

Charity as a Function of Neo-liberalism and Global Class Structure

Dennis G. Gay

Writer's comment: Often as Americans we tend to ignore the consequences of our actions. Sometimes those consequences are clear to us, open and available for us to consider. At other times the results of our actions are hidden, buried in a mire of conflicting or invisible events. After reading the article "How Susie Bayer's T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back," I found myself flabbergasted that such a complex web of events could follow the simple act of donating a garment. I realized that not all we do is as it seems. A good deed may be turned to a good purpose, yet the ultimate consequences of my good deed may contribute to the destruction of another person's culture and economy. I have come to a new and deeper understanding of the Gaia Theory, that all things, no matter how small, are interconnected. Even the small act of goodwill in the donation of an old shirt can have a powerful impact on others a world way.

I am grateful to Professor Suzana Sawyer for her devotion to my education. I now question my actions more deeply and search for the ultimate consequences of my personal choices.

—Dennis Gay

Instructor's comment: Introduction to Cultural Anthropology (ANT2) is a large, 300 student lecture course—a place where students can often feel detached and disaffected. Dennis Gay was anything but that. The course sought to challenge students to examine their own common sense assumptions about the world, society, and human nature, through an encounter with anthropology. Dennis did just that, with a passion. In his essay, Dennis eloquently questions our common sense notions of free will and agency. Through a critical analysis of a New York Times article, Dennis illustrates how our choices are conditioned by larger, less visible and often more pernicious, structures than we realize. The point, of course, is not to act, but rather to recognize the amazing ways in which our world is interconnected. Understanding allows us to move differently in the world. I look forward to seeing where Dennis takes his.

—Suzana Sawyer, Anthropology Department

AT FIRST GLANCE it may seem very strange to imagine the cast off clothes of Americans turning up on the peoples of Africa. Yet upon examination the idea seems to make perfect sense. If we no longer need those old clothes, let some one else receive benefit from them. In fact, it seems perfectly natural for us, to aid others in far away lands who don't have as much as we do. Perhaps even more than just natural, it is required of us in the grand scheme of some vast universal system.

The story of the donation of old clothing and how that clothing ends up in Africa is complex. There is more to examine than the perceived good deeds of one people to another. Certainly there is the kindness of the act of the donation. There is also the profit motive of the second-hand store, a profit motive shared by the bulk wholesale merchant and his retailers in foreign lands. There is the consumer in the third world country that receives and uses the goods that we in America so freely dispose of. However, I am in search of a much deeper story, a story unseen and untold, a story of class structure on a global level. It is my thesis that the American post-Fordist class structure is propagated globally, through seemingly innocuous acts, such as the donation of a T-shirt to a charity by a good-willed American. Moreover, the spread of a global class structure, based upon the American class structure system, is welcomed, indeed actively sought by the people of the third world.

In the article entitled "How Susie Bayer's T-Shirt Ended Up on Yusuf Mama's Back," George Packer and Harold Levy shown us the full path of a donated T-shirt, from the original owner through all the middlemen to the final purchaser in a remote Ugandan village. Superficially the story makes perfect sense to us here in America. Indeed, it presents a picture of wise and just re-use of American excess. After all, what better story than one which depicts our cast offs, our rubbish, being re-used by the poor people of the third world. Yet, this story left me deeply disturbed. For me this story is a version the magic of great illusionist magicians, who, using skilled mis-direction may make an airliner disappear. In this New York Times article an object even more massive than an airliner is hidden. The massive structure of a global class system is deftly manipulated to appear benevolent and beneficent to the third world purchaser and the first world donator, and yes even to us, the innocent reader.

In truth this article describes an effect of America's most important and pervasive export, the neo-liberal economic system we commonly

call globalism. This system is propagated by trans-national organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and implemented through governmental policies that liberalize and deregulate national economies (Sawyer, "Crude Chronicles":148). In the case of Uganda the effect, as described in the article, was to deregulate the import of used clothing from America. This deregulation was a simple and rather innocent action, on the surface, but an action with broad reaching effects for the textile industry in Africa, and indeed for the people of many African nations.

