



A critique of humanitarian reason: agency, power, and privilege

Chioke I'Anson & Geoffrey Pfeifer

To cite this article: Chioke I'Anson & Geoffrey Pfeifer (2013) A critique of humanitarian reason: agency, power, and privilege, Journal of Global Ethics, 9:1, 49-63, DOI: [10.1080/17449626.2012.756419](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756419)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756419>



Published online: 11 Jan 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2410



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

A critique of humanitarian reason: agency, power, and privilege

Chioke I'Anson^a and Geoffrey Pfeifer^{b*}

^a*Philosophy Department, University of South Florida, 4202 E Fowler Ave., FAO 226, Tampa 33620, USA;*

^b*Department of Humanities and Arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 100 Institute Road, Worcester 01609, MA, USA*

(Received 18 July 2012; final version received 20 October 2012)

This paper offers a critical analysis of the work of western humanitarian NGOs operating in the African continent. We argue that in most cases, NGOs and their supporters are deaf to the actual wants, needs, and desires – or, in other words, the agency – of those they are trying to aid. We do this by first offering a series of ways of understanding the ideological commitments that inform the work of many humanitarian NGOs and those who donate to them. In this, we expose the reasons leading to the failure of such individuals and organizations to recognize and take account of the agency of those they seek to help. Second, we offer evidence of the problematic outcome of this failure when coupled with a lack of recognition of the wider context of many of the conflicts that lead to the suffering of those that such NGOs intend to aid. In doing this, we expose the ways in which an NGO's own position can reinforce and contribute to the continuance of this suffering. This, we argue results from the simplified, inaccurate, and de-politicized ways in which NGOs tend to portray the problem of suffering both to those they solicit for donations and in their own conception of the problems and the 'moral' role that the organization itself plays in its work.

Keywords: humanitarianism; human rights; Africa; agency; Invisible Children

There has been a real discomfort and backlash among middle-class educated Africans, Ugandans in particular in this case, but people more broadly, about having Africa as they see it defined by a warlord who does particularly brutal things, and about the perception that Americans are going to ride in on a white horse and resolve it. To me though, it seems even more uncomfortable to think that we as white Americans should not intervene in a humanitarian disaster because the victims are of a different skin color. (Kristoff quoted in Cole 2012)

If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don't even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as 'good', a 'sacrifice' and 'help'. (Illich 1968)

The messengers of progress and civilization had destroyed what they had not built and ridiculed what they did not understand. It would be shortsighted to assume that they alone now possess the keys to survival. (Feyerabend 1988, 27)

The Non-Governmental Organization Invisible Children has been under critical scrutiny from other NGOs and human rights advocates since its inception. This scrutiny has been largely 'private', reflected in the comments of NGOs that have seen them in the field and the published works of academics who have studied their videos.¹ The critical discourse against Invisible Children (IC) went 'public', however, after the release of their *Kony 2012* video.

*Corresponding author. Email: gpfeifer@wpi.edu

The video achieved great viral success and led to a huge influx of capital for the organization (King 2012). It also prompted a great deal of public scrutiny of the organization and a multitude of criticisms concerning IC's mission. These criticisms are reflected in a diversity of voices; laymen expressed their opinions in YouTube videos and pundits and culture critics posted opinions in major Internet and print publications. Most notably, many Africans, including Ugandans, expressed offense at IC's campaign and the larger context of offensive NGO activity.

IC was criticized by human rights lawyers, academics, and Africans alike with regard to the *Kony 2012* video's apparent non-recognition of the agency of Africans who are, and have been, involved in the capture of Joseph Kony and the recovery of communities that have been affected by the Lord's Resistance Army which Kony commands. According to these critics, the metanarrative of the IC's videos evokes the problematic metaphor of a western savior who has come to improve the lives of Africans without any reasonable measure of African input on the matter. Prompted by the *Kony 2012* video, noted Nigerian author Teju Cole tweeted that IC, along with Oprah and other Western humanitarian organizations, represents the 'white savior industrial complex' (Cole 2012).

The terms of such a 'complex' are many. First, aid workers are often ignorant of important and problematic negative empirical effects – what we will later, along with Wendy Brown and Severine Autessere, term the negative 'ripple effects' or 'unintended consequences' – of their implicit ideological commitments; as such, they see no need to engage in a critical dialog about them.² Second, many see the call to address objections as a limit to the ability to care for the urgent needs of the suffering. Some organizations appeal, in response to such criticisms, to accountability measures that in themselves only provide for a narrow and ultimately ineffective conception of accountability.³ NGOs will, for instance, point to their own records of transparency in defense of criticisms to the contrary; though, once again, these conceptions of transparency are narrow, and ultimately unable to meet their own claimed ideals. Finally, NGOs simply do not have to answer most critics in order to maintain their support bases. This fact along with their ideological commitments creates a kind of opacity between human rights advocates and their critics.

These ideological commitments and the practices that they inspire reflect what we term a kind of 'dialectical deafness' in the humanitarian; that is, they make them unable to hear the criticisms of their actions or to address them. It is the aim of this paper to offer a critique of this deafness and the ideology that grounds it. We show how its overcoming will improve humanitarian projects by minimizing the negative 'ripple effects' of their actions and improving conditions of accountability. We also clarify the issues that are at stake in the discourse concerning African agency by showing that African claims for the respect of self-determination reflect a concern to which every human rights advocate must be committed (and must come to be able to hear) in order to be a human rights advocate properly so called.

