

AGE OF ICONS

*Exploring Philanthrocapitalism
in the
Contemporary World*

EDITED BY
Gavin Fridell & Martijn Konings

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2013
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4426-4349-9 (cloth)
ISBN 978-1-4426-1203-7 (paper)



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled
paper with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Age of icons : exploring philanthrocapitalism in the contemporary world /
edited by Gavin Fridell and Martijn Konings.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4426-4349-9 (bound). – ISBN 978-1-4426-1203-7 (pbk.)

1. Social change. 2. Celebrities. 3. Celebrities – Political activity.
4. Philanthropists. 5. Capitalism. 6. Neoliberalism. I. Fridell,
Gavin, author, writer of introduction, editor of compilation
II. Konings, Martijn, 1975– writer of introduction,
editor of compilation

HM836.A34 2013 361.7 C2013-904616-X

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance
to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts
and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

50 YEARS OF ONTARIO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE ARTS

50 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support of the
Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund
for its publishing activities.

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank the Canada Research Chair program, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Saint Mary's University, Trent University, and the University of Sydney for the support that made this book possible, as well as two anonymous reviewers, Daniel Quinlan at University of Toronto Press, and John Carlaw. Special thanks are owed above all to Bhavani, Kate, Sasha, and Sebastian.

AGE OF ICONS

Exploring Philanthrocapitalism in the Contemporary World

Celebrities are increasingly front and centre in public debates on everything from solving world poverty to halting genocide, confronting obesity, and finding spiritual contentment. Bono, Bill Gates, Al Gore, Bob Geldof, Oprah, Madonna, and Angelina Jolie are just some of the entertainers, politicians, pundits, elite business people, and policymakers whose highly visible political activism has become an integral part of their public personas.

These pop icons tend to be celebrated as “philanthrocapitalists” with a unique ability to remedy the world’s problems. However, as *Age of Icons* demonstrates, the solutions these icons promote for addressing global injustice, when examined critically, can be seen to work through the very same institutions that create these problems in the first place.

This volume assesses the growing role of popular icons in the construction of a culture that appears to incorporate a critical attitude towards the capitalist experience while, in fact, legitimizing the neoliberal character of the modern world. It will be an eye-opening read for anyone interested in the juncture between current events and celebrity culture.

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AGE OF ICONS

Exploring Philanthrocapitalism in the
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Introduction

Neoliberal Capitalism as the Age of Icons

GAVIN FRIDELL AND MARTIJN KONINGS

This book is about the age of icons, an era in which “big names” have become connected to “big issues” to a previously unprecedented degree. Bono and Geldof and African poverty, Gates and the global AIDS epidemic, George Clooney and the crisis in Darfur, Madonna and child poverty in Malawi – it has become nearly impossible to think of one without the other. Rich and powerful individuals – Leonardo DiCaprio, Angelina Jolie, George Soros, Oprah Winfrey – have become connected to any number of humanitarian issues, often serving as “Goodwill Ambassadors” or honorary advisors for the UN or other international or non-governmental organizations. These icons are mostly Western personalities, having built their reputations in collaboration with Western media and business interests; regardless of how far these personalities travel, their audience, and the source of their wealth and power, is predominantly Western. Abroad, they tend to represent the ideals and fantasies of Western capitalism (chief among them consumerism and individualism), while at the same time representing back to Western audiences a particular picture of life elsewhere. And yet, at the same time, with rapid technological change in global communications, these icons have an increasingly global reach beyond their traditional support bases. Superstar icon Oprah Winfrey’s famous talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, despite garnering its largest audience from within the United States, is now syndicated in 150 countries – three quarters of all of the countries in the world – from Afghanistan and Australia, to India, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe (*The Times of India* 2012; *The Griot* 2009; *Oprah Winfrey Show* 2012).

Within the West, and increasingly on a global scale, powerful icons play an ever-larger role in structuring the nature of debate in the

contemporary public sphere (Richey and Ponte 2011; Bishop and Green 2009; Brockington 2009; Cooper 2007). For this reason, we argue that they are more than idols, celebrities, or pop-stars, and are best understood as “icons,” embodiments of the tremendous potential and promise held out by Western capitalism. Whereas the conventional understanding of “idols” is premised on the assumption that they derive their celebrity status from a cult of personality, predicated on issues of consumption and style, eliciting often blind admiration from fickle fans, the major iconic figures of our day reach deeper, evoking intensely held loyalties and emotional connections, urging people to act, and advocating specific programs of social and political change at a macro level (ending global poverty or climate change) or a micro level (getting rich quick, learning to love oneself) to a historically unprecedented degree (Goodman and Barnes 2011; Littler 2008).

