

Humanitarianism as Neocolonialism

by Bradford Baker

Bradford Baker is a senior Comparative History of Ideas major. He has studied abroad numerous times throughout the globe and recently returned from his senior thesis trip in which he traveled from Cairo, Egypt to Capetown, South Africa.

I will argue that charity is dysfunctional in that it helps to keep the 'Third World' in the state of an impoverished and disenfranchised recipient of limited 'aid', rather than as partners in redistribution and just exchange. This suggests that tourism and charity in the 'Third World' represents the soft edge of an otherwise brutal system of exploitation. It deserves no alibi.

— John Hutnyk, 'Rumour of Calcutta'

The U.S. has no intention of raising up Africa to compete with it. It would not be in the U.S.'s best interests.

— Jim McDermott

As many of you within my CHID family know, I have made the most of my undergraduate experience when it comes to studying abroad. I have had the privilege of participating in nine separate programs and have visited 42 countries. In January, I returned from my most recent sojourn, a 7,000 mile overland trip from Cairo to Cape Town. As a result, I am writing this piece for a very specific audience: Well-intentioned, well-educated, usually white, college students who want to visit Africa to 'help.' So, basically, a lot of us in the CHID world. However, before I get ahead of myself, let me preface all of this by first saying that, for me, it is not a question of if we help, but instead how we help. Through the traveling that I have done over the past 7 years, I have personally witnessed pain, struggle, and strife within different communities all across this planet that truly cannot be put into words. Therefore, I personally believe that those of us with privilege have an obligation to work alongside those forced to exist under subaltern conditions to alleviate human suffering. So again, it's not if; it's how.

Tragically though, what I witnessed on this trip is that this is precisely where the most fundamental problem with 'helping' is encountered: at the very site of that privilege. The very

thing which provides us with the opportunity to 'help' is also that which inhibits us from creating actual change. The U.S. helpers I encountered throughout Africa possessed a multitude of these 'blinding/inhibiting' privileges—age, class, education, mobility, gender, etc. However, what I found the most frightening were the effects of white privilege. It might be difficult to make this point in short terms, but it is my belief that a vast majority of U.S. humanitarian intervention that is currently taking place throughout Africa is neo-colonial in almost every respect, and much of this is predicated upon whiteness.

I experienced neo-colonial relationships within humanitarianism everywhere I went. The most lucid example of this is based upon the time I spent in a small town called Gulu in northern Uganda (where the documentary *Invisible Children* was filmed). Quick little history, Uganda has had a civil war raging for 20 years now, named the most forgotten war in the world. It has resulted in more than a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and an estimated 15,000 children have been kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers. Currently, there are over 200 international NGOs operating in Gulu to help with the problems created by this war. 200 in a town of just over 100,000 people! Honestly, I was horrified by a vast majority of the organizations I encountered and the people running them. Everywhere you turn there are white aid workers, most of them treating Gulu as if it were their own private playground. Many of them have their own private 4x4s that they use to fly around the town at breakneck speeds (I was nicked by a World Vision truck), the white ex-pat workers are paid exorbitantly higher salaries than their African counter-parts (many getting paid over \$100,000 a year while Ugandans are paid a minute fraction of this for the same work), and almost all of them have private houses that are gated and guarded far away from the realities of the people suffering in the IDP camps—the people they are suppose to be helping.

An even more poignant example I can give is based upon an interview I had with the head of the American Refugee Council in Gulu. She is a 27-year-old, white woman from Michigan who got her masters' degree in social work. This woman had never been to Uganda (she had never even been to Africa prior to this job), she has no experience in working with refugees or IDPs and she has no knowledge of the culture/history/language of those she is there to 'help'. She came to Uganda simply looking for an internship and three weeks later she was given a job as the head—the *head!*—of ARC in Gulu. This woman is responsible for eight different camps and 30,000 peoples' lives with absolutely no experience doing this type of work! Now don't get me wrong, she is a very well-intentioned and incredibly sweet woman, but this scenario absolutely terrifies me. Unfortunately, this story is not the exception—it is the rule.

These are just a few examples of the space that exists between a privileged U.S. ‘helper’ and a thesubaltern African ‘helped.’ A space that was historically constructed around, and still manifests itself today because of, whiteness. As Steve Biko, a black anti-apartheid activist in South Africa, once said, “This then is what makes us believe that white power presents itself as a totality—not only provoking us but also controlling our response to the provocation.” This point is absolutely vital: white racism in the U.S., in large part is historically and contemporarily responsible for much of the exploitation that is currently taking place throughout Africa. Then white helpers—who are socially conditioned within that very same racist system—come to Africa and dictate how to respond to that very same exploitation. I witnessed and personally experienced what Biko was talking about on a very real and tangible level within each ‘helped’ community that I visited.

As I’m sure many of you (especially those of a liberal leaning, who staunchly oppose racism and probably have black—maybe even African—friends yourself) reading this right now are asking yourself right now, “how does all of this relate to being white?” Racism was ended in 1964, right? Well, de jure racism was ended with the abolishment of Jim Crow laws, but both sides of racism most definitely still exist de facto. The most commonly discussed side being the oppressing of people of color, now carried out primarily through institutionalized racism. However, what is rarely acknowledged is the other side of racism: the privileging of whiteness. With that constant privileging of whiteness comes the root of this problem with white helpers: internalized racial superiority. From birth we are conditioned to think that we are always right, we always have the answer and that we are the highest barometer of humanity; basically that we are better than people of color and we can solve their problems better than they can. As much as we want to fight that or outright deny it that psychosis of supremacy carries over and follows us to Africa, and into every single ‘helper’ relationship we occupy with African. It is quite literally this internalized and often invisible ideology of white supremacy that is the cause for those neo-colonial relationships I mentioned above. Whites who thought they were better than Africans were there to ‘help’ during the official colonization of Africa, and that very same dynamic is still manifesting itself today.

I really do not want to come off as ‘holier than thou,’ that I am somehow innocent of all this simply because—in CHID terms—I am aware of my historicized conditioning. The first study abroad program I participated in was in Cape Town in 2001. It took years to realize it, but beneath all of the noble rhetoric that filled my application essay, the main reason I went was to help poor African children so that I had a better chance of getting into medical school. How fucked up is that? I was simply going down there to boost my own resume, to benefit off their suffering.

Do you remember that feeling when you discovered that the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus weren’t real? Well, for me right now its kind of like that. What do you do when something that is suppose to be so good—helping those that are suffering—is run like this? And whenever I ask this question, people almost instantly reply by asking what I would do different. I don’t fully know yet. However, from what I personally experienced on this trip, there is most definitely something deeply wrong with the way ‘helping’ is currently being carried out within Africa, it is my belief that much of this is predicated upon racism its effect on the privileging of whiteness. So maybe the first step for all of us—myself included—wanting to help in Africa is to help ourselves first: To deeply reflect on our own racisms and the ways whiteness has privileged us, to think critically about the ways that those conditionings will affect our relationships with those we intend on ‘helping.’