

Between Compassion and Conservatism: A Genealogy of British Humanitarian Sensibilities

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Abstract: The chapter explores continuities in modern British humanitarianism at its birth two hundred years ago and today. Modern British humanitarianism arose out of the contradictions between humanist ideals, expanding social sympathies, and fears of radical political change following the French Revolution. Its development was strongly influenced by middle class evangelical reform circles, exemplified by the abolitionist William Wilberforce. The chapter argues that British humanitarianism today follows Wilberforce's conservative humanitarian tradition and his anti-progressive views.

Humanitarianism and British citizenship education

Gordon Brown's recent article on the state of the United Kingdom singled out the Make Poverty History campaign as one of the ways people express their common values today (Brown, 2008). The British government wants to make a statement of national values, but has been struggling to identify shared values as belief in national institutions has declined. Humanitarianism has come to the fore in official policies to promote a sense of Britishness, from annual charitable appeals like Comic Relief, to British military recruitment campaigns to citizenship education.

Accordingly humanitarian concerns receive growing attention in both the formal and informal school curriculum and beyond. Geography has been heavily revised over the last decade reflecting British humanitarian concerns (Standish, 2008, forthcoming), while teachers are directed by the Department of Children, Schools and Families and the Department of International Development (DFID) to curriculum materials prepared by aid organisations, such as Oxfam's *Education for Global Citizenship: A Guide for Schools*. Individual schools regularly sponsor charitable appeals. One popular charitable event directed at children is the annual appeal of the BBC children's programme Blue Peter. Blue Peter has broadcasted for fifty years and is one of the primary introductions British children have with humanitarianism through its documentary reports and annual appeals. The annual appeal alternates each year between domestic and overseas causes and is often adopted by schools. British schools last year were busy commemorating the bicentenary of the 1807 Slave Trade Act, as were Blue Peter and other television programmes. Yet while the bicentenary was widely officially marked, interest in the fiftieth anniversary of Ghanaian independence was muted and received little attention. The impulse to remember British abolition of the slave trade over Ghanaian independence indicates the contemporary character of British humanitarian sensibilities and how they are distinct from democratic sentiments.

The birth of modern British humanitarianism is bound up with the anti-slavery movement. Indeed Britain's most well-known British abolitionist William Wilberforce is credited with establishing the character of British humanitarian sensibilities and his legacy continues to be feted in Britain (Thompson, 1968; Williams, 2007). The bicentenary of the Slave Trade Act 1807 is therefore a convenient time to take stock of Britain's humanitarianism as a major international donor power. The chapter critically reviews Wilberforce's humanitarian philosophy two hundred years ago and identifies common themes with present British aid philosophy.

The charitable ideal has been linked to reciprocal duties within a community and duties of hospitality towards strangers. Humanitarianism based on mutual relations and interests, or facing strong political pressures from the population has a different character to one with a narrow social basis. British humanitarianism's character has been influenced by middle class reform circles and relations to society. Tensions have existed historically within British humanitarianism between its radical humanist strands and more conservative anti-humanist strands. On the one hand British humanitarianism attempted to carve out a space where our common humanity was recognised beyond international, political or social divisions. Its aspirations to affirm our common humanity, however partial, temporary and inadequate in practice, signified yearning to transcend existing historical conditions domestically and internationally. This impulse is seen in Oxfam's origins during the Second World War, which sought to provide relief to starving people in Nazi-occupied Greece, recognising a common humanity transcending wartime divisions (Whitaker, 1980). On the other British humanitarianism historically was entangled with British imperial expansion, and expressed conservative fears over radical political change and the role of the masses following the French Revolution.

Development aid has enjoyed a more progressive reputation than emergency relief, but my analysis here focused on British development thinking, suggests present British humanitarianism leans towards Wilberforce's conservative humanitarian tradition. In identifying philosophical continuities, I am not arguing that British humanitarianism is inevitably tainted by the original sins of its conception. But its prominence in public life in various periods has coincided with the contraction of social concern and progressive politics, rather than their straightforward expansion. Its present conservative character, notwithstanding its radical self-perception, is influenced by the demise of progressive politics and disconnect from a popular social basis.

Wilberforce's contradictory humanitarian tradition

Wilberforce was undoubtedly a key figure behind the 1807 Slave Trade Act and the 1834 Abolition of Slavery Act. He was also a leading British philanthropist in other causes, encompassing criminal justice reform and the plight of child workers. He is credited with helping establish dozens of charities including the Society for Betterment of the Poor (1787), the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (1824) as well as major evangelical Christian organisations such as the Church Missionary Society (now the Church Mission Society) (1799) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (now the Bible Society) (1804) (Belmonte, 2007; Hague, 2007; Pollock, 1977; Wilberforce Central). Wilberforce's philanthropic exertions were praised for ushering in 'the better hour', in the poet William Cowper's much quoted phrase.

