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Karen Guth

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(Seeing) RED

A provocative book offers a sharp critique of the connection between consumerism, international aid and the culture of celebrity activism.

By Karen Guth

It is not unusual to become immobilized when confronted with the world's pressing problems. What to do in the face of abject poverty, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or devastating environmental degradation? The sheer magnitude of these and other challenges proves overwhelming for political leaders and academic experts, let alone individual citizens.

But what if there were an easy, immediate way to respond to these problems in the course of one's ordinary, daily activities?

This is exactly the solution proposed by a new model of international development, examined in a recent book by Lisa Ann Richey '89. In *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*, published by the University of Minnesota Press, Richey and her husband and co-author, Stefano Ponte, offer critical perspectives on an approach that weds consumerism and aid to address urgent global issues.

Their study focuses on Product RED, a joint effort of corporations such as American Express, Converse, Emporio Armani, Gap, Hallmark, Starbucks, and others, to provide support to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS. Launched in 2006

in Switzerland, the initiative relies, in part, on the celebrity of U2 singer Bono to promote brands sold by the corporations. The profits generated from Western consumers provide HIV/AIDS medications to Africans suffering from the disease.

Richey, a professor of international development studies at Roskilde University in Denmark, and Ponte, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), call such approaches "Brand Aid" because they provide "aid to brands" by helping sell branded products — and they involve the sale of "brands that provide aid" by directing a portion of the profits to help others. In effect, these new initiatives bypass the old debates about aid versus trade, combining the two in innovative forms of corporate social responsibility where proceeds from the sales of items that people buy every day — clothing, coffee, greeting cards — are given to public and private aid groups.

At first glance, Product RED appears to be an ideal marriage. Corporations enhance their brands, consumers get the satisfaction of supporting a good cause, and Africans receive needed medications.

But *Brand Aid* suggests it's not that simple.



At the heart of Lisa Richey's work is this question: Is it possible to shop well to save the world?



Irish rocker Bono enlisted Oprah Winfrey to help promote the launch of his Red product line in 2006.

Richey points to recent studies that indicate that people who buy 'do-good shopping purchases' are more likely to decrease their contributions to nonprofits.

The book leaves the impression

that approaches like Product RED create as many, if not more, ethical dilemmas as they solve. *Brand Aid* considers these “innovative mechanisms” of international development from the standpoint of social scientific and cultural analyses, examining the impact of celebrities on policy-making, consumption as a means for helping, and corporate shifts away from traditional forms of social responsibility. But the book is undergirded by what Richey characterizes as a deep “moral dissatisfaction” with these new approaches.

“I became interested in RED because I was really upset by it,” Richey says. “The situations of Africans were suddenly being used to sell luxury products, and somehow Western consumers could get the notion that they were helping somebody just because they chose one pair of sunglasses over another.”

Richey and Ponte contend that Product RED reduces complex global problems to a simple formula of “Shop and Save Africa.” When she first became aware of Product RED, Richey had just completed a year in South Africa doing research at an AIDS treatment clinic, and the message contrasted with what she had observed about the realities of treating AIDS. “We had just come back after so much really difficult time in clinics hearing people try to negotiate the very

complicated things in their lives, and then we hear Bono come on the screen and say it’s really easy. It’s 20 pills. It’s 30 cents a day.”

While Richey does not deny the importance of access to the medicine that Product RED supplies, she contends that treating HIV/AIDS requires more than mere access to drugs. “It’s definitely not easy, and there’s an awful lot going on in terms of support networks, in caregiving, in really keeping people socially alive. It’s not just a matter of keeping people’s bodies functioning from one day to another but of who they are as mothers, or fathers, or brothers, or workers in their communities. [With Product RED] that whole component is left out.”

The harsh juxtaposition of simple solutions and complicated problems also made her question why Product RED’s message was so appealing. She wondered, “Why is this a message that’s flashy, that sells? Why is this what people want to hear?”

She and Ponte offer several possible explanations. Part of the appeal is what they refer to as “low-cost heroism” — that we can address complicated global problems without making personal sacrifices or increasing our awareness of the problems. They note that Product RED encourages a kind of “consumer citizenry” without calling normal patterns of consumption into question, and it allows corporations to improve

their brand image without reforming unethical business practices. In the end, the seductiveness of Product RED becomes clear: it engenders a sense of moral accomplishment while leaving unquestioned our own unethical practices — and those of corporations.

