Make Poverty History: Africanisation and the Erosion of Global Social Justice

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New, but old…

The MPH campaign had <u>historic ambition</u> which in some aspects it achieved. The number of people who participated (in some way) in MPH reached perhaps 8 million. The vast majority of Britons knew – even in fairly cursory terms – about MPH. The issue of poverty infused the elections of that year to the extent that even the Conservative Party developed manifesto positions regarding poverty reduction and aid.

Those who led the campaign presented it as unprecedented, innovative and contemporary. They also presented it as part of a historical tradition, a modern manifestation of a politics which began two hundred years ago.

Much of MPH's newness derived from its campaign <u>techniques</u>: the use of e-campaigning, texting, and the cutting edge marketing and public relations. There was a strong desire by those who ran the campaign to appeal to the young, to appear a la mode, to be flexible and innovative.

Much of MPH's 'oldness' derived from its <u>politics</u>. MPH placed itself within a history of British campaigning that was signposted by anti-slavery, anti-apartheid, and drop the debt. There was a sense that each of the campaign issues was driven by a common morality, a morality which was offended by the mass poverty of distant others. Thus, the making history in MPH was presented as a specific moment in a venerable campaign tradition.

Thus, for all of its energetic campaigning techniques, MPH was based in a historic tradition that reached back to the emergence of the modern British polity in the 1700s. The focus of this paper is precisely on the historical placing of MPH and therefore the effects of MPH on political campaigning more generally.

It is the argument here that

(1) MPH tapped in to a campaign tradition which contained within in strong conservative aspects.

(2) This occurred despite there being a desire to develop a more radical justice-based campaign.

(3) The justice elements of the campaign were all but muted by the political economy of the campaign

(4) The political conservatism of MPH stands in contrast to GSMs which offer a rough template for an alternative campaign politics

(5) The tensions and difference between the two 'traditions' can be seen most clearly in relation to Africa's place in campaign politics.

Imperial campaign tradition

Let us begin by sketching a campaign tradition which, it is argued, provides the bedrock for MPH. I call this tradition imperial because its formative stages were outcomes of the creation of the British empire, and in salient ways aspects of this imperial politics persist in the present.

[1] The imperial campaign tradition is at its heart a bundle of political practices that aim to construct a certain kind of <u>Britishness</u>. From abolitionism onwards, this campaign tradition spends most of its energy arguing the case for British civic virtue. Profoundly imperial, campaign literature energetically presents the British as universal humanitarians, Protestant missionaries, and pragmatic modernisers. This self-perception is reinforced by sketchy oppositions to various kinds of natives and often the French!

Extremely but not exceptionally, the abolitionist and anti-slavery campaigns are largely about the propriety of the British people and state. All specific issues of foreign policy are strongly filtered through this narcissism. This narrative persists after emancipation in campaigns to liberate Africans from 'domestic' or 'Arab' slavery. After the emergence of sovereign states throughout the empire and Britain's relative decline after the second world war, the national self-regard becomes muted and transformed but persists.

The persistence can be found in the AAM and Jubilee 2000 campaigns, and although there is no time here to detail this, we can make some general remarks just to connect each of these campaigns together and latterly to connect them with MPH. AAM and J2000 both claimed to be global campaigns which were in fact to all intents and purposes British. For this reason, even within the more institutionally complex terrain of a global order of sovereign states and the UN, both campaigns worked to project British campaigns outwards onto various global stages. Internally, both campaigns suffered tensions from factions who became unhappy with the Britishness of the campaigns. In Jubilee's case this led to the creation of Jubilee South.

[2] Also, AAM and J2000 relied upon an institutionally British and morally <u>protestant religious politics</u>. Both campaigns were based in Anglican and unorthodox Protestantism. In Howe's words, the 'Nonconformist and Radical-Liberal tradition' (1993: 169) provides the moral discourse for campaigners.