In the age of icons, major iconic figures play an ever-increasing role in political life. In emotionally charged and contradictory ways, contemporary icons convey boundless faith in a better world under construction while simultaneously embracing the status quo, lashing out at the ills of global capitalism, while at the same time representing and defending its triumphant possibilities and inevitable forward march. Today’s icons offer the promise of limitless change without changing the limits of existing society, which is central to their popularity as well as to their defining contradiction: Western icons conduct widely celebrated *superhuman* feats with only *modest, pragmatic* outcomes.

A recent case of icon-in-action demonstrates the issues surrounding this trend. On 12 January 2010, a devastating earthquake registering 7.0 on the Richter scale hit the island nation of Haiti. Following a long and tumultuous history – first as a slave colony for the French; then, after independence, facing imperialist aggression and intense civil strife; and finally subjected to a series of Western-backed dictators and coups – the country was in no shape to deal with the effects of such a massive quake (Schwartz 2010; Engler and Fenton 2005; Dicum and Luttinger 1999, 30; Knight 1990, 193–221). Buildings collapsed, social and economic infrastructure crumbled, and disease spread. In the end, almost 230,000 people lost their lives and over 2 million were left homeless. Thirteen thousand U.S. troops were dispatched to the country, and aid agencies, national governments, and international institutions initiated a major emergency relief effort.¹ It was not just the conventional aid institutions that offered assistance, however. John Travolta, star of such

movies as *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, and *Pulp Fiction*, also heard the call for help and leapt into action.

Operating from his multimillion-dollar Florida mansion, equipped with its own private runway, Travolta selected one of his five airplanes (a customized Boeing 707), loaded the plane with food and medical supplies, and set off for Haiti (Carroll 2010; *CBS News World* 2010; *London Evening Standard* 2007). He brought along not only his wife and medical doctors but also Scientology ministers, trained in an alleged healing technique said to use the “power of touch ... to reconnect nervous systems shaken by trauma” (*Daily Mail* 2010c). Bypassing a huge backlog of hundreds of planes waiting to land at the Port-au-Prince airport, Travolta’s plane touched down to immense fanfare and media coverage. Travolta spent the night in Haiti, acting, by his own account, as “commander” of his relief mission, “guarding” the supplies during the night and even giving a free tour of his luxury plane to a wounded 7-year-old boy, orphaned when his parents were killed in the earthquake (*Daily Mail* 2010b). Walking the red carpet in New York a few days later, the actor reflected on the moral aspects of his adventure: “We were there right away, with this airplane, because you know we have the ability and the means to do this so I think you have responsibility on some level to do that” (*Daily Mail* 2010a).

In a world where overt cruelty seems to be increasingly within the bounds of public discourse in North America – true to form, multimillionaire conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh actually called on Americans to *not* give money to support Haitian relief! (Hinckley 2010) – Travolta’s actions stand out for their kindness and generosity. Yet they did not go without criticism. Aid organizations, frustrated over the long waiting list for their relief planes bringing urgent supplies, expressed dismay over the fact that Travolta’s plane managed to get permission to land. Critics also questioned his decision to use the resources at his disposal to fly in Scientology healers. An anonymous doctor at a hospital in Haiti was quoted as cynically commenting, “I didn’t know touching could heal gangrene” (Carroll 2010; *CBS News World* 2010; MacKey 2010).

While such concerns were drowned out in the overall media spectacle, it is not inappropriate to ask if Travolta’s actions were the most efficient manner of doing what needed to be done and to wonder what the “opportunity costs” were of flying in Scientology healers. What could experts in emergency relief have accomplished with the same

resources? What if Travolta had just signed a cheque and donated money to an organization with experience in aid relief and resigned himself to following the news on television, foregoing the excitement of a self-directed rescue mission? Of course, Travolta no doubt saw his own role not merely as a provider of resources but equally as someone who was able to draw media attention to the crisis. But one might ask if it did not do more to precisely divert the media focus away from the reality of death, disease, and destruction, replacing shocking images of desperation and need with upbeat ones of celebrity, charity, and generosity (Richey and Ponte 2011; Brockington 2009; Cameron and Haanstra 2008; Littler 2008).

To billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates, these sorts of questions are entirely beside the point. For it is precisely the prospect of “recognition” that drives the rich to give money to those in need. Recognition provides a “market-based incentive” for wealthy individuals and corporations to help the poor by enhancing the giver’s reputation, thereby bringing together “self-interest and concern for others” in a mutually beneficial way (Gates 2008, 10–11). Seen from this angle, questioning Travolta’s actions is an overly sentimental exercise in futility: there is no point in asking what things *might* have looked like had the resources been put to other uses, since it was only on the basis of Travolta’s prospects for recognition that the funds were made available in the first place.