The distribution of American wealth is well defined and is often depicted in the shape of a pyramid, with a very small top and a very large base. This illustration demonstrates that the American economy has little room at the top and a great deal of room at the bottom. As a result of this bottom heavy structure we have come to recognize that "our society is structured to create poverty and extreme economic inequality" (MacLeod 239). With the exportation of the American economic system to the global stage, it is inevitable that the economies of the third world will emulate our economic system, and therefore by default, our social system, further propagating the distillation of extreme wealth in the hands of the few at the apex of the pyramid and extreme poverty in the hands of the many at the base of the pyramid.

The exportation of American class structure is inevitable; indeed it is integral to the new world economy. In order for the economic success of America to continue, and indeed the continuation of the economic success of all first world countries, the American economic pyramid must be built on the global stage. This pattern must inevitably result in a social structure modeled on the American class structure, creating extreme poverty and economic inequality, for the billions of people at the base of the pyramid.

It is important to understand that the pyramid is not simply transposed onto a global, trans-national stage without change. The pyramid grows to an immense new size as it devours the economies of each new additional country. But it grows almost exclusively at the base of the pyramid. That is to say, little addition is made to the pinnacle, while huge additions are made to the base. Each new third world economy is added below, growing the base of the pyramid downwards, while the vast wealth of the global economy is further concentrated in an apex that is ever shrinking in proportion to the increased size of the pyramid.

How then can the kind donation of an article of clothing by a middle class American facilitate and augment the global class system? The answer lies in the inter-relationship between agency and structure. Isolated from the global system, each American is firmly held within the structure of the American social system. This is contrary to common belief in America, which says that "everyone is middle-class, the U.S. is not a class society, the U.S. is a meritocracy" (Sawyer, Lecture). The truth, of course, is self evident. For the most part America is a strictly classed society. With rare exception, in spite of effort, attitude or education, as was vividly illustrated by Jay MacLeod in *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995), one will remain within the class into which he or she is born.

Within the global social structure, however, the perspective shifts. In relationship to the larger global economic and social construct, the middle-class American has gained new height in the pyramid, as the base of the pyramid deepens the relative height of the middle class American rises. In this higher position within the pyramid the free agent actions of the American are turned into tools for the oppression of those peoples lower in the pyramid. Amazingly, the middle class American and the third world recipient are both unconscious of this effect and its ramifications. Both act within their agency, yet both are simultaneously made subservient to the greater social structure, and act as agents in the propagation of this oppressive structure.

A kindly older woman in New York City exercises her free will and makes a donation of clothing to a local charity. This is done in expectation of personal gain in the form of a tax deduction, but also in the spirit of giving; her act of giving, although an act of free will and individual agency, is intrinsically locked within the social construct. The structure defines the fact that someone else is lower in the economic pyramid, and so may benefit from the kindness of the donation, by being provided clothing at a discounted price at a second-hand store. Further benefit is expected by the donator in that the profits of the thrift store will go to charity and be used to aid those even further down the pyramid. Our kindly older woman has acted as free agent, yet was also constrained by social structure, a rigid construct of which she may have been only vaguely aware.

The garment then passes through channels of which our kind old lady is totally unaware. The garment quickly passes through the second hand store and is diverted into a system which magically shifts it from the world of kindness and charity and into a world of capitalist

profiteering. In the process the structure of global neo-liberalism inserts itself. No longer is the garment allowed to serve the purpose of the donor, her free agency is usurped and replaced by the profit motive. The donated garment is now only a commodity in the world market.

The exportation of the American social and economic structure now turns the donation cum commodity into a tool of global oppression. The process is not necessarily intentional. A structure such as this is not clearly intentional at any point. It is rather, as Wacquant explains, "the congealed outcome of innumerable acts" (quoted in MacLeod 256). Each of these acts is an act of a free agent. The culmination of each free-will act of innumerable free agents results in a structure that serves to constrain the very free agency whose sum total created it.

