalist market is so natural to them that they cannot imagine an alternative.

Bono said perhaps more than he intended when he replied jokingly to a Ford worker in South Africa, who asked who he was. "I'm the chairman of the U2 corporation," said the millionaire rock star.

Bono's own experience of making millions out of capitalism does not make him its best critic. He has a record of charitable activities, which extends to personally working in an African orphanage. But without that, he would be useless as a foil for the Bush administration.

Strutting the international stage alongside a representative of the most powerful nation in the world, even on occasion offering a mild rebuke, feeds an ego already bloated by success in the ephemeral pop industry, compounded by delusions of political power. The benefits for O'Neill and the Bush administration are more tangible. Bono confers a stamp of moral sanctity on a plan for the neo-colonial domination of Africa.



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