

Bards of the powerful

Far from challenging the G8's role in Africa's poverty, Geldof and Bono are giving legitimacy to those responsible

Hackers bombard financial networks", the Financial Times reported on Thursday. Government departments and businesses "have been bombarded with a sophisticated electronic attack for several months". It is being organised by an Asian criminal network, and is "aimed at stealing commercially and economically sensitive information". By Thursday afternoon, the story had mutated. "G8 hackers target banks and ministries", said the headline in the Evening Standard. Their purpose was "to cripple the systems as a protest before the G8 summit." The Standard advanced no evidence to justify this metamorphosis.

This is just one instance of the reams of twaddle about the dark designs of the G8 protesters codded up by the corporate press. That the same stories have been told about almost every impending public protest planned in the past 30 years and that they have invariably fallen apart under examination appears to present no impediment to their repetition. The real danger at the G8 summit is not that the protests will turn violent – the appetite for that pretty well disappeared in September 2001 – but that they will be far too polite.

Let me be more precise. The danger is that we will follow the agenda set by Bono and Bob Geldof.

The two musicians are genuinely committed to the cause of poverty reduction. They have helped secure aid and debt-relief packages worth billions of dollars. They have helped to keep the issue of global poverty on the political agenda. They have mobilised

people all over the world. These are astonishing achievements, and it would be stupid to disregard them.

The problem is that they have assumed the role of arbiters: of determining on our behalf whether the leaders of the G8 nations should be congratulated or condemned for the decisions they make. They are not qualified to do so, and I fear that they will sell us down the river.

Take their response to the debt-relief package for the world's poorest countries that the G7 finance ministers announced 10 days ago. Anyone with a grasp of development politics who had read and understood the ministers' statement could see that the conditions it contains – enforced liberalisation and privatisation – are as onerous as the debts it relieves. But Bob Geldof praised it as “a victory for the millions of people in the campaigns around the world” and Bono pronounced it “a little piece of history”. Like many of those who have been trying to highlight the harm done by such conditions – especially the African campaigners I know – I feel betrayed by these statements. Bono and Geldof have made our job more difficult.

I understand the game they're playing. They believe that praising the world's most powerful men is more persuasive than criticising them. The problem is that in doing so they turn the political campaign developed by the global justice movement into a philanthropic one. They urge the G8 leaders to do more to help the poor. But they say nothing about ceasing to do harm.

It is true that Bono has criticised George Bush for failing to deliver the money he promised for Aids victims in Africa. But he has never, as far as I can discover, said a word about the capture of that funding by “faith-based groups”: the code Bush uses for fundamentalist Christian missions that preach against the use of condoms. Indeed, Bono seems to be comfortable in the company of fundamentalists. Jesse Helms, the racist, homophobic former senator who helped engineer the switch to faith-based government, is, according to his aides, “very much a fan of Bono”. This is testament to the singer's remarkable powers of persuasion. But if people like Helms are friends, who are the enemies? Is exploitation something that just happens? Does it have no perpetrators?

This, of course, is how George Bush and Tony Blair would like us to see it. Blair speaks about Africa as if its problems are the result of some inscrutable force of nature, compounded only by the corruption of its dictators. He laments that “it is the only continent in the world over the past few decades that has moved backwards”. But he has never acknowledged that – as even the World Bank's studies show – it has moved backwards partly because of the neoliberal policies it has been forced to follow by the powerful nations: policies that have just been extended by the debt-relief package Bono

and Geldof praised.

Listen to these men – Bush, Blair and their two bards – and you could forget that the rich nations had played any role in Africa’s accumulation of debt, or accumulation of weapons, or loss of resources, or collapse in public services, or concentration of wealth and power by unaccountable leaders. Listen to them and you would imagine that the G8 was conceived as a project to help the world’s poor.

I have yet to read a statement by either rock star that suggests a critique of power. They appear to believe that a consensus can be achieved between the powerful and the powerless, that they can assemble a great global chorus of rich and poor to sing from the same sheet. They do not seem to understand that, while the G8 maintains its grip on the instruments of global governance, a shared anthem of peace and love is about as meaningful as the old Coca-Cola ad.

The answer to the problem of power is to build political movements that deny the legitimacy of the powerful and seek to prise control from their hands: to do, in other words, what people are doing in Bolivia right now. But Bono and Geldof are doing the opposite: they are lending legitimacy to power. From the point of view of men like Bush and Blair, the deal is straightforward: we let these hairy people share a platform with us, we make a few cost-free gestures, and in return we receive their praise and capture their fans. The sanctity of our collaborators rubs off on us. If the trick works, the movements ranged against us will disperse, imagining that the world’s problems have been solved. We will be publicly rehabilitated, after our little adventure in Iraq and our indiscretions at Bagram and Guantánamo Bay. The countries we wish to keep exploiting will see us as their friends rather than their enemies.

At what point do Bono and Geldof call time on the leaders of the G8? At what point does Bono stop pretending that George Bush is “passionate and sincere” about world poverty, and does Geldof stop claiming that he “has actually done more than any American president for Africa”? At what point does Bono revise his estimate of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as “the John and Paul of the global-development stage” or as leaders in the tradition of Keir Hardie and Clement Attlee? How much damage do Bush and Blair have to do before the rock stars will acknowledge it?

Geldof and Bono’s campaign for philanthropy portrays the enemies of the poor as their saviours. The good these two remarkable men have done is in danger of being outweighed by the harm.