1. Accountability and deafness

It is our fundamental assumption that the activities of any given NGO disclose its worldview with intimations of the ideology that can be said to motivate its action. A representative of the NGO may rightly disagree that the actions that we attribute to the organization in fact make up the ultimate motivations of the individuals that run it or work for it. However, if our examination is accurate, those dissenters will still have to provide reasons why those private intentions are not then reflected in the public personae of the NGO. It must also be noted that the public personae of the NGO includes statements made by its founders in interviews and blog posts; the notions of public and private here are hardly distinct, and this overlap is reflected

in our understanding of the personae of the NGO. For the purposes of our investigation then, we see the NGO and its public engagements as a kind of public subject, an entity that can be critically engaged as a text and interlocutor.

We understand 'dialectical deafness' to occur when an individual or organization is unable to outwardly address deep criticism or change actions as a result of real and substantive critique. Such deafness is intimately related to accountability. There are two key features of accountability that are important here. The first is the simple notion of organizational accountability as described by Jem Bendell in his 2006 United Nations Report on NGO accountability. Bendell argues that in the context of humanitarian work, accountability should be a democratic ideal that recognizes the asymmetry of power relations that exist between those who are the receivers of various forms of humanitarian aid and those who are the donors of aid (Bendell 2006). In properly considered organizational accountability as Bendell (2006) describes it, 'the person or group affected can change the behavior of the person or group affecting them' (5). On Bendell's model of accountability then, NGOs are accountable to those they seek to help in that the NGO must take account of the actual wants, needs, and desires of the recipients of aid in the planning and execution of their work. This conception describes a necessary aspect of accountability, but it is, in our view, one that remains incomplete, since it does not fully specify the mechanisms of influence that the affected should wield.⁴

The supplementary conception that we propose is focused primarily on the humanitarian (both those that run and work for various humanitarian NGOs and those who donate to them) and their capacity for reflection. Such reflective accountability is in line with what Bendell identifies in his account, that is, a willingness to recognize the possible existence of very good reasons to revise or stop one's charitable activity, reasons that come from those whom the organization seeks to help. This addition to the conception of accountability, however, also explicitly requires that NGOs and individuals should be accountable for actively seeking these reasons out and then reflecting on and responding to them in the proper way. It is this, we maintain, that is the most difficult for the NGO to accomplish and it is why in many cases NGOs and individuals are deaf too. In the next few sections we outline some of the causes of this deafness.

2. The nature of the appeal

It is, as Rozario (2003) has pointed out, a long-standing practice for humanitarian organizations to appeal to their audience by developing simple narratives that are both easily digestible and point to the often violent atrocities that such organizations seek to help end. As Rozario adeptly argues, much of the justification for mounting such appeals can be found in the belief that these narratives aid in the production of a sympathetic perspective in the audiences that are targeted by such campaigns. They do so by appealing not to the rationality of individuals, but rather to their emotions and their senses so as to, as Rozario puts it, 'provoke an imaginative identification with the misery of the victims' so that 'once the sympathetic bond had been established . . . charity would follow' (2003, 423).

Rozario is right to argue that the first problem with such appeals (and such reasons for mounting such appeals) is that they are founded on the belief that humans have a natural moral disposition to feel sympathy for others that can be activated by the simple (and graphic) narratives offered by these appeals. The further assumption that grounds this belief is that, again as Rozario points out, our emotions and desires are somehow fixed in a certain way and are not themselves the results of a complex history that has led to their construction.

In challenging this view, Rozario leans, first, on the Nietzschean claim that sympathy itself is not a natural emotion in humans and is rather something that we come to feel, in the particular ways that we do, as a result of the complex history of human civilization. Second, he claims that

in order to properly understand sympathy, we must also understand its connection to the history of humanity's taking delight in the suffering of others (rather than simply feeling revulsion for it) (Rozario 2003, 424). With this in mind, Rozario offers a well-researched case study of the early twentieth-century history of the *Red Cross Magazine* – the publication used by the American Red Cross as a vehicle for garnering support and donations – pointing out all the ways in which the editors of the magazine used the readership's thirst for the spectacle of violence and suffering to garner support and monetary donations for the variety of causes the Red Cross was (and is) involved in. After detailing this, Rozario returns to the connection between feelings of sympathy and feelings of pleasure evoked in the viewing of images of the suffering:

It is one thing to argue that a taste for spectacles of suffering drew people to humanitarian publications. But why did this attraction prompt sentiments of compassion and charity? This is actually an old question, one that recurs throughout classical and canonical literature, but perhaps nowhere is it addressed with as much bite and as subtly as in Saint Augustine's Confessions. Augustine squarely acknowledged and confronted the element of 'pleasure' involved when watching the brutally violent gladiator contests and theatrical tragedies that unfolded in the amphitheaters and on the stages of the Roman Empire in his day. His extraordinary conclusion was that this delight must be necessary for the production of sympathy. How else, he thought, was the attention of self-absorbed spectators to be riveted on the suffering of strangers? (Rozario 2003, 440)

Rozario then enlists contemporary philosopher Patricia Greenspan in expanding on (and further explaining) Augustine's musings on the connection between taking pleasure in suffering and sympathetic and charitable behavior:

... Greenspan submits that the principal spur to charity in our own time is the guilt men and women experience when they respond inappropriately to the misfortunes of others. If people believe they should feel sadness or horror but instead feel a strange titillation (which seems to be the modern fate), they begin to experience an 'emotional discomfort' severe enough to become a 'compulsive motivation' that drives them to perform the acts of virtue that they hope will cleanse or expiate their bad feelings. (Rozario 2003, 440)

What Rozario points to here is similar to what Lilie Chouliaraki identifies as a 'Regime of Pity'. For Chouliaraki, 'spectators do not possess "pure" emotions vis-à-vis the sufferers, but their emotions are, in fact, shaped by the values embedded in news narratives about who the "others" are and how we should relate to them' (Chouliaraki 2006, 11). The spectator's emotional response is used and reconstructed by the appeal so as to goad the spectator into action, but this action is based on the 'emotional discomfort' evoked in the spectator by the appeal itself.