This tradition has combined Reformation tenets concerning duty, empathy, and a view of humankind as a brethren of children of God. The *sotto voce* of its religious appeal allowed both campaigns to incorporate liberal and secular organisations but it is worth bearing in mind that some of the large campaign NGOs that become prominent in the 1990s also emerge out of progressive Christianity (CAFOD and Christian Aid, and to some extent Oxfam). The point is that one can discern a lineage of political thought which has evolved through the practice of campaign politics that combines in different discursive forms Christian, liberal, and universalist principles. Imperial campaigning is, in essence, liberal universalism driven by Christian empathy.

But, why insist on coupling this campaign tradition with an *imperial* politics? The argument here is not a relativist one in which liberalism is *tout court* condemned for its notions of universal rights. Rather, it is that the practices and effects of this campaign tradition have contributed to a certain kind of international political structuring in which:

- Britain constitutes the central place in a world of troubled peripheries.

- It is the morally proper task of the British state to intervene in various aspects of other societies in order to pursue morally virtuous ends.

- It is the role of the British public to generate a strong political lobby to encourage, inform, and support the British state in its endeavours.

Thus, the Christian-liberal campaign tradition is intrinsically a form of British narcissism. It is based on an appeal to the greater public sentiments of Britons and it maintains a sweeping faith in the immanent moral propriety of the British state. This kind of campaign morality might then be projected outwards onto various issues and geographical regions that were forcibly incorporated into the British empire, but the great bulk of the imperial campaign tradition has a specific and telling geographical co-ordinate: Africa.

[3] Since abolitionism, Africa has served as the repository of a swathe of Christian-liberal moralising. Until the attainment of sovereignty by African states, a great deal of this moralising involved very little effort to understand African societies and even less effort to generate organisational/political links with Africans. As Achille Mbembe argues, Africa's relations with Britain were structured along an axis of absence/presence. It was enough that Africa suffered from an absence of freedoms, rights, modern institutions which Britain ostensibly enjoyed. This simple dualism served and serves as a trigger for the familiar imperial campaigning morality which ends with Britain intervening to liberate or save Africans by providing the things that they lack, whether Bibles, more aid, or good governance.

Indeed, the cavalier attitude of campaign movements towards Africa is perfectly encapsulated in that very name: Africa. There is an almost complete

absence of any attempt to acknowledge the massive diversity within the continent. In popular culture, 'Africa' becomes a single 'black body', a unity of the Black African and Africa to a single racialised genotype whose gender, class position, religion, location, occupation, and age are irrelevant.

Africa's figurative 'emptiness' in British political culture served and serves only as a starting point for various imperial designs and desires. The *terra* and *homo nullis* of Africa are filled by proposals for civilisation, empathetic desires, and religious appeals each of which require little cognisance of Africans as they are largely appeals to a certain kind of Britishness duly contextualised in the non-Britishness of Africa.

Africa in this sense holds a special place in the British polity, distinct from other Western countries. It has served as the wellspring for missionary empathy and charity, the location of privations for abolitionists, a landscape of 'biblical' famine for mass charitable appeals, and it served as the single focus of Make Poverty History.

It is striking that MPH was so completely 'Africanised'. MPH's campaign materials were initially issue based: trade, debt, and aid. But, as the campaign grew, the imagery of the campaign, and especially the campaign's integration into a broader 'year of Africa' which involved the government, the media, and the celebrity, led to a near-complete unity of 'the poor' with 'the African'. The impoverished millions of people who lived in South Asia and China – let alone the less easily geographically-defined extreme poor throughout the rest of the world – were absent.

The result of the Africanisation of MPH was that it became part of the imperial campaign tradition. The deep associations of Africa with charity, indigence, and various forms of socio-political absence/deviance (which in contemporary views are most aptly summed up by the epithet 'corruption') within the British public view overpowered the more tentative attempts that MPH made to appeal to issues of justice.