Wilberforce, as Britain's most celebrated abolitionist, shows how British humanitarians could be opposed to progressive politics, tolerate vast social inequalities, and treating the problems faced by the population in terms of law

and order. Wilberforce was actively involved in government political repression, helping draft draconian legislation to outlaw trade unions, radical political parties, and suspension of *habeas corpus*, and pursuing the arrest and prosecution of political activists through his Society for the Suppression of Vice and Encouragement of Religion (Hague, 2007, pp. 250-256; pp. 440-446; Hochschild, 2005; Thompson, 1968, pp. 112-113, p. 141). He further supported the authorities in opposing a public inquiry into the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, when cavalry soldiers charged a peaceful demonstration calling for parliamentary reform. Radical writings such as William Hazlitt's 1825 *Spirit of the Age* associated Wilberforce with the forces of reaction, not progressive politics (Hazlitt, 1969; Hind, 1987; Thompson, 1968). So judging the humanitarian Wilberforce as politically illiberal is not being anachronistic, but to judge him by the politics of his day, against his glowing presentation in successive British antislavery anniversaries.

How could Wilberforce, identified with emancipating slaves, be actively involved in denying political rights to the majority of his population? Wilberforce's contradictions reflected the post-revolutionary reaction among the expanding middle classes and evangelical circles in Britain to the French revolution, which retreated from radical, democratic politics (Thompson, 1968). In this vein, Wilberforce singled out suppression of the slave trade and reform of social manners as his two life goals (Green, 1985), and omitted eradicating poverty and social inequalities from his core concerns.

Wilberforce's *A Practical View of Christianity* (1798) had wide influence on British philanthropic circles of his day and shows his primary concern with spiritual poverty rather than material poverty. Wilberforce, seeing humanity as essentially sinful, attributed Britain's state of crisis to the parlous state of religion, and weak public and personal morality (Wilberforce, 1798, p. 375). His abolitionism involved a spiritual concern for religious salvation, both of a slave-owning society and the slaves themselves, uniting his causes of abolition and social morality. Slavery was an unnatural immoral system, but slaves had to be educated for (moral) freedom, just as the population domestically had to first to be educated before expanding the franchise. Consequently he advocated gradual emancipation of slaves, believing immediate emancipation 'would be productive of universal anarchy and distress' (quoted by the Antislavery Society), as an expanded franchise would be domestically. The humanitarian concern for moral salvation, originating in its evangelical roots, carried through British overseas missionary work. Meanwhile Wilberforce saw social hierarchies and poverty as natural conditions, and followed Malthusian ideas treating impoverishment as caused by overpopulation and excess (Green, 1985, pp. 184-185). He condemned a culture asserting material self interests in favour of an austere public spirit, and feared that the spread of material wealth to the middle and lower classes was corrupting social morals (Wilberforce, 1798, p. 383, pp. 410-412).

But however sincerely Wilberforce believed the poor to be closer than their affluent betters to a state of grace, his religious consolation offered cold comfort to a population suffering pauperisation. Wilberforce's paternalistic anti-materialist model of spiritual betterment inevitably had an apologetic air when he expected the population to reconcile themselves to social inequalities and suppressed political activities (ibid., p. 415). His religious philosophy sat rather too comfortably with the conservative post-revolutionary politics – as did abolitionism for a class who was learning to exploit free labour. Antislavery has been critically analysed in this period of political repression and rapid industrialisation as a residual progressive cause among former progressive members of the middle classes now fearful of radical political change (Davis, 1975; Rice, 1981; Thompson, 1968). Abolitionism answered the psychic needs of mill owners, giving

them a sense of moral purpose, although otherwise hardened to the immediate suffering around them (Thompson, 1968, p. 160). The radical writer William Cobbett, also a contradictory figure, observed in 1824 against the evangelical leadership how:

Rail they do...against the West Indian slave-holders; but not a word do you ever hear from them against the slave-holders in Lancashire and in Ireland. On the contrary, they are continually telling the people here that they ought to thank the Lord (Cobbett in Thompson, 1968, p. 434).

Analysing Wilberforce's mix of moral evangelism, paternalism and antidemocratic politics also helps explain how British humanitarianism became entangled with British imperial expansion. For many, imperial rule was an extension of the moral and social responsibilities of a paternalistic domestic order. Wilberforce's gradualist abolitionism was later echoed in British colonial policy, which believed that colonial trusteeship was necessary before national self-determination. Further links may be drawn between Wilberforce's fears over commerce's corrupting influence, and British colonial and post-colonial development fears over modernisation corrupting populations. British aid organisations are heavily influenced by a moral, anti-materialist critique of society, echoing Wilberforce's humanitarian philosophy, but consciously eschew a missionary role, despite historically evolving out of overseas missionary work. Even organisations such as Christian Aid or CAFOD, whose names proclaim their religious links, emphasise the secular, eucemical character of their aid work. This feature contrasts with the US aid sector, which is more overtly religious and involved in missionary work, although not necessarily as anti-materialist (Hearn, 2007). I focus on the anti-materialist strain in British development thinking in the rest of the chapter.

British humanitarianism's romantic subjects

Wilberforce's evangelical denunciation of commerce's corrupting influence re-invokes the long Western cultural trope of the pastoral against the sinful city. Earlier pastoral idylls were commonly only literary conventions, but the industrial revolution sharpened their cultural significance in Britain. Romantic critiques of industrialization by writers such as the Brontes, Wordsworth and other writers resonated widely. Moreover just as writers were turning to nature for solace from the miseries of the city, so the wealthy were fleeing from urban squalor and social disturbance to the suburbs or depopulated countryside.