Richey and Ponte also criticize the way Product RED focuses on “distant others,” allowing us to evade important ethical concerns closer to home. By appealing to stereotyped portrayals of helpless, suffering Africans and using these images to sell luxury products, Product RED reinforces global power dynamics that picture Westerners as privileged saviors of powerless African victims.

The impact of celebrities on public policy exacerbates the problem. Celebrities like Bono come to stand in for African leaders who are, in fact, addressing the problems themselves. “Whenever there’s a supermodel, or Bono, or some other AIDS celebrity taking the stage and speaking on behalf of other people, they’re taking up space that could belong to someone else,” says Richey. “There are plenty of African superstars. We don’t see them accompanying every picture about something happening in Africa.”

But what really worries her is the increasing evidence that initiatives like Product RED erode political avenues for effecting change. “Instead

of dealing with issues at a political level,” says Richey, “it engages people as consumer citizens. Instead of voting, you just need to shop better. That has a potentially problematic outcome.”

Richey points to recent studies that indicate that people who buy “do-good shopping purchases” are more likely to decrease their charitable contributions to nonprofits, non-governmental organizations and faith communities. “People think, well, I’ve done that work already. I’ve already contributed to that cause. I bought this necklace, this really great product that does something.”

Whether such a causal relationship exists is contested by social scientists, as is the effectiveness of Product RED as an approach to international development. But regardless of one’s own views on the subject, *Brand Aid* provides an informative read on a host of issues — issues that Richey encountered for the first time during her days at Furman.

Originally from Hanahan, S.C.,

Richey enrolled at Furman intending to become a lawyer. But political science courses with John Green and Don Gordon changed her plans. Green planted the idea that she major in political science, and from there, she says, “It was all Don Gordon’s fault. I was the head of the Pre-Law Society before I had Gordon’s classes, and after that I wanted to work in Africa on international development issues.”

Of his former student, Gordon says, “Lisa is a remarkable woman. She is keenly intelligent and has a massive amount of energy and enthusiasm for any project she works on. Her work with Stefano on Africa is important and in many ways cutting edge. She’s what you hope a Furman graduate would be — committed, thoughtful, intellectually stimulating, personable, and working to leave the world a better place.”

Richey’s interest in Africa grew through her participation in Furman’s Model Organization of African Unity and the Washington, D.C., program, where she interned for the National Security Archive on policy issues related to South Africa. But it was the Middle East/Africa study abroad trip, led by Gordon, that had the most lasting impact on her intellectual development.

In 1989 the group traveled to Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Kenya and Tanzania. The trip was Richey’s introduction to Africa and issues of development and global social justice. In particular, she remembers visiting the home of a woman outside of Nairobi as part of a poverty tour. As she viewed the woman and her home of dung and mud, Richey’s response was to borrow an extra shirt from a classmate so she could give her own shirt to the woman. “I wasn’t completely sure why or whether that was the



COURTESY LISA RICHEY

While working in Africa, Lisa Richey found time for a scenic boat ride on Uganda’s Lake Bunyonyi.

right thing to do,” she says, “and I’ve probably been working ever since on trying to understand if that was the right thing to do.”

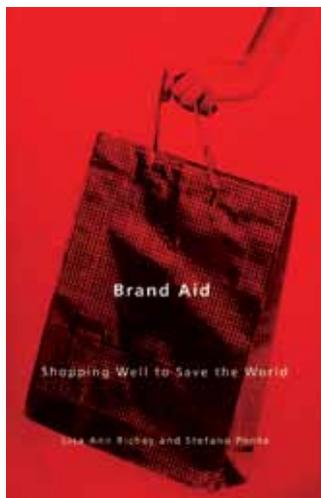
After graduating, Richey pursued a Ph.D. in political science at the University of North Carolina. As part of her dissertation work, she conducted research in Tanzania from 1995-96. She examined the impact of international development policies on population and reproductive health, including access to family planning and safe motherhood. She spent much of her time in clinics where she listened to patients, talked to service providers, and learned about their ideas on child-bearing and health. She published the results in her 2008 *Population Politics and Development: From the Policies to the Clinics*.