But, it would be difficult to argue that MPH was entirely overpowered by a powerful latent popular view of Africa as a moral zone of charity and disaster. It also *contributed* to the maintenance of the imperial campaign tradition. In fact, the MPH campaign increasingly relied on references to Africa and did not strongly try to define itself against other aspects of the Year of Africa. It allowed itself to become part of this broader phenomenon because it assisted the popularity of MPH. The core desire of MPH to generate as much support as possible within a very short period of time made the practicalities of campaign building pre-eminent. If Africanisation was the price to pay to gain easy familiarity and therefore mass recognition and appeal, then MPH accepted that price.

[4] The imperial campaign tradition is based on a specific repertoire of <u>campaign practices</u>. These are, schematically: the building up of civic actions

and a faith in government action. It would be fair to say that imperial campaigning contributed substantially to the creation of the modern British polity: petitioning, lobbying, consumer politics (boycotts), local meetings and hustings, the mass printing of pamphlets… all of these techniques that led to the creation of the British polity were substantially consolidated and maintained through the imperial campaign tradition.

As such, these campaign techniques serve to construct a reformist, pragmatic and lawful politics that taps in to British self-perceptions of a nation exceptionally endowed with a non-revolutionary and orderly sense of rights and Right.

These techniques have all been focussed on government and have been finely tuned to the rhythms of policy and Act making within the British state. As such campaigns maintain a faith in government as an agency to deal with the issues propounded by the campaign. Campaigning serves to bring urgency to matters that – if they were fully enlightened as to the facts – MPs and others would recognise and deal with. Campaigning aims to improve or purify political processes within the British state which are fundamentally legitimate and lawful.

In sum, the imperial tradition has the following characteristics:

- A central concern with 'proper' Britishness which campaigns aim to reinforce.

- A secondary reference to the condition of a people or peoples within the British empire.

- A campaign morality based in a Protestant Christian tradition and liberalism which mixes notions of universal rights/humanity and an empathy that can only exercised by the powerful.

- A focus on Africa as a place to draw on reified images to raise sympathies and justify a raft of interventions or policies

- A faith in the British government as the agency to realise campaign objectives.

In different forms, and with varying emphases, one can find all of these traits in the campaigns with which MPH associated: abolitionism, anti apartheid, and Jubilee 2000. Unsurprisingly, these traits were both central to MPH and they go a long way to explaining the campaign's ability to generate rapid and mass recognition and support. MPH drew on a latent imperial campaign tradition as an expediency to mass appeal.

The quick death of global social justice within MPH

However, it would be excessive schematic simply to argue that MPH was part of an imperial campaign tradition and that therefore it had little relevance beyond that tradition. In fact, at least in the early stages, MPH was based on a justice agenda which was not based in the kinds of features outline above. The articulation of policy demands regarding **trade** and **debt** were both demands of the government and criticisms of the government and the global order that it is part of. For MPH coalition members such as WDM and War on Want, these issues were part of an agenda very much based on the notion of global social justice – a term to which we will return. For other coalition members, these were the core of a policy agenda – often revealingly called 'asks' (not demands) – to request from the British government. In other words, debt and trade were both part of an imperial campaign tradition and another tradition based in global social justice.

As a result of the desire to attain mass public recognition, the justice agenda was fully replaced by an imperial one, encapsulated by an MPH spokesperson during the G8 meeting in Gleneagles: the campaign aimed 'to welcome the G8 leaders to Scotland and to *ask* them to *deliver* trade justice, debt cancellation and increased aid'.

The third policy position related to **aid**, which quite clearly resonates with all sort of imperial moralities. The addition of aid to the MPH agenda could hardly escape familiar assumptions about charity, generosity, and fears that corrupt governments would squander aid. Although MPH tried to present increased aid as essentially the honouring of a promise, general public perceptions were indistinct about the difference between aid and charity, and indeed the public prominence of aid as a lobbying issue led to a general perception that levels of ODA were about 30% of government budgetary expenditure.