Social critiques commonly portrayed rural innocence destroyed by urban exploitation. Fearful of industrialisation's social consequences, some middle class reformers considered non-industrial rural social models. The British Victorian Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite Movements looked nostalgically back to an idealised pre-modern Middle Ages in revulsion against modern urban society. They wanted to maintain rural labour and revive the handicrafts against the dominance of mechanised work (Williams, 1961, p. 37). Major strands of modern British culture defined themselves against mass urban industrial society. The literary critics F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson outlined a modest harmonious and simple rural life, anticipating the basic needs approach of international development:

they satisfied their human needs, in terms of the natural environment; and the things they made [...] together with their relations with one another constituted a human environment, and a subtlety of adjustment and adaptation, as right and inevitable (quoted in Williams, 1961, p. 252).

But the power of such romantic primitivism risked undermining rather than advancing social concern. Cultural critiques expressed romantic preferences for

simple rural folk and ambiguity over working class betterment, sometimes openly deploring them for vulgarity and philistine consumption. John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* has critically documented British intellectual prejudices against working people for their tinned food and cheap entertainment. Carey's study observes how when the masses are merged back into an innocent pastoral world they are redeemed, but also eliminated as subjects (Carey, 1992, pp. 44-45). The masses cannot be in a pre-industrial idyll. Here intellectuals displayed, in the writer George Eliot's words, 'sensibilities of taste' rather than rational, humane sensibilities (Eliot, 1995, p. 121-122). Some British intellectuals ended up following Nietzsche's anti-humanism and rejected humanitarianism for aesthetics along with their rejection of industrial society (Carey, 1992, pp. 12-17).

Romantic conservatism was restrained domestically in the face of the social demands from the working classes for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Romantic portrayals of organic, pre-industrial communities were treated skeptically by social scientists. The cultural critic Raymond Williams argued fifty years ago, 'it is foolish and dangerous to exclude from so called organic society the penury, the petty tyranny, the disease and mortality, the ignorance and frustrated intelligence which are also among its ingredients' (Williams, 1961, p. 253). Writers like Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy remained conscious of the difficulties experienced by the rural poor and the attractions of the town, despite the urban miseries they documented.

Anti-industrial ideas were not taken up as viable social models by the British nineteenth and twentieth century mass political movements. Postwar British progressive politics affirmed the common man in political slogans like 'homes fit for heroes'. Official policies endorsed the need for universal material welfare provision from council houses to unemployment payments. If British social critics remained concerned about the population's moral improvement, they recognized the importance of their material improvements. Accordingly Richard Hoggart's classic *The Uses of Literacy* asserted how material achievements opening up social and moral possibilities:

They wanted these good and services not out of a greed for possession, a desire to lay their hands on the glittering products of a technical society, but because the lack of them made it very difficult to live what they called a "decent" life, because without them life was a hard and constant fight simply to "keep your head above water" spiritually as well as economically. Thus with a better place to wash in and better equipment, it would have been possible to keep the family as clean as they felt "proper". We no longer hear about the sheer stink of a working-class crowd. A real progress was clearly possible and was a worthwhile aim (Hoggart, 1958, p. 172).

The postwar ideals of the common man and social altruism were elaborated in Richard Titmus' *The Gift Relationship* (1970), which studied the significance of blood donorship and transfusion services. His work outlines how altruism towards strangers could be realised in modern society through blood donation. Blood transfusion is premised on our common humanity and the equivalence between people. The gift of blood affirms our common humanity and our common human needs. Donation of blood involves individual donors' altruism, their belief in the altruism of strangers towards strangers and potentially being the strangers in need (Titmus, 1970, p. 269).

The cultural studies of Hoggart, Williams and others challenged accounts romanticising the pre-industrial past, while sociological accounts like Titmus

pointed to how modern urban society could be underpinned by a strong sense of social commitment. However a lament for rural life against mass society persisted with the older landed gentry or the upper middle classes against mass urban society. Victor Bonham-Carter's mid-twentieth century *The English Village* and *The Survival of the English Countryside* deplored the commercialisation of farming and the demise of rural ways of life. Bonham-Carter was an early conservationist and helped found the Soil Association. These ideas were also more likely to persist in the charitable sector dominated by the upper middle classes than the postwar welfare state sector.

In important respects, the British aid sector evolved in reaction against industrial society. Its philosophy has historically accorded more with Bonham-Carter's aversion to modern industrialization than Hoggart's affirmation of its benefits for ordinary people. It has been inclined to idealise authentic traditional peasant communities counter-posed to an inauthentic, corrupting industrial society. Anti-industrial sentiments follow anthropological thinking, which informed colonial administration. Anthropology, of all the disciplines, has probably most exuded a romantic primitivism. Anthropologists often expressed alarm at how contact with modernity was destabilising the societies they researched. Modernity's destabilising impact on traditional societies disturbed colonial administrators and shaped colonial thinking on development as it tried to deter nationalist movements (Duffield, 2007). British colonial advisers feared that the European presence undermined the traditional ways of life of subject populations (Furedi, 1994). They singled out coercive military rule, urbanisation and unregulated exploitative extraction industries for fostering alienated, rootless, mobile 'deracinated' populations (Duffield, 2007, p. 173). Indirect rule or native administration was to mediate the disturbing European presence and reinforce the authority of rurally-based tribal leaders against the influence of the emerging modern urbanised, politicised nationalist leaders. Native administration was accompanied by education policies, seeking to limit modern influences, including knowledge of European languages. Colonial advisers recommended the promotion of primary schooling in native languages with a curriculum emphasising relevant skills training rather than European languages and academic attainment. Cultural idealisations of developing countries as pre-modern societies persisted after national independence. The British in India were overwhelmingly attracted to Gandhi's spiritual harmonious traditional vision rather than Nehru's vision of a modernising state, as Ruth Praver Jhabvala novels wryly portray.