We certainly do not want to make the claim that all those who donate to humanitarian causes or engage in humanitarian actions are driven to do so by the emotional discomfort they feel in taking delight in the spectacle of the suffering of others. Nevertheless, when this is the motivation, it leads to a host of problems that must be considered (and will be so shortly). Further, if Rozario's explanation of the problematic nature of appeals to the emotions on the part of some humanitarian organizations via the triad of Nietzsche, Augustine, and Greenspan is at all correct (and it surely is in many cases) then turning the issue of the suffering of others into a (seemingly) moral problem is also fraught with difficulty as it can lead directly to action based on such 'emotional discomfort'. This is to say, if those who are moved by the 'moral' nature of the problem of suffering – and the perceived immorality of their own response of delight at such suffering – become engaged in humanitarian activity as a result of such a process then it is not the suffering of others that underlies the wish to help, it is rather one's own shame at taking delight in the spectacle that is the motivating factor. Thus, the agency, needs, wants, and desires of the suffering other actually end up figuring very little in the decision to help. The main goal is, rather, a self-regarding one instead of a strictly moral one – it is the

desire to cleanse oneself of the perceived immorality of one's own pleasurable reaction at the spectacle of the suffering of another.

3. Deafness made visible

A conspicuous recent example of the lack of concern for the actual desires of the suffering other on the part of a humanitarian organization (and its donors) is that of the recent campaign against the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) by the aforementioned NGO, the IC. Two members of Invisible Children attended an April 2012 panel discussion at New York University at which the *Kony 2012* video and its lessons were the topic of discussion.⁵ The representatives from IC were faced with mounting evidence that survivors of the violent atrocities that the LRA had committed in Uganda in fact had no interest in 'popularizing' Kony and the LRA. Victims, relatives of victims, and other Ugandans who were present at the talk expressed incredulity at the Cover the Night campaign, in which IC's mostly Western followers were instructed to go out into their communities to post posters and stickers of Joseph Kony's name and likeness in an attempt to 'make him famous'. In particular, they took issue with the date of the campaign roll out: 20 April. This date is the anniversary of a massacre of northern Ugandans in the village of Atiak, which took place at the hands of the LRA in 1995. For many Ugandans it is a day of mourning and remembrance. For this reason, the Cover the Night campaign seemed particularly insulting.

IC's actions were not only hurtful but also indicative of a lack of understanding of the region, its history, and those who survive in the wake of the extreme violence. Representatives of IC admitted that they had neither consulted a significant number of survivors of the LRA's actions in Uganda nor had they screened their now famous – and, in Uganda at least, famously denounced and reviled (Lawino 2012) – video calling for action against Joseph Kony for the victims, so as to gain insight into the reactions of the very people that IC sought to help.

Furthermore, consider the following provocation from Victor Ochen of northern Uganda's African Youth Initiative Network:

Americans are confused as to the suitable use of the images of those who have recently caused great suffering and trauma. A glut of seemingly celebratory images of Osama bin Laden on the bare walls and signposts of New York City would not be tolerated. A contextually deceptive catch phrase like 'Make bin Laden Famous' would hardly be an acceptable way of framing the search for his capture. (Ochen 2012)

It is precisely this kind of thought that the founders of IC are deaf to because they were (and are) more focused – possibly in the fashion that Rozario points to above – on their own reactions to the very real horrors that they witnessed than on what, arguably, should have been the central focus: the wants, needs, and desires of those victimized by the violence.

Returning in this context to Teju Cole's charge that the IC are a part of the 'White Savior Industrial Complex', while Cole's comment, as noted at the beginning of this paper, indicts the IC's attitude as neocolonialist, his further complaint is that the kind of work that the IC and other similar organizations engage in often has the effect of diminishing the accomplishments or humanitarian struggles of non-westerners or natives in communities targeted by Western humanitarian organizations. The Complex, he argues, 'is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege'. The 'White Savior's' activity changes the meaning of the world, such that, as Cole (2012) argues, the world 'exists simply to satisfy the needs – including, importantly, the sentimental needs – of white people and Oprah'. This is to say that, much like Rozario's comments, Cole points out how humanitarian action often runs the risk of being undertaken not out of other-regarding concerns, but rather out of self-regarding concerns. The self-regarding concerns at issue here are about what Mathers

(2010) identifies as the expectation of self-discovery in humanitarian work. That is, those who work for, run, or donate time and money to humanitarian causes with the expectation that it will lead them to become properly 'moral' or to discover their 'purpose' or 'who they are' are deaf to the protests of the other they seek to help. This is because, when undertaken for these reasons, donating time or money to a cause is more about the experience of the donator, than it is about the one who is to be the recipient of help. Apropos this, in his criticism of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe notes that 'the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa.' Africa, says Achebe, has become Dorian Gray's portrait: 'a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate' (Achebe 1978, 13).