In sum, the three tenets of MPH contained within them the possibility of a more radical campaign politics, but each of the three was quickly formulated in ways that remained well within the imperial campaign tradition. This formulation then served to generate considerable tensions within the campaign, especially between WDM, War on Want, ActionAid, and the other major coalition members.

Understanding Poverty

But, MPH's campaigning was antithetical to a global social justice agenda in other important ways which relate more to the political economy of the campaign and its ideas. Let us take the notion of poverty itself. This is hardly a straightforward term.

We can discern the following features in the way MPH articulated poverty:

- It was largely an African property – this meant that it keyed in with long-standing charity narratives about indigence and help

- It was a condition that kept children from schools and people from health care. It was not a phenomenon related much to conditions of labour.

- It was something that could be 'made history'

It is this latter aspect that was most prominent and also most revealing. Poverty was presented as something that could be substantially eradicated within the campaign's lifetime. Embedded in the campaign's name and focus on the G8 in July 2005 was a message that global poverty could be addressed by the economically powerful states if the 'eight men in a room' made the right decisions.

This is remarkable, both in is fantastic understanding of the causes and nature of poverty and in the heroic ambitions of the campaign. Clearly, the G8 were never – in any formulation – going to make poverty history. The reason for such a bold campaign messaging was that it was believed that 'aspirational' messages to the British people would be most likely to generate participation. In the logo, poverty is sandwiched between the emboldened words: 'make history'. Other messages were based in entreaties to people and politicians to act like heroes or to be great. This modern PR strategy of appealing to a aspiration to be part of history reproduces the national narcissism that in earlier campaigns was generated through abolitionist sermons, appeals to the sagacity British imperial rule embodied in the figure of Britannia during the colonial period, the liberal-Fabian-Christian intellectual tradition of Britishness that infused AAM and also J2000.

But, more deeply, the 'eight men in a room' framing of the campaign presented poverty in a remarkably conservative fashion. If poverty could be 'solved' during a single 'window' that was the G8 meeting, then poverty as a social condition must logically be:

- In no sense a result of the actions of those G8 governments.

- In no sense a structural condition because it is amenable to a single straightforward and moderate agenda of increased aid, trade reform, and reduced indebtedness.

- A condition which can be largely solved by the G8 and in which 'the poor' (as already argued largely Africanised and removed from their productive lives) will benefit through an almost mystical process of cause and effect.

After the G8, MPH spokespeople both praised the G8 and remarked that in fact this marked the beginning of the end of poverty, not the end of poverty. Less prominently, a group of NGOs that were part of MPH now pursue the G8 around their barricaded summits, reminding leaders of their 'promises'. Tellingly, the entire post 2005 G8 campaign has focussed on Africa, and all pretence to be concerned with poverty in any other sense has been dropped. As the roadshow has carried on, in Britain, very little public prominence has been

achieved. 2005 has appeared to be a campaign 'spike' unlikely to be repeated for some time.

This is largely because 2005 was as much a year about British esteem in the world as it was global poverty. In various ways, New Labour promoted the idea of dealing with Africa as the key foreign policy issue. 'Africa' has frequently served as a foil to Iraq in this sense: a far easier way to project Blair and New Labour as humanitarians dealing with the 'scar on the conscience' of the world. MPH accepted this shaping of 2005 – it presented Blair and Brown partly as protagonists that needed to be pressured to take the right decisions but also as politicians broadly 'on board' whose task was to push the rest of the G8 into agreement. Within this understanding of the G8, pejoratives about the cagey Japanese and self-interested American governments put the British government in a favourable light.

This specific understanding of poverty – African, amenable to a fairly easy solution, the latter achievable through a strong British campaign to get the British government to do the right thing and encourage its peer states to do the same – becomes more remarkable when we compare it with another understanding of global poverty which has emerged through the GSMs of the 1990s. In this perspective (with all due caveats concerning the very broad and unstable nature of global social justice coalitions) poverty is a direct product of purposeful Western state and IFI action. It is also a condition that farmers, wage labourers, small traders, artisans and so on suffer as an injustice. It is also a social condition that underpins a range of Southern agencies: MST, Zapatista, labour unions, farmers' associations in India, water users in South Africa and so on. This understanding of poverty – structural , relational, and globalised – was entirely dislocated from MPH.