Indeed one of the attractions of colonial service or post-independence voluntary service for Bonham-Carter's readership was to escape from mass urban society (Lee, 1967). Humanitarian work in the developing world offered the possibilities of retaining a world of servants and deference no longer possible at home to a former colonial class who found it difficult to reconcile themselves to postwar British egalitarianism (Cannadine, 2002). British aid work drew upon colonial administrative experience as well as a younger generation of post-independence aid workers inspired by feelings of international solidarity with national independence struggles. Yet there was an element of escape from disappointed political activism at home to more exotic, less accountable activism abroad when the post-1968 counter-culture rejected the Western industrial masses for the romantic ideal of the pre-modern rural peasant. Romantic anti-materialism consolidated in the British aid sector as national struggles internationally and the working class domestically receded as political forces.

Schumacher's anti-materialist aid philosophy

E.F. Schumacher's 1970s' classic *Small is Beautiful* is considered the bible of British development. Schumacher's transformation from the chief economist of

Britain's heavy coal industry to leading advocate of non-industrial development illustrates British social reform circles' retreat from mass industrial society. Schumacher identified himself with the English Socialist tradition, particularly its strong moral sense, which brought Schumacher closer to Wilberforce. His spiritual asceticism and concerns over consumerism remarkably echo Wilberforce's evangelical philanthropy, although politically different at first sight.

Wilberforce and Schumacher may be defined as pessimistic humanists, mistrusting humanity unchecked by God and emphasising the prevalence of human depravity (Schumacher, 1974, p. 20; Wilberforce, 1798, p. 437; Wood, 1983, p. 264).). Godless man, Schumacher believed, was a Machiavellian immoral figure driven by hubris, power and greed. Religious awe, respect for nature and humility had to be cultivated for social peace (Schumacher, 1974, 1979). Schumacher commended Buddhism for its anti-egoism (Wood, 1983, p. 343) and seeing 'the essence of civilization not in the multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character' (Schumacher, 1974, p. 40). Both saw the spread of prosperity as corrupting and sought a spiritual non-materialist model of social improvement, seeing social happiness in terms of spiritual well-being (Schumacher, 1974, p. 18 p. 23; Wilberforce, 1798, p. 408). Schumacher, while impressed by Marx's writing, intensely disliked his materialism, atheism and class hostility (Wood, 1983, pp. 293-4). Schumacher considered that publicly owned industries cultivated a public service ethos, but that they struggled to influence their own workforce, let alone wider society, against a culture of greed (Wood, 1983, p. 272). His philosophical influences shifted from economic and socialist writing to spiritual writings and figures like Gandhi and Ivan Illich (Wood, 1983, p. 349).

Over the decades Schumacher gradually became less worried about the standard of living in industrial societies, than the quality of culture (Wood, 1983, p. 283). Schumacher attacked working class materialism and criticised aspirations to industrialize the developing world as cultivating the wrong values (Wood, 1983, p. 273). Schumacher shared Wilberforce's Malthusian ideas about population limits, and wanted to moderate human needs. But an even worse prospect for Schumacher was that humanity might be able to overcome natural limits and become limitless. If humanity escaped nature's limits, he feared, materialism would be allowed free reign (Wood, 1983, p. 304). Schumacher preferred technologically simple, local solutions such as assisting villagers to build their own village pumps against industrial mechanization reducing labour (Wood, 1983, p. 315). His work on intermediate technology led him to make links with organisations like the Soil Association, highlighted above (Wood, 1983, p. 347). He worried that foreign aid was making people 'poorer by giving them Western tastes' (in Wood, 1983, p. 314). He preferred non-material aid to material aid, arguing 'A gift of knowledge is infinitely preferable to a gift of material things. [...] The gift of material goods makes people dependent, but the gift of knowledge makes them free' (Schumacher, 1974, p. 163).

Oxfam's interest in Schumacher's ideas is documented in Ben Whitaker's informative history of Oxfam (Whitaker, 1983, p. 82). Oxfam criticised international development thinking conflating growth and development, and seeing development primarily in material terms (Whitaker, 1983, p. 220). A moral understanding of development was advanced: 'the truly un- or underdeveloped human being' was someone knowing 'other people are starving or dying from preventable cause and fails to do what he can to rectify this' (ibid., pp. 82-83).