Achebe's words resonate with eighteenth-century criticisms of the developing 'culture of sensibility' in Europe, particularly in the bourgeois society of Britain. This new cultural sensitivity to suffering, Halttunen (1995) argues, contributed to our modern understanding of humanitarian action. What is of interest in this account of history are the criticisms that were raised against the immanent writers of 'sentimentalism', such as Anne Barbauld and Samuel Richardson. Critics claimed that 'the poetry of sensibility actually explored not the feelings of the imagined sufferer but the feelings of the spectator/reader's own exquisite sensibility' (Halttunen 1995, 308). Ibrahim Shaw, also commenting on this problem, points out how the portrait painted of the suffering other is also drawn from, and related to, the spectator's own set of 'unquestioned cultural values, myths, and ideologies – perspectives least likely to be challenged, or perhaps even identified' (Shaw 2012, 85). Here, he points to three commonly used tropes in the Western mythology about Africa:

... 'historical baggage' (seeing Africa in the prehistoric era of exploration, or through the lens of the slave trade era of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries): ethnic hatred (seeing Africa as only one country with many tribes fighting against each other) and a dark, primitive, hopeless image (seeing Africa as a 'basket case' where poverty and misery are rife, and where nothing can be done to change things. (Shaw 2012, 86)

A further popular illustration of this problematic attitude can be seen in the experience of visiting an orphanage in Zambia recounted by L.A. Dodgers pitcher Clayton Kershaw in an article in the *New York Times*. Upon his return from this trip, he described the revelations that accompanied his time with children in the orphanage in this way:

You come home and you see people striving to get more money, more cars, bigger houses and more possessions, thinking that will make them happier. You go to Zambia, it helps put things in perspective. You realize where happiness comes from, and it's not from material goods. (Crouse 2011)

Kershaw's words here reflect Achebe's point in his remark about Africa and the portrait of Dorian Gray, Shaw's identification of Western mythologies of the African other, as well as those connected points that Rozario and Cole offer us. Kershaw went to Africa with his wife, ostensibly to assist with issues of suffering involving the AIDS epidemic. Yet, this was ultimately less about helping others and more about his own experience as chronicled in his own reflections on this trip. Further, the article itself can be seen as a reflection of this problematic position as it is Kershaw's own self-revelations that are the focus of the piece. Even the journalist who wrote it engages in this revelatory tone: 'The faces of the Zambian orphans Kershaw met during his visit have stayed with him, a rosin bag of images to help him maintain his grip on what really matters' (Crouse 2011).

If the analysis of these examples coupled with the history of the development of the emotions of sympathy and sentiment explored here reveals anything it is that 'what really matters' for the Western aid worker in Africa is the degree to which the experience of 'Africa' itself can conform and contribute to the self-conception of the Westerner as a 'good person' or as someone who can

symbolically ‘rise above’ the need for capitalist consumption through a basic acknowledgement of its seeming non-necessity for the poor people the Westerner met on the trip.

4. Commodifying suffering

Rozario goes on to point out a second problem that impacts many contemporary western NGOs in his review of the early twentieth-century activities of the American Red Cross, namely the commodification of suffering itself. He notes here that there are

surprising similarities in the presentation and consumption of charity texts and the pulp magazines, advertisements, and commercial movies of an increasingly entertainment-oriented mass culture. As it turns out, it was only when philanthropy became a marketing venture and when donors began to be treated and courted as consumers who had to be entertained that philanthropy could become a mass phenomenon. (Rozario 2003, 419)

This shift, from an ‘appeal to fellow men’ to a business practice modeled after all other business practices whose aim is profit, is yet another intimation of a foundational impurity in the purportedly moral discourse of charitable fundraising. The engagements of commercial marketing are unconcerned with the general practices of truth telling that are associated with the standards of journalism or other sites of reporting about the world that are governed by ethical standards. Instead, marketers are required above all to get attention and use that attention to appeal to the emotions of the consumer in such a way as to bypass truly moral or otherwise rational considerations when it comes to the use and purchase of goods or services. Rozario links this also to the rise of industrial psychologists as marketing consultants. Well-known psychologists of the age such as John B. Watson were able to wield the power of the discipline ‘to manipulate “irrational” emotions’ (Rozario 2003, 428).

These irrational emotional appeals for support have been a tactic used by humanitarian organizations to get support since behavioral and Industrial/Organizational Psychology came to prominence in the twentieth century. Supporters who give according to the emotional appeal, again, need not be connected with or critical of the practices of the organization. It is possible, then, for people who have never visited the NGO in its primary location, or who have never sought independent accountability of the organization itself, to confidently remark that the NGO is ‘doing good work’.

Charitable organizations are in a uniquely powerful place when it comes to bypassing conscience in advertising for their causes, insofar as the kind of work that they purport to do is most often viewed uncritically and seen as self-evidently worth supporting. NGOs feed children, build schools, and counsel war victims. In other words, as Rieff says, ‘Here are a people engaged in an activity that is wholly admirable, and that one need not view skeptically’ (1997, 132). The purportedly self-evident goodness of the project, together with the emotional appeal, all but eliminates the demand for accountability for which supporters would push in other domains of life, such as business or politics. Even in a world of mass media, NGOs have a relatively easy time escaping accountability, at the same time that they publicly welcome calls for ‘transparency’. Their work, meanwhile, can go poorly reported by independent sources or reported only by the NGO itself.

Returning to the example of IC, in relation to this, in the aftermath of the *Kony 2012* debate, they attempted to address some of the criticism of their organization and its actions. CEO Ben Keesey posted videos on Vimeo in which he called for questions and posted follow-up videos. In doing this, Keesey invoked IC’s claimed commitment to transparency. IC also created a follow-up video to *Kony 2012*, *Kony 2012: Part 2: Beyond famous*, which was posted on YouTube on 5 April 2012 just 1 month after the original *Kony 2012* video was released. In addition, IC posted written replies to criticisms and objections on its website.

This transparency, however, was of the kind criticized above: the kind indicative of an organization with ideological commitments that made it deaf to very real concerns raised by its critics. Most of the objections that IC addressed were straw men, whose proper counterparts were much more problematic for IC's campaign. For example, in response to the question 'Are Ugandans for or against the *Kony 2012* campaign?' it is stated:

As everywhere else, reactions are mixed. Just as with any country or continent, it is dangerous to characterize the Ugandan nationality categorically. KONY 2012 has evoked a variety of responses from people all over the world – many positive, but some critical. The same is true within Uganda.