But how did she get from UNC to Denmark? As it turns out, the story involves Richey, an Italian she met in Michigan, and, to an extent, a former Tanzanian president.

In preparation for her dissertation research, Richey took a course in Swahili at Michigan State University. There she met Ponte, a native of Verona who was also studying Swahili in advance of a trip to Tanzania for his own Ph.D. work. The two hit it off and arranged to travel together.

While in Tanzania, Richey and Ponte decided to marry. She describes the ceremony, conducted in Swahili by a town official in the Morogoro Municipal Office at the foot of the Uluguru mountains, as “extremely unpretentious and lots of fun.” The exchange of vows took place in a “typical government office” amidst “dust, peeling paint, government-issue wooden chairs, a desk, and a picture of the country’s first president, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere.

“It’s a great joy,” she says, “to have our wedding pictures showing the two of us holding hands under a beaming Nyerere!”



To complete the adventure, the Tanzanian nuptials featured a surprising array of marital options — for Ponte, at least. Because Tanzania is a multi-religious country, citizens are offered several marriage choices. Ponte was asked to decide whether he would like a monogamous marriage, a polygamous marriage, or a potentially polygamous marriage. “He started to laugh,” Richey says. “I was not amused. I kicked him softly under the desk and we moved forward — after checking the appropriate box.”

The couple went to Denmark in 1999 when Ponte was recruited by the Danish Institute for International Studies. Richey took a position at the Center for African Studies at the University of Copenhagen, where she stayed until 2000. After finishing postdoctoral fellowships at Harvard and Columbia, serving as a project researcher for DIIS herself, and completing a six-month stint on a coffee farm in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, Richey returned with Ponte to Denmark. They considered returning to the United States but decided on Denmark because of the opportunities it provided to achieve a reasonable work/life balance for them and their children, Sasha (14), Arianna (10) and Zeno William (6).

Today, in addition to teaching

courses in international development, Richey is at work on a new project that looks further into the roles of celebrities in aid work. She says she is examining “how celebrities are shaping public debates over aid, producing new ways to think about connecting individual donors with worthy recipients of their help, and changing the ways that traditional development institutions work.”

She is also working to establish partnerships between Danish and Tanzanian universities to support Ph.D. programs, researcher education, and organizational development for research on human health, and she and a colleague are involved in a project on images of HIV/AIDS in China and notions of human security.

These projects will likely shed new light on the field of international development, as has *Brand Aid*. Which brings us back to the question at the heart of the book: Is it possible to shop well to save the world?

If the answer is yes, it is not in the way initiatives like Product RED intend, suggests Richey. She does think we should take the consumer realm seriously, but less in terms of buying luxury products to support the purchase of AIDS medication and more in terms of conscientious consumerism. She believes we need to pay more attention to what we buy, where the products come from, and the conditions under which they were produced — and then make a fair choice.

While hesitant to support a kind of localism or nationalism, Richey does think it’s worthwhile to “look at our own backyards” rather than to focus our efforts exclusively on distant locales. “We could look to our own neighborhoods. We could look to groups that are being socially, economically and politically excluded in our own communities, and think about how to work in solidarity with those people,” she suggests.

Lisa Elliott Grose '89, a classmate of Richey at Furman who has been inspired by her friend’s work, is struck by what she calls Richey’s “humanitarian side.” Grose marvels that even when Richey’s children were small, she took them with her to Tanzania when she worked in clinics. “She thought nothing of it,” Grose says. “There was just no question that this was a job that must be done. She felt a calling to do it. She is clearly a very gifted academic. She’s also very clearly got a heart for what she does.”

But where does this passion come from? “I think anger is a very good motivating force,” Richey says. “When I see injustice in the world, when I see systematic discrimination and exclusion and poverty — which shouldn’t exist in the world today — I feel angry. That’s a big motivator for me.” |F|

Karen Guth, a 2001 graduate, holds a Ph.D. in religious ethics from the University of Virginia. She is a postdoctoral fellow with the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Decatur, Ga.