British humanitarianism's political conservatism

While Wilberforce and Schumacher wanted to offer a spiritual model of well being and humility, it is worth recalling the political context in which their philosophies developed. Wilberforce's call for humility and acceptance of poverty appeared at a time of impoverishment and suppression of social demands. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful's* focus on basic needs was attractive to developing populations suffering poverty, but a political vision limiting them to basic needs represented a curb on their aspirations. Schumacher's denunciation of materialism appeared internationally when developing countries were flexing their new political authority and seeking to renegotiate their international economic position such as through the 1974 UN Declaration on a New International Economic Order or the OPEC successful re-negotiation of oil prices against the West. Domestically, the 1970s in Britain were a decade of trade union militancy with workers demanding higher material living standards. Schumacher enjoyed good relations with the National Union of Miners for his defence of the coal industry against oil and nuclear energy (Wood, 1983, pp. 289-290). But his anti-materialist philosophy clashed with British workers' material demands, expressed, for example in the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes. Moreover his ideas timed with the breaking of the postwar Keynesian welfare consensus by the 1974 Labour government and continued by the 1980s' Conservative government, which adopted policies incrementally attacking working class organisation and living standards. Both Wilberforce and Schumacher therefore went against contemporary social demands and embodied conservative, elite political perspectives.

Schumacher failed to consider how his ideas might have a politically apologetic character, where local low technological subsistence farming approaches became prescriptions for developing countries, de-legitimising material aspirations beyond basic needs and legitimising much backbreaking manual work in the developing world that earlier development models hoped to overcome. Schumacher condemned repetitive industrial labour, but his approach romanticised unmechanised rural labour and other non-industrial livelihoods, and failed to acknowledge their boring, repetitive aspects - agricultural 'shovelling, shovelling, shovelling', to borrow his words on industrial work (Wood, 1983, p. 273). Simultaneously non-industrial models and their 'Teach a Man to fish' slogan assumed that the majority of people in the developing world only wanted to be fisherman or farmers. How did Schumacher's model meet the ambitions of the potential Schumachers in the developing world, who aspired to a life outside agriculture? Schumacher did not have an adequate answer. His failure, like Wilberforce's, was linked to his belief that the poor were spiritually superior to the affluent, ideas he shared with Mother Teresa, another influence on British humanitarianism. His non-material spiritual model of well-being was politically controversial where he praised separate development in South Africa (Wood, 1983, pp. 340-341).

The British aid sector's embrace of Schumacher's anti-materialist philosophy for both developing countries and industrial countries distanced itself from contemporary British working class activism. Whitaker's history notes Oxfam's long concern about being a predominantly middle class organisation lacking a solid basis in the working classes (Whitaker, 1980, p. 36). Oxfam failed to win over non-academic industrial Oxford (ibid., p. 20), even as it saw itself as part of a global village - an indicatively pastoral analogy. Consider Oxfam's anti-materialist vision against the strong militancy associated with the Oxford Cowley car plant. Car workers were amongst the most militant and highest paid industrial workers in Britain, including Cowley's approximately 22,000 workers in the early 1970s (Thornton, 1997). Government attacks on trade union militancy singled out Cowley workers for disrupting the economy and exacerbating economic crisis (Philo, 1995, pp. 3-20). Their official and unofficial strike action achieved significant wage increases and raised living standards, but their activism also

encompassed international solidarity with political movements elsewhere from Chile to Vietnam (Thornton, 1995). Conversely Oxfam headquarters a few miles away was discussing how its staff should embrace wage restraint and adopt simpler life styles as a model to the rest of British society (Duffield, 2007, pp. 63-64; Whitaker, 1983, pp. 30-32). Oxfam's *How the rich should live* project envisaged eliminating poverty by reducing personal consumption in the industrial world (ibid), a model at odds with local car workers' demands. Retrospectively Oxfam's proposals for personal sacrifice effectively complimented official austerity measures followed through in the 1980s attacking trade union militancy and imposing wage restraints. Oxfam ironically moved headquarters in 2003 to a business park located on the site of the former car plant.

Anti-materialist thinking has become more established than when Whitaker wrote his history of Oxfam three decades ago. DFID and British aid organisations endorsed the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* 2000 report. The World Bank report - significantly for a financial institution - proposed well-being rather than wealth as the goal of development. Echoing Wilberforce and Schumacher's philosophies, the report declared how, '*Wealth and wellbeing are seen as different, and even contradictory*' (Narayan et al, 2000, p. 21). Repeatedly the report emphasised non-material needs of the poor, defining well-being and ill-being in psychological terms, '*Wellbeing and illbeing are states of mind and being. Wellbeing has a psychological and spiritual dimension as a mental state of harmony, happiness and peace of mind*' (Narayan et al, 2000, p. 21, italics in original). The report concluded that substantial material advancement was unnecessary to well-being and that small improvements made a big difference to the poor. Yet careful analysis of the background documents suggests that the poor interviewed in the World Bank research were more concerned about their material wants than the report represented (Pender, 2004).