We have found that many Ugandans welcome the film's message of stopping Joseph Kony, but some take offense at how the message was delivered. Admittedly, KONY 2012 was geared towards young, western audiences in an effort to raise awareness of what began in Uganda, but is currently taking place in DR Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. (Invisible Children 2012)

At the end of this quote, a link is provided to a video that IC produced in which non-Ugandan community leaders speak about the LRA.

This response, along with the question that prompts it, is disingenuous at best. IC does not describe in any meaningful detail the nature of the grievances that Ugandans have raised against the *Kony 2012* campaign (some of which are reproduced above). Nor do they address the intensity of the offense that many Ugandans, most notably among LRA victims, have registered against the campaign. Recall Victor Ochen's comments above drawing the analogy between 11 September and the atrocities committed by the LRA. Moreover, the first showing of the *Kony 2012* video in northern Uganda in Lira resulted in a riot in which people screamed into news cameras and rocks were thrown. The organization that held the screening, of which Ochen is a founding director, decided it best to suspend all future screenings out of respect for public safety and the feelings of the war victims (Quinn 2012).

The second showing, which took place in Gulu and was put on by IC itself, did not fare much better. The event was documented in an official IC video, which depicted a completely peaceful showing at which all present were supportive. However, the *Acholi Times* reported that police dispersed the crowd, who were angered by the film, with tear gas and live ammunition (Okumu 2012). In the edited video of the showing in Gulu, as in the question that is used to frame the response on their website, IC render the dissent of Ugandan victims invisible.⁶ They create an image of the world that does not match reports that come from outside their organization.

5. Accountability revisited

Adam Branch argues that it is unsurprising that IC responded in the way that it did to its critics, especially given the history of the accountability of many NGOs operating in Africa. He writes:

Africa tends to be seen by Westerners as an accountability-free zone, where they can say and do what they want without facing any consequences. Therefore, it must have been a shock to Invisible Children when Africans spoke back and denounced the falsehoods of Kony Part I. (Branch 2012)

The wider context evoked in Branch's comments about the lack of accountability of NGOs in Africa is detailed in a 2003 study of the accountability practices of many NGOs. This study found that the NGOs that were a part of the study had devoted very little time to developing accountability practices for their work (Scholte 2003). In commenting on the findings of this study, Bendell points out that the reasons that many NGOs gave for not developing such practices:

... Included efficiency, as accountability processes are too expensive, as well as protestations that their power was nothing compared to governments and businesses, so their accountability was not

a serious issue. They also questioned how working on accountability would really help them achieve their various missions. Thus initiatives on accountability were viewed with suspicion. (Bendell 2006, 13–14)

IC's response to its critics who demanded such accountability, effectively, was to ignore these denouncements as we have seen, and given the wider problem of accountability, is quite in keeping with the practices of many NGOs. The problem is that this act of disregard on the IC's part operates as a secondary victimization of those whose lives were affected by the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army and who by and large object to the IC's campaign insofar as it is the erasure of the agency of the victims themselves. As Victor Ochen goes on to suggest this secondary victimization comes from the fact that the *Kony 2012* campaign was launched without the consent of the people it purports to help (Ochen 2012). The victims feel that *Kony 2012* is happening to them, instead of for them. The narrative of the film portrayed Ugandans as voiceless victims and this is exactly how the video has made many Ugandans feel. In other words, the *Kony 2012* video was seen as a violation of their agency. In this way, the organization is deaf to the call to accountability.

This deafness and lack of (real) transparency, the inability to hear the voices of those many humanitarian organizations seek to help, and the unreflective support for such humanitarian campaigns by Westerners are further made possible by several background assumptions characteristic of the modern self. Kaunda identified at least one of these in his discussion of what he terms the 'Machine Age Heresy' (1981, 32).

Kaunda contends that human beings in the modern age are prone to believe that the pace of advancement in technology and science could itself be mirrored in matters of politics. Thus, we are, on this view, quick to believe that:

Unless something is inherently absurd, sooner or later someone is going to find a better way of doing it. All that is needed is more brain power, more money, more equipment, more hard work. This is a fine, brave philosophy when applied to the world of things. It can be very dangerous when introduced into the world of politics. (Kaunda 1981, 32)

In the world of politics, there are intractable situations whose solutions do not depend simply on the creation of a new chemical compound or the streamlining of a manufacturing process. The conduct of a state is not that of a machine, which has only to have the proper parts in the right configuration. Human beings change loyalties, switch roles, hold grudges. The hidden 'Factor X' that a machine may need to run reliably has no human or political equivalent. One of the great mistakes of political life, argues Kaunda, is the naive belief that a tactic that previously achieved great political results will continue to do so, that it will be presented as the Factor X that can solve the great problems of the age. Such an advocate travels 'as straight as an arrow, but in a bent world' (Kaunda 1981, 33).

Thus, as Kaunda shows us, the notion of the irresistibility of technological advancement in the modern age can contribute to the widely held, and naïve, belief that great humanitarian crises can be solved if only sufficient resources are properly allotted. Of course, this means that we also see most, if not all, humanitarian crises as political crises. However, we also should note a secondary problem with the Machine Age Heresy: namely that the assumptions upon which the Heresy is based, that the march of technology is irresistible, is itself mistaken.

