



Admirable aid: But who's really 'running the world'?

Frisbees And Famine

This month sees the launch of Sport Aid 88. Steve Wagg looks at the contradictions inherent in the charities' campaigns against famine

It's now nearly three years since Bob Geldof mobilised a battallion of popular entertainers - many of them, in the circumstances, embarrassingly rich - to perform in the historic Live Aid concerts for the famine victims of the Sudan and Ethiopia. In the wake of those momentous events have flowed a number of similar projects, notably Sport Aid and Comic Relief, as well as a briefly vigorous debate carried out, among other places, in *Marxism Today* (December 1985 and July 1986). This month, with barely time enough for us to take off our red noses and put on our trainers, Sport Aid returns with an impressive series of international sporting events, running through to the autumn.

Modern charitable campaigns like Live Aid, Comic Relief and Sport Aid are almost bewildering in the scope not only of their ambition and achievement, but also of the problems to which they address themselves and to which they serve to draw public attention. Sport Aid, for example, in 1986 persuaded 20m people across 89 countries to take part in their Race Against Time. This year it hopes to involve sportspeople from all of the 218 established countries in the world.

In Britain in 1986 the Race Against Time was staged in 39 towns and cities and runners totalled 1.2m. (This time it promises to be more than that.) The race in London had a record 110,000

entrants. In India 2m people went onto the streets and the race was watched live on tv by an awe-inspiring 750m viewers.

Now shortly, here and across the world, vast and disparate numbers of people will be jogging, footballing, wrestling, orienteering, ice skating, throwing frisbees and, perhaps most improbably of all, surfing against hunger in the Third World. Among them will be the now familiar sprinkling of singers, disc jockeys, tv presenters and professional sportspeople, picking up where the comedians of Comic Relief left off in February. Once again the focus is on the barely describable plight of African children, 15m of whom are dying of malnutrition, exposure and preventable disease every year - a rate of 280,000 each week.

Comic Relief and Sport Aid are admirable, but the contradictions they represent persist almost as obstinately as the suffering they seek to relieve. For one thing, the marriage between Western hedonism on the one hand and charitable initiatives

against unspeakable poverty abroad on the other has always been an uncomfortable one. As some of the albeit grateful recipients of Comic Relief admitted, the sight of wacky Westerners in big red noses cavorting on their behalf must have caused consternation to some Africans. For myself, on Comic Relief night I found the juxtaposition of film of skeletal African children with the spectacle of tv talk-show host Jonathan Ross dropping his trousers to raise money for them almost too difficult to take in.

More important is the underlying ethos of the whole aid programme. This was effectively laid down by Live Aid originator Geldof, who consistently argued that the campaign was not about politics but about saving lives. Geldof went effing and blinding round the world, lecturing all politicians on what was needed. Brussels bureaucrats would have to get off their arses and shift their butter mountains, he told them. As usual, it was implied, 'politicians' - perennially 'all the same' and 'in it for themselves' - had failed. It was up to the ordinary punters to change the world.

Writers such as Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques were made optimistic by Live Aid and rebuked the TUC and the Labour Party for not embracing it (*MT*, July 1986). Others like political scientist Ray Bush stressed the need to understand the *manmade* nature of famine. These arguments must continue to be put forward, unpalatable as that may be.

There's no quarrelling with people doing things for a good cause. Indeed, one good thing about Sport Aid is that, although the now obligatory 'famous personalities' are involved (Doctor and the Medics, Bryan Robson etc), the emphasis is on people *doing* things on their own initiative. I just hope some of the track-suited millions will permit themselves a political thought or two on how the dreadful situations they are helping to tackle were allowed to develop in the first place.