Low material horizons are repeated in recent British humanitarian campaigns like Make Poverty History and also alter-mondialism or anti-globalisation thinking. British humanitarian thinking is severing links between well-being, social justice and material advancement in developing countries. Too often British humanitarianism (and broader alter-mondialism) romanticises the lives of the rural poor, which Hoggart and Williams warned against (Hoggart, 1958, p. 172; Williams, 1961, p. 253). Condemnation of modern consumer society neglects how the major material improvements mattered for the wellbeing and dignity of the working classes. People in the industrial world do less backbreaking work and overall spend less time working if education and retirement are taken into account. Moreover condemnations of consumerism may express elite sensibilities of taste against the rest of the population rather than humanitarian sensibilities, as Eliot also warned against (Eliot, 1995, pp. 121-122), and I highlight below.

Pessimistic humanitarianism

Humanitarianism spectacularly came to prominence in the 1985 Live Aid concert for the Ethiopian famine - the year that the government defeated the twelve-month miners' strike and the remnants of the British working class political movement. British humanitarianism became burdened with unfulfilled hopes for justice and peace as progressive political visions contracted, but was also shaped by shrinking political visions and pessimism about humanity (Hammond, 2007). Political disorientation sharpened British humanitarianism's long observed swings between hubris and despair over its mission (Whitaker, 1983, p. 184).

The demise of progressive politics encouraged a diminished view of citizens and their moral, social capacity. Political and cultural elites slipped into jaundiced views of the population, no longer having to take into account the working classes

organised as a class speaking for itself. Social distance can encompass nostalgia, just as earlier distance unfavourably contrasted the urban and the rural labouring classes. Michael Collins' *The Likes of Us* documents cultural prejudices against the white working classes and their sense of being neglected, findings echoed in a 2008 BBC national survey (BBC, 2008). Titmus' *The Gift Relationship* (1970), informed by democratic ideals of the common man and communal trust, assumed people's altruism. Conversely official regulations on adult volunteers, and major charities like the NSPCC, approach every adult as a potential abuser (Appleton, 2006). Cultural disenchantment carried over into humanitarian sensibilities. Characteristically artist Peter Howson's degraded view of the common man expressed in his British paintings continued in his Bosnian paintings, when appointed official British war artist to Bosnia.

A degraded view of ordinary people came through the bicentenary representation of history. National self-congratulatory accounts of abolition have long been challenged by studies analysing international rivalries, national economic interests and imperial expansion, beyond humanitarian concerns (Drescher, 1985; James, 1963). But both grand national narratives and critical social, political and economic analysis are being displaced by micro-narratives, inclined to present history as a series of human rights abuses histories, giving little sense of historical development (McGovern, 2007). From the school curriculum to media reporting and humanitarian appeals, accounts are infused with morality tales stressing victims' personal feelings and perpetrators' behaviour (Hammond, 2007). In this vein, the bicentenary put forward a narrative of whites' racial oppression and enslavement of blacks, challenged by a brave minority of enlightened souls. The simplistic narrative of perpetrators and victims maintained Wilberforce's reputation as a political progressive, while ignoring the active agency of slaves in Haiti or how most of the British population were disenfranchised during Wilberforce's lifetime (James, 1963; Taylor, 1968). The dominant narrative implicitly revised the history of slavery as a system supported by the British population. Ignoring the political suppression of ordinary people, the current narrative echoes Wilberforce's paternalism in presupposing that humanitarianism requires interventions by an enlightened elite against an unenlightened mass. Meanwhile the fiftieth anniversary of Ghanaian independence celebrating a national political struggle did not resonate with a country doubting its own national identity, or with its preferred narratives of victims and perpetrators saved by outsiders.

Titmus' egalitarian model of the gift of one individual or community to another is being displaced by more undemocratic models of domestic and global governance. Aid organisations' involvement in contemporary global governance has been perceptively explored elsewhere (for example, Duffield, 2007). Instead here I highlight how contemporary British humanitarian advocacy seeks to reform its own population and appears somewhat estranged from ordinary people.

Raising awareness

The primary relationship the British public has with the aid sector is as donors, whether fundraising, or donating money or goods. A major aspect is as donors and customers of charity shops selling second hand goods – Oxfam is a familiar presence on the British high street. Present campaigning, despite continuing donations from citizens, appears to lack confidence in people's humanitarian sensibilities or capacity to be active in public life. Not least official and non-governmental campaigns increasingly try to connect with the population through schools, but politics through classroom represents a paternalistic undemocratic form of politics as political education/indoctrination (Arendt, 1993). Yet public

sensibilities towards the Ethiopian famine were more quickly awakened than the professional sensibilities of aid agencies in the field (Vaux, 2001, p. 115).

Much advocacy work is around raising people's awareness. Awareness campaigns have proliferated reflected in an Awareness Campaigns Register listing over seven hundred national awareness campaigns to assist the PR industry. Awareness raising has evolved from therapeutic theories of empowerment. Many British awareness campaigns are linked to health concerns, but therapeutic concepts have caught on in humanitarian advocacy. Proliferating *awareness* raising campaigns suggest cultural concern with one's own or others' sensibilities, and echoes Wilberforce's evangelical concern to reform social manners and personal conduct (1798), albeit in secular therapeutic language. Preoccupation with cultivating a sensitive personality is underscored by the frequent use of the shorthand phrase 'raising awareness' without always tagging on the specific cause.