Commercialised campaigning

Thus, the understanding of poverty held by MPH generally undermined the fragile expressions of social justice that existed within MPH. This understanding also served to distinguish MPH from another campaign tradition which we have alluded to as GSM. Before we return to some more reflections on this comparison, there is another aspect of the campaigns political economy which is revealing in its effects on campaign morality.

MPH very purposefully engaged with what might be called a corporate campaigning nexus. It embedded itself in a mileu of public relations companies, advertising companies, celebrity icons, and media personalities. Ultimately, it was the efforts of these agencies – not formally part of the campaign but very influential and rich in resources – that led to MPH's widespread purchase within the British public.

Indeed, strategy meetings within MPH concerned themselves with 'brand recognition', the categorisation of the British public as a marketplace of

consumers. The major iconography of the campaign was produced by advertising companies: the name Make Poverty History came from AMV, the three second click adverts were devised by an advertising company, as were other web and TV media outputs. The campaign attained popularity through its associations with the burgeoning celebrity humanitarians most prominently Bono, Geldof, and Richard Curtis.

The *modus operandi* of the ad agencies is obviously marketing. The aim that all accepted was to achieve a broad and shallow public sensibility. The outcome was that millions bought white wristbands and watched the Live 8 concerts in the first half of 2005, but subsequent surveys show that very little change in people's views of poverty, Africa, or justice have changed. MPH encouraged discrete, individualised acts of consumption.

The argument here is that MPH constituted a key moment in the commoditisation of campaigning which is subsequently evident particularly in Oxfam's public relations strategy (Oxfam credit cards, gifts etc.) and the RED product line co-founded by Bono and others. This commoditisation presents campaign actions as simple easy consumer decisions – in the RED manifesto 'all you have to do is upgrade. Your choice.' Like RED, MPH specialised in short sentences that appeal to virtuous consumer preferences. There is no notion of collectivity, no notion of solidarity or justice, little sense of a longer struggle, and no appreciation of any structural cause of poverty.

Global Social Movements

So far, I have argued three things:

- That MPH is best understood as a recent iteration in a specifically British imperial campaign tradition – based in a British cultural tradition of civic action, focussed on the good offices of the British state, and with little awareness of the benighted masses in whose name the campaign claims to speak.

- That aspects of MPH's political economy – its desire to achieve rapid and widespread reach, its rendering of poverty as solvable through the 'right' decisions by the powerful over a single summit, and its embracing of highly commercialised messaging strategies – produced an anaemic notion of justice that hardly served to move public sensibilities away from the charitable mindset.

- That these traits can be distinguished form another – newer – campaign tradition loosely understood as global social movements.

This final section will conclude by looking more closely at this latter point. It is necessary to make a few guarded comments on the notion of a global social movement.

There is no clearly delineated single global movement, nor is there anything more than a very rough and lose consensus regarding its unity. At best, one can speak of a 'movement of movements' that has at its heart a concern with poverty and exploitation based in a critical reading of global capitalism.

The extent to which the GSM is truly global is not clear and it would certainly be an exaggeration to assert a genuine transnationality or 'virtuality' to the GSM. Nevertheless, the GSM distinguishes itself through its strong geographic focus on various social movements from the Global South and their engagement with various aspects of global neoliberalism.

GSMs share a common understanding of campaign practice: that it is long term, ideologically driven, and based in an ethic of commitment and solidarity.

Inasmuch as these broad features allow us to bundle together a range of protests, forums, social movements, strikes, consumer/investor boycotts, and acts to reclaim the commons, we can speak cautiously of a GSM. Inasmuch as we can do this, we are struck by the fact that MPH – for all its self-conscious fashionability – looks rather old-fashioned and conservative in its practices and moralities.