Gates’s reasoning regarding “recognition,” we would argue, is not entirely convincing. There is no inherent reason why the personal preferences and vanity of the wealthy should take precedence over considerations about how to alleviate human suffering in the most effective way. And yet, in many ways we would be among the minority, as the logic of his argument has increasingly become part of neoliberal common sense in much of North America and Europe. For a growing number of critical issues, it seems, people applaud celebrities for intervening and getting the “job done” without much interest in whether their actions are really making substantive differences for the better in the long term. While the “recognition” accorded to the good deeds of the powerful and wealthy, as Gates suggests, may have grown exponentially over the past decades, this has not necessarily been accompanied by a significant diminution of human suffering. In fact, the past decades have seen a historically unprecedented and widely documented escalation of social and economic inequality with severe negative effects for the poorest and most vulnerable globally (McNally 2010; Harvey 2005).

This book explores the possibility that the growing importance of powerful icons in structuring political debate in the public sphere is not a reflection of their practical and pragmatic ability to eradicate inequality and injustice, as their eager supporters would have it (Bishop and Green 2009; Kinsley 2008). Instead, we argue that the political power of today's icons is best understood as deriving from their ability to *suppress awareness* of the preponderance and roots causes of inequality and injustice. In addressing this general concern, the contributions in this book are centred on two main themes.

First, despite mounting evidence of a strong connection between neoliberal economic policies and growing inequality, discussed below, there remains a widely held sense of optimism in the West (certainly not among all sectors of society, as the recent Occupy Wall Street movement has powerfully revealed) about neoliberalism's ability to eliminate the very problems it helps to create. We argue that the power and pervasiveness of neoliberal optimism needs to be understood by recognizing not only Western capitalism's ability to commodify human relations and empty them of more meaningful and substantive content, but also through its ability to actively generate highly seductive images, discourses, and signs packed with intense emotional and psychological appeal. On this terrain, today's neoliberal icons stand equal to none.

Second, we argue that the immense power of Western icons can best be understood through a careful distinction between "idols" and "icons." Whereas the notion of "idol" tends to evoke a sense of inner emptiness and superficial connection, "icons" suggest something that is deeply interwoven with everyday life and embodies powerful emotions based on complex social connections. Neoliberal optimism's highly seductive appeal, we argue, is essential for understanding both the immense power of today's neoliberal icons – in commanding loyalty and expressing popular fantasies and desires – as well as the significant limits of this power, confined to the narrow boundaries of the neoliberal capitalist order upon which their iconic status depends.

Neoliberal Optimism

Neoliberal policies – centred on cuts to public spending, the privatization of public assets, and the removal of regulations limiting the flow of investment capital, currency exchanges, and trade – are central to the dominant political, economic, and ideological framework of our times. Beginning in the 1970s, neoliberalism rose to hegemony among the

most powerful nation states and official international organizations, as well as a great many non-governmental aid and development organizations. Its rise brought an end to the varied and complex post-war era, dominated by a mixture of liberal international trade policies alongside an array of social interventionist models, including the Keynesian welfare state, economic nationalism, state communism, and a variety of international agreements to regulate financial flows and commodity prices. Drawing on classic liberal economic ideals, neoliberals are deeply opposed to state intervention in the economy for social ends, which they feel is bound to be inefficient, inaccurate, and biased towards the demands of specific "interest groups," such as unions or trade lobbies. In contrast, they argue that the competitive market serves as a "hidden hand" that responds efficiently and accurately to the actions of countless individuals through the undistorted market signals of supply and demand. Thus, while the state is depicted as choking individual liberty and initiative, causing economic waste and stagnation, the market, as summarized by David Harvey (2005, 20–1), is presented as "the best device for mobilizing even the basest of human instincts such as gluttony, greed, and the desire for wealth and power for the benefit of all."

One of the most significant social impacts of the past 40 years of neo-liberal expansion on a global scale has been an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, a gap that has never been greater. A recent report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2008, 1) examining 73 countries concludes that "between 1990 and 2005, approximately two thirds of the countries experienced an increase in income inequality." Widening inequality is particularly evident between average workers and the super rich, especially in the United States where, in 2007, the average "US CEOs earned more than 521 times the average employee, as against 370 times four years earlier" (ILO 2008, 18).