A fascinating study *Ribbon Culture: Charity, Compassion and Public Awareness* has researched the cultural meaning and etiquette of ribbon or wristband wearing as a fashion statement representing awareness and empathy without having to understand the causes (Moore, 2008). Her analysis of self-expression displacing social understanding suggests how humanitarian awareness raising campaigns may represent contraction of social concerns not their expansion. Indicatively the original 1985 Live Aid concert wanted to raise money to 'feed the world', whereas the 2005 Live 8 concert was about raising our awareness of poverty. Promotion of the Make Poverty History white band sometimes read like fashion magazine tips. Consider this advice on the Make Poverty History website: 'You can wear the white band in any way you like - as a wristband, an armband, a headband, or a lapel badge.

Awareness raising initiatives may fall into conspicuous ethical display as they draw attention to the person thereby representing a narcissistic turn. The Million Faces photographic petition to control arms, which invites people to submit their photos as opposed to the customary signatures, epitomises this self-display. Participants are advised that 'Faces aren't just there to look pretty - use yours to show your support for Control Arms' and to 'Do your best 'my face is going to make a difference' face and snap.' Such campaigning flatters participants and imbues acts of self-publicity with moral meaning. Oxfam UK's Generation Why proposes 'Do what you love doing - just change the world while you're doing it', talking up minimalist involvement with minimal inconvenience as politically significant.

Ethical consumption and sensibilities of taste

Emphasis on personal ethics has grown as progressive collective politics has declined and social change is understood essentially as the sum of individual actions. Much advocacy in Britain relates to ethical consumption as a core aspect of ethical living and site of social action. Ethical consumption developed from the boycotts of South Africa goods, which became the dominant manifestation of political opposition to Apartheid among liberals in Britain. This focus has reinforced as aid organisations like Christian Aid and Oxfam, or national figures like Archbishop Williams have taken up climate change and concentrated on people's lifestyles in industrialised societies as the problem. Oxfam's Unwrapped programme, for example, offers donation gifts such as goats for farmers, women's livelihood programmes, including an alternative humanitarian wedding gift list, instead of buying unwanted consumer presents. Individual projects come together through the annual Fairtrade Fortnight, which is helping institutionalise ethical consumption norms.

Ethical tourism has grown accompanied by Fair Trade Travel logos and Responsible Tourism Awards and other initiatives (Butcher, 2003, 2007; Rice, 2007). British aid organisations have begun promoting their own ethical tourism schemes such as Oxfam's Global Challenges alongside their reports criticising mass tourism's impact on developing countries and the environment (Rice, 2007). Ethical tourism is particularly targeted at the growing British 'gap year' market of young people travelling after school or university. Campaigns aimed at the younger people strikingly target personal consumption such as Oxfam's Why Generation, which advises 'Support campaigns by changing your every day life – from where you shop and what you buy, to what you study and where you work'. http://www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy/do_something/ethical/. The student organisation People and Planet has put much of its campaigning energies in this area, focusing recently on the high street clothing retailer Primark, 'we have chosen to target PRIMARK because of its influence on UK retail practices, in particular its power in driving down prices and fuelling demand for 'fast fashion' (Leggett, 2007).

Ethical campaigns rightly note how industry self-regulation is slow to improve poor working conditions and that significant changes require social pressure. Ethical sensibilities are impacting on British retail. Major retailers are offering customers ethical consumption through selected sales linked to fair trade, ethical and environmental sourcing, or charitable donation. So the supermarket Sainsbury's informs customers 'Our Values Make Us Different'. M&S and Oxfam are coordinating a scheme where anybody donating old M&S clothes to Oxfam will get an M&S £5 voucher. Topshop is currently selling African print dresses towards funding children's projects in Ghana.

A consumer approach emphasises redistributing consumption, rather than transforming production and redistribution to advance the living standards of all globally. Some paradoxes exist in consumption as form of political social action and personal ethics (Butcher, 2005, 207; Heartfield, 2008; Heath and Potter, 2005). Indicatively those most likely to be concerned about ethical consumption are among wealthier, higher consumption social groups (Heartfield, 2008). Shopping as social action fits, rather than necessarily opposes, a consumer outlook, which finds it difficult to conceive action beyond consumption. Moreover ethical consumption may represent a form of *conspicuous* ethical consumption (Heath and Potter, 2005). Affluent consumers may demonstrate their superior discernment from the masses through their organic diets, expensive foreign travel to novel destinations, or specially sourced authentic fair trade and ecological goods. Ethical attacks on mass consumerism uncomfortably echo earlier elite attacks on the masses, moral sensibilities blurring with sensibilities of taste (Carey, 1992; Eliot, 1995). Predominantly middle class campaigners targeting retailers selling cheap mass-produced clothes subconsciously mix elitist and moralistic judgements of the masses and their consumption patterns. Such impressions are reinforced by how ethical judgements compliment official policies and cultural judgements, which question the population's personal tastes and relationships. Consider Oxfam's poster on London tubes in 2008 'Obesity levels rising while two thirds of the world go hungry'. This simplistic connection implicitly appeals to tacit class prejudices and blames hunger in the developing world on the masses overeating in Britain - obesity in Britain is associated with the least powerful, low income groups – rather than furthering understanding of the causes of poverty in Britain or the developing world.