Africa's Place in the World

Clearly, then, there is a real difference and tension between the imperial campaign tradition and the GSM approach to campaigning. It is striking how much the difference between these two campaign traditions seems to revolve around Africa. Generally, the GSM campaign tradition is associated with Asia and Latin America; generally the imperial campaign tradition is associated with Africa. Subcommondante Marcos, Hugo Chavez, and Arundathi Roy cluster around the former; Bono and Bob Geldof cluster round the latter. In the telling words of one social movement activist in Ghana, commenting on MPH: 'Can you think of even one African voice of face that has communicated the aspirations, passions, concerns, and expectations of her or his fellow Africans over the last year?' (Chukwa-Emeka Chikezie, African Foundation for Development).

Why is this? I think that the core of an answer relates to Africa's place in the world, that is, the patterns of its engagement with the global political economy. Africa does contain the majority of the world's extremely poor, and certainly it contains the world's most extremely poor countries. The reasons for this poverty are obviously complex, but it would be extremely negligent to imagine that it is because Africa has not been fully engaged with globalisation. In fact, what passes as 'globalisation' has often serve to disrupt, impoverish, exploit,

and militarise African societies. Nevertheless, it remains a generally-held axiom that African countries desperately require further, or better, international integration. Both Thomas Friedman and Tony Blair agree that globalisation is an unstoppable train and that good politics is about strategising how to 'get on board'.

Of course, the notion that Africa is 'behind' 'cut off' or 'traditional' in some kind of exceptional fashion is as old as empire. The neoliberal discourse of convergence can easily be filtered through this time-worn morality to provide a modern version of an imperial trope: Africa requires the assistance of the advanced (with due deference to ownership and partnership) in order – to become part of global modernity.

Thus, poverty is African and as such it is an expression on a remoteness from market-based wealth. The polarisation that served to present Britain as civiliser and Africa as its object has its contemporary analogy in the presentation of Britain as leading the G8 to bring Africa out of poverty through aid, debt relief and trade reform in order to make globalisation work for the poor in DFID's words.

This is figuratively reinforced through the campaign imagery of MPH – Africans as unschooled children, residents in houses unconnected to water or electricity, those remote from healthcare and so on. The complex but profoundly modern livelihoods of men and women figure far less strongly. Globalisation – that highly romantic and ideological representation of capitalism – is implicitly placed as a public good which – for unclear reasons – Africa has failed to draw from.

Another revealing aspect of MPH which illustrates this world-view relates to trade. MPH began with a notion of trade justice which was structural and based in a critique of the neomercantilist practices of the US and Europe. However, the messaging regarding trade was far less effective than those related to aid and debt which were easily understood in the terms just set out (aid to help integrate into globalisation; debt relied to empower people to become more active in their connection to the world). The notion of trade justice was far less recognised by the public compared with more aid and less debt. Within the coalition, some NGOs – notably the powerful Oxfam – saw trade reform as levelling the playing field; others saw trade reform as part of a politics of sovereignty and developmental autonomy which was in part an argument for new forms of regulation of the market. In the public sphere, inasmuch as trade just was discussed, it was understood as a need to remove subsidies on Western agricultural exports. In other words, free trade was fair trade. So, although trade justice offered a more complex and potentially radical campaign platform, it was largely seen as a question of getting the prices right to encourage efficient and extroverted trade between all nations.

The point here is that Africa's pride of place in the imperial campaign tradition has allowed it to become a continental metaphor for an apology for global

capitalism: all that is indigent, squalid, low-technology, and corrupt can be located in an imagined continent in which capitalism has not yet flourished.

For Britain at least, GSM campaigns that are based on the deleterious effects of 'globalisation' on Africa are radical in two senses: they both challenge global capitalism and a strongly embedded geographical morality related to Africa. If we take Stephen Howe's phrase that 'Britain is the last colony of the British empire', then campaigns to decolonise the mind away from the African imperial tradition might be the best way to think about Britain's place in any broader GSM.