Inequality between nations is also on the rise. The vast majority of middle- and low-income countries have experienced significantly reduced progress on economic growth and major social indicators (such as life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy) from the 1980s to 2005 compared to the decades of the 1960s and 1970s prior to the neoliberal era (Weisbrot, Baker, and Rosnick 2005). All the while, the gap between the richest countries and the poorest ones has grown considerably. In 1987, GDP per capita (in purchasing power parity, PPP) of the United States was 26 times that of the combined GDP per capita (PPP) of the least developed countries. By 2007, this gap had doubled to 53 times.² Globally,

in terms of inequality between the richest and poorest people in the world, the statistics are even more shocking. The combined net worth of the world's 20 richest people is more than the total combined GDP of the world's 49 least developed countries and their 837 million inhabitants. Gates, currently the world's second wealthiest person, has a personal net worth of \$53 billion, roughly equivalent to the *combined* GDPs of Kosovo, Rwanda, Malawi, Mongolia, Guinea, Barbados, Mauritania, Swaziland, Togo, Fiji, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Lesotho, Cape Verde, the Maldives, Belize, Burundi, Bhutan, Antigua and Barbuda, Djibouti, and Samoa (World Bank 2011; Forbes 2010b).

Interestingly, this historically unprecedented escalation of inequality has not yet resulted in the derailing of the neoliberal project in the West, even while it has sparked a degree of protest and disenchantment, as well as outright resistance, in the Global South, most notably by the rise of various "pink tide" countries in Latin America (Robinson 2007). In Western nations, however, despite signs of despondency and disappointment, what strikes us as most notable has been the continued pervasiveness of an intense spirit of optimism about the ability of neoliberal capitalism to create a world without poverty, disease, and suffering. It is not that public discourse has failed to register the existence of acute inequality, but rather that this fact and the social ills connected to it are typically portrayed not as something that neoliberal capitalism has caused but as something it has not yet resolved.

Following this logic, the editors of *The Economist* magazine, in the wake of the financial collapse of 2008, acknowledged the unprecedented amount of wealth being concentrated in the hands of a small number of rich "tycoons," only to assure their readers not to worry, because "in liberal democracies the powerful get on by pleasing others. In short, they work for us" (*The Economist* 2011b). The claim implicit in such formulations is that the core institutions of neoliberal capitalism are moving the world in the right direction but that much remains to be done to make their benefits universally available (Bishop and Green 2009; Kinsley 2008; Sachs 2005; Bhagwati 2002). Capitalism, in this way, is portrayed as an unwavering vehicle of historical progress for *all*, despite questions that might be raised by empirical investigation. What ultimately gets obscured is the relational nature of wealth: the fact that extreme riches do not exist on their own but are so often built on the poverty and exploitation of others.

Against a relational understanding of wealth and poverty, the proponents of neoliberal optimism offer unwavering confidence in the ability

of existing institutions to deliver universal inclusiveness and empowerment in the continuing struggle against major social problems, which are assumed to be in the process of disappearing rather than becoming worse. There is an element of near-religious faith in this devotion among liberals who would otherwise insist on their claims to secularism and sober pragmatism. While much has frequently been said about the neo-conservative alliance of religion and big business in North America, less has been observed about the kind of faith that hides under the claim to progressive liberalism and the intense belief that neoliberal capitalism is uniquely capable of delivering a universalism that is based not on a concern with divine purpose but with mundane human needs. Neoliberal icons, we would argue, are powerful embodiments of this capitalist faith in action, representing a potent mixture of hard-nosed realism (we *must* work with existing institutions – giant corporations, the World Bank, existing forms of government – to get things done) and uncompromising idealism (the individual *can* change the world, as long as she submits wholeheartedly to the previous caveat).

The contributors to this book are sceptical about neoliberal optimism and the assumption among much mainstream literature that the dominant trend in global capitalism is the gradual achievement of a more just world. Reading the modern-day mainstream political economy literature, one could be forgiven for thinking that the dominant trend in global capitalism is the step-by-step eradication of injustice. The literature has become intensely concerned with the degree to which the world deviates from an idealized picture of equal opportunity, even though there is little evidence that this is a meaningful yardstick or that the world is home to forces gravitating in that direction. The world is considered as if it were not fundamentally structured by power and control but by technical problems of logistics and coordination, with power struggles merely localized disturbances in a fundamentally pluralist, open-ended world. Robert Cox (1986) notably captured this trend in terms of the tendency to privilege “problem-solving theory” over “critical theory.” While this argument has often been assailed for making an unwarranted distinction between the two, what he meant was that there exists a strong tension between the ability to generate critical insight and the focus on social problems *as these have been publicly identified and articulated*, after they have undergone a long process of editing and sanitation.

For Cox, the primary responsibility of scholars is to investigate precisely how the public framing of social problems by policymakers,