In his celebrated paper arguing for humanitarian action, Singer (1972) states as a fundamental assumption that there are no problems with distribution, that the state of technology and transportation has made it such that supplies can be moved fairly quickly to anywhere in the world. However, in the humanitarian response to the earthquake that devastated Haiti, as the Popular American radio program *This American Life* has adeptly pointed out, this is simply not true (*This American Life* 2010). Nevertheless, in such cases as the Haitian Earthquake, as Easterly

(2006) has written, the refrain that ‘something should be done already’ often informs particular humanitarian campaigns, most often those that entail a grand plan or a ‘big push’. The problem here seems to be that the notion of the ‘big push’ itself is premised upon a belief in both the Machine Age Heresy and the false assumptions about science, technology, and distribution from which the Heresy is derived. Not only are humanitarian projects inherently political projects – and not simply solved by technology, and a-political technocratic administration of goods and services – but the technology that can potentially change a social situation is itself controlled by political forces. Easterly is thus correct when he goes on to point out that, ‘Setting a prefixed (and grandiose) goal is irrational because there is no reason to assume that the goal is attainable at a reasonable cost with the available means’ (2006, 11).

6. Ripple effects

The problems we have identified here and that have been exemplified mainly in our example of the actions of the IC can also be linked to a wider critical discourse centered on the conception of ‘Human Rights’ that underlies much of the arguments that make humanitarian intervention a moral imperative. To make the problems that humanitarian organizations seek to solve problems of ‘human rights’ and to present the work of humanitarian organizations as solely concerned with ending the violation of such rights is, as Wendy Brown has adeptly pointed out, a way of de-politicizing them, of making of them, as has already been described above, (seemingly) moral problems rather than political ones. We are in agreement with Brown when she argues that, turning such problems like those that IC identify, into moral problems (and thus enacting their de-politicization) is

an instrument for abating the grievous suffering of targeted individuals and groups, stanching the flow of human blood, diminishing the cries of pain, unbending the crouch of human fear – who could argue with this, especially when the historical present features so much politically let blood, politically inflicted pain, and politically induced fear? Indeed no one can argue with it . . . If human rights achieve this, and nothing more, there is no quarrel to be had. (Brown 2004, 452)

It is the last sentence of Brown’s statement here that is critical for us (and for her). If human rights discourse and humanitarian action only achieves the goal of ending suffering, then it is hard to argue with (even if some of the motivations are not other-regarding motivations as we have described above). It is, however, this ‘only’ that is all important. Such actions are in fact, as we have already begun to show, far from the a-political, simply moral, acts that they paint themselves to be or understand themselves as. They are rather necessarily political in a multitude of ways and they have decisively political outcomes (some of which are highly problematic and have already been alluded to above). These must be thought and must be understood, and most importantly must not be covered over by the simplistic narratives and urgent cries for help that they are marketed as. Brown continues, and this is worth quoting en masse as it forms the background of much that we have been interested in pointing out up to this point:

. . . It is the nature of every significant political project to ripple beyond the project’s avowed target and action, for the simple reason that all such projects are situated in political, historical, social and economic contexts with which they dynamically engage. No effective project produces only the consequences it aims to produce. Whatever their avowed purpose, do human rights [actions] only reduce suffering? Do they (promise to) reduce it in a particular way that precludes or negates other possible ways? And if they reduce suffering, what kinds of subjects and political (or antipolitical) cultures do they bring into being as they do so, what kinds do they transform or erode, and what kinds do they aver? (Brown 2004, 453)

We have, in the examples of the screening riots at Lira and Gulu, and the response of the survivors of the LRA’s brutality, already seen some of these ‘ripple effects’ in relation to the

actions of the IC. Séverine Autesserre recounts for us a further and particularly disturbing ‘ripple effect’, of certain other human rights activity and humanitarian intervention taking place in the DR Congo in relation to the singular focus of the international community on the sexual violence endured by women there. She explains that not only has such a singular focus led to the down-playing of importance of, and diverting of resources away from, helping victims of other forms of abuse, such as non-sexual torture, and even sexual violence against men and boys (as the main focus in on women and girls), but it has also, perhaps shockingly, contributed to the continuance of such sexual violence as it has created an atmosphere in which ‘armed groups have started to see sexual violence as an effective bargaining tool’ (Autesserre 2012, 16). Her example of this phenomenon is the much publicized mass rape of some 387 civilians that took place in 2010 in the DR Congo town of Luvungi at the hands of a local militia called Mai Mai Sheka in connection with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda. According to Autesserre the commander of the militia ordered the soldiers to

... systematically rape women, instead of just looting and beating people as they usually do because he wanted to draw attention to his armed group and to be invited to the negotiating table. He knew that using sexual violence was the best way to reach this goal, because it would draw the attention of the international community, and various states and advocacy groups would put pressure on the Congolese government to negotiate with him – which is exactly what happened. (Autesserre 2012, 16)

Autesserre continues, pointing out that this

... unintended consequence would not exist if it were not for the presence of a final problem: there is much more attention, and many more projects, devoted to the consequences of sexual violence than to its causes, such as poverty, land conflict, hostile civil-military relationships, disorganization of the army and the police, weakness of the justice system, physical and economic insecurity, and oppressive gender norms. The mass media coverage in the aftermath of the 2010 mass rapes in Luvungi is a case in point: all news items focused on the horrific nature of the violence, and on the UN failure to respond, while virtually none tried to explain why the soldiers decided to rape. (Autesserre 2012, 17)

It is interesting, in the context of some of the ideas that we have been occupied with here, to note that none of the causes of such violence that Autesserre cites have the same kind of spectacle-like quality that the violence itself has. This is to say, they simply do not have the effect of causing the kind of ‘emotional discomfort’ that Rozario speaks of (and are thus much harder to get organizations and individuals interested in helping to solve), but it is these very causes that must be addressed if such violence is to actually be stopped.