There appears to be little room for the urban masses in the contemporary British humanitarian vision, again echoing earlier British cultural elites (Carey, 1992). This is perhaps unsurprising given the sector's continuing failure to broaden their

staff social profile (Hopgood, 2006).) Indicative of the demographical narrowness of ethical campaigners is Oxfam's Why Generation advice on the best ethical careers. A respondent observed its list failed to include non-professional work, 'what about people who sweep the streets, unblock the drains, empty dustbins etc?' (Drakes, 2006). Ironically a British aid organisation in their claims to be part of a global community should envy the diverse ethnic and social profile of customers and staff in the average Primark store - including lower income groups, white working class and migrants sending remittances and cheap consumer goods to their families.

Activism organised around consumption in an unequal world logically attributes more agency to higher socio-economic groups who enjoy higher consumption patterns as opposed to lower socio-economic groups on lower wages and standards of living. Social pressure arising from a narrower social basis has a different character from a mass political movement, concerned with raising workers' standards of living and working conditions. Tensions exist between concern for workers' rights and living standards as against limiting mass consumption. People and Planet's 2007 campaign against Primark demanded that the company ensure that those producing their goods received 'a living wage' (Leggett, 2007). A living wage involves social determinations of what constitutes a decent standard of living and the affordability of the goods and services socially expected. Today's campaigns targeting cheap mass-produced goods forget the social significance of mass production of cheap clothing historically for working class dignity and realisation of a living wage (Hoggart, 1958). Even where aid reports note the sense of shame expressed by the poor who cannot afford decent clothes or shoes, as the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan et al, 2000, p. 100, p. 171), they nevertheless marginalise material questions and the positive social good of producing cheap goods as part of ensuring living wages globally.

Industry self-regulation and moral campaigns have historically been slow to transform the material conditions of the poor. The cause of climate change is giving moral legitimacy to this reluctance. Ethical consumer campaigns challenge multinational corporations, but they are prepared to lower the material living standards of populations among industrialised populations, and contain the material aspirations of people in the developing world beyond basic needs. Following Schumacher, finding solutions to poverty and environmental problems that allow humanity to have higher consumption patterns globally appears morally repugnant, even if achievable. Aid organisations have tied solutions to climate change to their anti-materialist development philosophy. Christian Aid's recent reports on climate change invoke the global poor against the lifestyles of industrial countries and want to codify a framework that obliges industrial countries to 'adopt lower-consumption lifestyles' and developing countries to promote the basic needs of the poor (EcoEquity and Christian Aid, 2006, p. 2). Their basic needs models consciously oppose the inhuman assumptions of earlier ecological writing, which brutally regarded famines and disasters as nature's way of dealing with overpopulation, but their anti-materialist models imply limiting social mobility rather than advancing the material position of the masses globally.

Just as British humanitarian sensibilities dislike mass consumption domestically so they fear developing populations' aspirations to material prosperity and modern consumer products. Revulsion is expressed to the Chinese or Indians adopting post-industrial countries' material standards of living, from cars to fridges to air conditioning. British cultural preferences persist for an austere Buddhist China or an India of Gandhian spiritualism and self-denial against Nehru's modernising vision. Ethical consumption may ignore the costs for the masses domestically and globally, just as Wilberforce's support for the Corn Laws ignored the costs for the poor of his day. But if developing countries are not industrialised and limited to

basic needs, they will continue to have little room for contingency. People will remain ever vulnerable to emergencies and indefinitely entangled in dependent relationships with donor powers. Meanwhile environmentalism may legitimise new forms of protectionism, excluding competition from farmers in the developing countries in the name of the planet (Heartfield, 2008).

British post-human humanitarianism

Two centuries ago, Wilberforce's humanitarianism helped abolish slavery, but denied the political and social rights of man. British humanitarianism today wants to promote social and environmental justice, but is wary of emancipating humans from nature. A current Oxfam advertising slogan is the neat 'Be Humankind'. Nevertheless aid organisations are becoming planet-centred and de-centring humanity. The shift was symbolised by People and Planet's name change from Third World First in the 1990s.

At the heart of humanitarianism is or should be the humanist impulse to recognise our common humanity transcending political, social and cultural divisions. This impulse was evident in the founding of organisations like Oxfam. Transcending difference, the humanitarian ideal points to the gap between present conditions and the human potential to create a flourishing life and enriched relationships. Humanitarianism at its best symbolises hope replete with meaning: the nobility of the human spirit and the promise of its triumph over inhuman conditions. A non-human centred humanitarianism is an oxymoron. We have already witnessed the dangers of humanitarianism forgetting to treat people as ends in themselves. Twenty years ago the aid sector was slow to recognise the Ethiopian famine because it was wedded to its development vision. In the 1990s it withdrew aid to Hutu refugees because it prejudged them genocidaires on masse (Vaux, 2000). These stark examples warn how professional humanitarianism may become insensitive to human suffering and even deny groups humanitarian consideration. Tellingly Malthusian population concerns over too many people have resurfaced in humanitarian circles. Contemporary British humanitarianism is infused profoundly anti-humanist, anti-progressive sensibilities leading to policies eschewing human emancipation for human bondage to a natural order. A post-human humanitarianism risks denying compassion today and the promise of a better future for humanity.

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