Unknown to our kindly older woman, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have changed the rules by which third world economies must play. In the guise of humanitarian effort to improve the lives of people in countries like Uganda, huge amounts of monies are poured into the third world. This investment is, in effect, an exportation of American social and economic structure into other countries, hidden within a gift of monetary assistance. These generous loans are accepted as free will choices of the governments of the third world. Once again, however, that free will is exercised within a structure, little understood and often ignored by the decision-makers. Hidden within the structure is the guarantee that the countries that accept such monies will ultimately default upon the loans, at which time changes in the economic structure of the country are imposed by the terms of the loan agreements. These may be seemingly small changes, such as lowering of tariffs and trade embargoes that may have previously protected what little economic base the country may have had. Such was the case in many African countries, which, like Uganda lowered the trade barriers which previously restricted the importation of used clothing.

At this point in the travels of our donated garment, the most insidious portion of the exportation of the American social and economic model presents itself. Commodities are of no value if there is not a market for them. In America we are intimately familiar with the deluge of advertising which drives the consumer mindset and creates demand for commodities of every imagination. There is no such inundation of the African market by mass advertising. The scarcity mindset, the desire to spend ever more scarce monetary resources, is generated within the African imagination.

Conklin, and Graham in their examination of eco-politics in the Amazon discuss the fact that all communities are imagined, and that the global eco-village is “primarily a first-world construct” (697). This imagined construct applies just as vigorously in reverse, from the third world to the first world. People of the third world have created an imagined construct which defines the first world as a place of abundance and ease for all: “I thought maybe we Africans are the only ones who suffer. The people from there—I thought they were well off. I think they don’t even work” (Packer 54+). This imagined world of luxury is then associated with the commodities that arrive from America. Commodities like the donated used clothes that arrive by the shipload in African ports.

Uganda once had a thriving fabrics and clothing industry, fully capable of clothing the people of Uganda and surrounding countries. In fact the cotton from the region is among the best quality in the world. With the imposition of Neo-liberal changes to trade rules, the Ugandan clothing industry collapsed. The collapse was in part an effect of the Ugandan imagination of the American community: “Ugandans simply don’t believe that their own factory could make clothes as durable and stylish as the stuff that comes in bales from overseas” (Packer 54+). Hence, the demand for American used clothing flourishes, while the Ugandan clothing industry collapses.

Once again, free-will agency is constrained within the construct of a much larger structure. Each individual Ugandan, acting with free-will choice, serves to destroy his own economy and make himself subservient to the new global class structure. The choice to spend scarce monetary resources on the discards of the American middle-class seems right and correct to the Ugandan. The choice to donate a garment to charity seems right and correct to the kindly older woman in New York City. Yet both individuals are acting within a much larger structure, and indeed, their actions serve to implement and support that structure.

The American post-industrial economy has served to solidify a class system in the U.S. In order for this capitalist system to survive and grow, it must export itself to the global stage. In the process of that exportation, the world’s wealth is concentrated into a small zone at the top of the economic pyramid, while simultaneously poverty and economic inequality rapidly inundates the rest of the world. Sadly, what appear to be isolated events of charity from a middle class

American woman, and modest consumerism from a Ugandan villager, have much greater ramifications than either person may ever know. The act of giving something away and the act of purchasing something are both innocent and unrelated actions, taken by unrelated and free-will agents. Yet both actions are controlled by a much larger structure, both actions acting to reinforce and expand that structure, bringing into question whether or not the actions were indeed expressions of free agency.

The journey of a T-shirt from donation bin, to African village, is much more than it seems. It is the story of the insidious nature of globalism, the consequences of Neo-liberalism, and the power of social and economic structure to control the results of seemingly freewill choices of unrelated people in diverse lands.

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