

## The “Bono-Banalization” of Globalization in Davos

by **Eduardo Gudynas**

The World Economic Forum is held at the beginning of every year; this time from January 23rd-27th. Its usual participants are well-known names from presidents, to prime ministers, from heads of large corporation, to some academics. It’s a space for celebrating and reproducing globalization, and for this it has received serious criticisms from global citizens. We should remember that the World Social Forum began as a counterproposal to Davos, showing that another world is possible.

In response to criticism, Davos’ organizers tried making a few changes in the script: they conceded ties were no longer necessary; they broadened the themes discussed to include things such as AIDS and “marriage and sex”; and they also organized smaller workshops. The apogee of those changes came in 2005 when the Forum for corporate and political elites were assaulted by music stars like Bono and Lionel Richie as well as actors such as Angelina Jolie, Richard Gere, and Sharon Stone. This marks the “banalization” of the World Economic Forum by reverting to magical formulas and mass media to end poverty in the Global South.



*Davos 2005: Bill Clinton (former US president), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Thabo Mbeki, South Africa president, with Bono.*

Many of us remember Sharon Stone’s sudden revelation in Davos that Africa needed immediate help. Standing in the middle of one of the forum’s sessions she began trying to collect one million dollars from the corporate heads surrounding her in the room. Of course, everyone supported her plea and promised to open their wallets, but few ever did. It took almost a year for those promises to be met, and Stone did not come back to Davos, and those million dollars did not solve Africa’s problems.

U2 singer Bono, however, is still a regular at Davos, where he presents his different recipe solutions to the world’s problems. Providing the conceptual backing to these solutions is Jeffrey Sachs, who assures the world the solution lies in massive increases of aid to developing countries. In 2005, Sachs published his book *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* with a prologue by Bono (1).

It might be appropriate to remember Sachs' key role as an economic counselor to Bolivia and countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia, in the application of "shock therapy" policies, which ended in profound economic crises. His recipes for ending poverty were being edited at the same time as the 2005 Davos Forum, when Bono launched his Africa campaign along with Tony Blair and Bill Gates.

Sachs' ideas are based on a reductionist view of poverty: as overly dependent on monetary income, strongly conditioned by geography, and devoid of a previous history that explains the dynamic by which some countries became rich at the expense of other nations. By the same token, Sachs' recipe calls for maintaining current global relations, but just with more foreign aid. He does not question the essence of globalization: no reforming of global trade or capital flows, and no consideration of different styles of development.

The proposals are simplistic but are difficult to criticize with the presence of Bono and other actors, who dress up the mercantilist policies with edgy glamour making them look "cool." Sure, Bono is a nice guy and no one wants to undermine a nice rocker. But for now, "Bono-politics" are not enough. They are simple solutions that do not attack the roots of the problems that generate poverty, even if they alleviate the consciences of those responsible. The strategy sits well with the corporate leaders meeting in Davos. It achieves several goals, such as putting a human face on the forum and entertaining the press, who end up covering rock stars rather than questioning the corporate CEOs. It's a strategy based on spectacle, and to show for it, Bono's efforts were a central theme of a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*.

Davos also serves as a useful channel for corporate donations, which determines a course of action against poverty based on charity. Little is discussed about relations of production and equity; the debate is reduced to donation amounts. The emphasis is never on how to reverse the causes of global inequity, but rather what corporate bigwig will donate the most money. The postures of the Sachs-Bono duo are functional for current forms of globalization, because they don't put at risk its structures and dynamics.



*Bono's global solution: the red credit card to end World hunger.*

The academic field provides some serious critiques to Sachs-Bono-type positions (from both the right and the left; 2), but they are few and far between. The thing is, academics have also become bewitched by the banal. For example, writing about his Davos experience in 2006 in *The Times*, respected economist Kenneth Rogoff, a Harvard professor, described, "This time, Bono came with an exceptionally clever idea: the American Express Red card (1 per cent of purchases goes to support the Global Fund (to fight aids, tuberculosis and malaria)."

Added the economist, "Someone showed me a sample card and it even looks cool." He also writes "The parties and dinners at Davos were notably lighter and more relaxed. McKinsey, as it so often does, had the best music." While Google, he says, "was the most happening ... serving vintage wine and champagne" (3).

Welcome to the "Bono-banalization" of global problems in which it is assumed that poverty can be solved by the use of a credit card while clinking champagne glasses at a

party in Davos. Since such approaches are too obviously ineffective, the presence of actors and musicians is merely lip service to critics and negative citizen reactions. George Caffentzis calls this their “Plan B,” which serves to hush protestors while leaving the spinal column of the global economy intact (4). Mix some Bono with a little Bill Gates, add Angela Merkel with some Lula da Silva, and globalization now wears new clothes.

The real role of Davos is promoting global markets and liberalizing international trade. These roots are exposed in this year’s agenda with the return of classic themes and its focus on “the power of collaborative innovation” based on five pillars: business, economy and finance, geopolitics, science and technology, and values and society. Making the point more clearly is the list of coordinators of the 2008 meeting: former British Prime Minister Tony Blair; the presidents of Pepsico, Chevron, of the banks J.P. Morgan and ICICI of India; the president of China Mobile Communications and Henry Kissinger.

The Davos Forum does not tackle global problems, and in fact reproduces the conditions that generate inequality and poverty. Saying world hunger is a global problem is not enough. And trying to solve this problem with a credit card is ridiculous. WE must take steps toward concrete solutions, many of which will be very painful for industrialized countries, and in that effort there is not a lot to celebrate, but a lot to change.

#### **References**

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