Barbara Harrell-Bond gives us one further example of the negative ‘ripple effects’ or unintended consequences that arise in aid-intensive environments as they exist now. The example is one that arises in refugee camps, in which there are many foreign aid workers and the relationship between them and those who need aid are corrupted by differentials in power. As we have already noted, getting support for aid work in the West often involves portraying those who need aid as child-like victims. Aid workers and other supporters who visit the space of need often fulfill this representation by treating the needy not as social peers who need assistance, but as precisely the child-like victim that inspired the support in the first place. As Harrell-Bond writes,

This stereotype of the helpless refugees also informs refugees’ perceptions concerning the role they are expected to play to gain the approval of the helpers and to be successful in obtaining aid. As most refugees are able to infer, accepting their client role and ingratiating themselves with camp authorities and individual helpers is one of the survival strategies used in the context of fierce competition over scarce humanitarian aid resources. (2002, 57)

The content of the call to action that inspires the aid worker thus forms the perspective that the aid worker uses to interpret the world. Yet, the aid worker does not notice the degree to which this perspective compels the person in need into ingratiating and subservient patterns of action.

Furthermore, this lack of recognition leads some aid workers to mistreat those who do not fulfill this image of the victim:

there is an alternative stereotype of 'bad' refugees as thankless, ungrateful, cheating, conniving, aggressive, demanding, manipulative, and even dangerous persons who are out to subvert the aid system. Neither image embodies the complexities of human reactions in situations of extreme stress, but as anyone who has worked with refugees will likely agree, it is the latter image or experience of refugees that has the greatest bearing on how helpers treat refugees. (Harrell-Bond 2002, 58)

Bond notes many cases in which refugees who did not fit the conception of the child-victim were either forced to play that role or ostracized to the point of harm.

7. A call for reflection

We have, to this point, done two things: First we have offered a series of possible ways of understanding the ideological commitments that inform and underlie both the work of many non-governmental humanitarian organizations and those who donate to such organizations. In so doing, we hope we have exposed what we see as the reasons leading to the failure of the ability of such individuals and organizations to recognize and take account of the agency of those they seek to help. Second, we have offered evidence of the negative 'ripple effects' or 'unintended consequences' of this failure when coupled with a lack of recognition of the deeply political, historical, and cultural nature of many of the conflicts that lead to the suffering of those that such organizations intend to aid, along with a lack of understanding on the part of the organization itself, of the ways in which its own position can reinforce and contribute to the continuance of this suffering. This, we have argued, results from the simplified, inaccurate, and de-politicized ways in which NGOs tend portray the problem of suffering both to those they solicit for donations and in their own conception of the problems and the 'moral' role that the organization itself plays in ending such suffering.

These ripple effects are, as we have seen in just a few brief examples, far from innocuous; they make up what Slavoj Žižek has identified as the 'structural violence' built into many existing systems or organizations, violence to which those who operate within the system are largely ideologically blind and deaf and are thus unable to confront critically (Žižek 2008, 36). What we have attempted to identify then is the structural violence inherent in the current modes of humanitarian intervention propagated by many western NGOs and their supporters. With this in mind, we can now turn to a brief discussion of what the outcomes of the critique we have offered here might be.

Our argument in this regard is as simple as it is radical. When faced with the urgent call to help, we should refuse to answer this call by immediately opening our wallets, joining the cause, or buying plane tickets. We have seen, in the many examples offered above, the problems that such action brings with it. As Žižek has provocatively put the point:

... I am therefore tempted to reverse Marx's Thesis 11: the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act, to intervene directly to change things... If today we follow a direct call to act, this act will not be performed in an empty space – it will be an act within the [existing] hegemonic ideological coordinates. (Žižek 2002, 170)

The 'ideological coordinates' Žižek speaks of here can be understood, in the context of this paper, as those that we have identified as producing the dialectical deafness of the humanitarian and the NGO, which leads to an inability to be properly accountable and the many other problems we have discussed at length.

Against the foreseeable criticism of our recommendation to stop acting as leading to a kind of quietism, and thereby allowing for the continued violence and suffering that the current work of NGOs at least attempts to stop (in other words, the criticism goes like this: 'what you recommend is that we do nothing, surely doing something is better than doing nothing!'), we

should point out that, far from being passive and conservative, the most radical thing one who wants to help can do is to break the hold of this ideology through a patient and careful critique of the call to act, the situation that provokes the call, and the motivations of both the organization who produces the call as well as the individual's own immediate response to it. What criticisms such as this miss and what must be (in our view) brought to prominence is precisely the structural violence that exists in the system as it stands and that we have repeatedly attempted to point to throughout this essay. This is to say, if we truly want to stop suffering, then we must become able to see and hear all the causes of such suffering, not just those which do not implicate the Western humanitarian NGO and rather portray it as the savior of the suffering other.

The truly quietist act in this situation is the one in which we simply and unreflectively assent to the call. It is this that really does nothing to stop the violence: the NGO that produces the call gets the donation, or the volunteer; it goes on doing what it has been (without any real accountability), the donor and/or volunteer gets to discharge her feeling of guilt for enjoying the spectacle without having to concern herself any further with effects of the action or donation on the world, the political nature of the situation is never properly understood, the structural violence exemplified in the 'ripple effects' continue to happen, and, most importantly, the agency of those who are suffering continues to be ignored. All of this is, as we have shown above, what has already been happening and so, responding to the call to act in the prescribed ways (donating money or time for instance) merely perpetuates the static nature of the ideological situation itself (and its problems). Here then the truly transformative act, the one which has the most potential for punching through the ideological deafness, is to refuse to respond immediately to the call, to engage in the proper critical reflection (of which this paper hopes to be a model) as it is only here that we find the possibility of creating the conditions in which we are able to become un-deaf to the ideology that grips humanitarianism and humanitarian action, move beyond it, and become properly accountable.

Notes on contributors

Chioke I Anson is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of South Florida, motorcyclist and radio producer. His primary interests are Hegel, humanitarianism and motorcycle studies. Currently, Chioke is Resident Radio Producer at the nationally syndicated show BackStory with the American History Guys.

Geoffrey Pfeifer is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. His interests are in the areas of contemporary continental philosophy, social and political philosophy, development ethics and global justice. His work has appeared in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory, Human Studies*, and *The European Legacy*.

Notes

1. Most notably in the work of Finnström, who takes serious issue with the original IC video in his 2008 *Living with bad surroundings: War, history, and everyday moments in Northern Uganda*.
2. Autesserre (2012) describes in detail how this veil of ignorance is routinely cast over even the aid workers who work in the field.
3. In the case of IC, we are in agreement with Adam Branch that this accountability is to the wrong audience – western supporters, but not victims of the war in Uganda.
4. This consideration as to how the disadvantaged 'should' exert power begs us to visit the claims of Jan de Vos, who reminds Western theorists that the stratagems for empowerment that we draft are themselves exertions of power over the global south, often made without the representation which we claim to advocate. See De Vos (2011).
5. The entirety of the panel discussion is available for download at <http://resourcespace.law.nyu.edu/filevault/?r=47&k=503be87d93>.
6. The depiction in this video, when compared to written reports of the event, is truly extraordinary: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWuP_XWrD04&feature=player_embedded.

References

- Achebe, C. 1978. An image of Africa. *Research in African Literatures* 9, no. 1: 13.
- Autesserre, S. 2012. Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences. *African Affairs* 111, no. 443: 202–22.
- Bendell, Jem. 2006. *NGLS Development Dossier: Debating NGO accountability*. New York: United Nations.
- Branch, A. 2012. Kony 2012: Accountability, not awareness. *Al Jazeera*, April 7. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/201247943869166.html> (accessed June 9, 2012).
- Brown, W. 2004. The most we can hope for . . . human rights and the politics of fatalism. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2–3: 451–63.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2006. *The spectatorship of suffering*. London: Sage.
- Cole, T. 2012. The white savior industrial complex. *The Atlantic*, March 21. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/> (accessed May 25, 2012).
- Crouse, K. 2011. In Africa, lessons on passion and perspective for Kershaw. *New York Times*, February 26. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/sports/baseball/27kershaw.html?_r=2&partner=rss&emc=rss (accessed June 12, 2012).
- De Vos, Jan. 2011. The psychologization of humanitarian aid: Skimming the battlefield and the disaster zone. *History of the Human Sciences* 24, no. 3: 103–22.
- Easterly, W. 2006. *The white man's burden: Why the west's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Feyerabend, P. 1988. *A farewell to reason*. New York: Verso.
- Finnström, Severker. 2008. *Living with bad surroundings: War, history, and everyday moments in Northern Uganda*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Halttunen, K. 1995. Humanitarianism and the pornography of pain in Anglo-American culture. *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2: 303–34.
- Harrell-Bond, B. 2002. Can humanitarian work with refugees be humane? *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, no. 1: 51–85.
- Illich, Ivan. To Hell With Good Intentions: An Address by Monsignor Ivan Illich to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects in Cuernavaca, Mexico on April 20, 1968. http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm (accessed September 15, 2012).
- Invisible Children (2012) Questions and Answers. <http://invisiblechildren.com/about/q-and-a/> (accessed May 15, 2012).
- Kaunda, K. 1981. *The riddle of violence*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- King, J. 2012. Kony 2012's success shows there's big money attached to white saviors. *Colorlines*, March 14. http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/03/kony_2012_white_saviors.html (accessed May 22, 2012).
- Lawino, S. 2012. Victims decry Kony 2012 video as profit making project. *Acholi Times*, April 16. <http://www.acholitimes.com/index.php/8-acholi-news/155-victims-decry-kony-2012-video-as-a-profit-making-project> (accessed June 8, 2012).
- Mathers, Kathryn. 2010. *Travel, humanitarianism, and becoming American in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ochen, Victor. 2012. Interview by Chioke I'Anson. Digital Recording. April 15. Manhattan, NY. <http://chismatic.blogspot.com/2012/04/victor-ochen-on-ngos-and-invisible.html> (accessed May 23, 2012).
- Okumu, D. 2012. Kony 2012 screening in Gulu leaves one dead and many injured. *Acholi Times*, April 16. <http://www.acholitimes.com/index.php/8-acholi-news/154-kony-2012-screening-in-gulu-leaves-one-dead-and-many-injured> (accessed June 5, 2012).
- Quinn, R. 2012. AYINET to suspend further screenings of Kony 2012. African Youth Initiative Network, March 15. <http://www.africanyouthinitiative.org/ayinet-to-suspend-further-screenings-of-kony-2012/> (accessed June 8, 2012).
- Rieff, D. 1997. Charity on the rampage: The business of foreign aid. Review of the road to hell: The ravaging effects of foreign aid and international charity by Michael Maren. *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 1: 132–8.
- Rozario, K. 2003. 'Delicious horrors': Mass culture, the Red Cross and the appeal of modern American humanitarianism. *The American Quarterly* 55, no. 3: 417–55.
- Scholte, J.A. 2003. Protecting the rights and addressing the responsibilities of non-governmental organizations. Summary report, unpublished paper, Warwick University, Coventry.
- Shaw, Ibrahim. 2012. *Human rights journalism: Advances in reporting distant humanitarian interventions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Singer, P. 1972. Famine, affluence and morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1: 229–43.

This American Life. 2010. Island Time. Act Three. Haiti is destiny. May 2010. This feature chronicles the logistical and political hurdles that limit the delivery of aid. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/408/island-time> (accessed May 19, 2012).

Žižek, S. 2002. *Revolution at the gates: Žižek on Lenin, the 1917 writings*. New York: Verso.

Žižek, S. 2008. *Violence*. New York: Picador.