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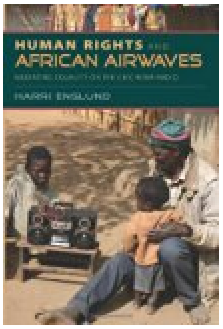
Harri Englund. *Human Rights and African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. x + 294 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-22347-0.



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Democracy, Human Rights, and Neoliberalism in Malawi

In less than a decade, Harri Englund, a social anthropologist, has published six books based on his ethnographic field work in Africa, primarily Malawi, that examine the limits of human rights discourse in the context of extreme poverty.[1] This book extends the thesis of his best-known work, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (2006), which argues that foreign aid and human rights activism are obstacles to the emergence of democracy in Malawi. Englund contends that the emphasis that human rights activists place on individual freedom and abstract rights actually denies the vast majority of the Malawian population opportunities to give voice to their grievances and moral claims about injustice. More broadly, he argues that human rights advocacy and national development policies in Africa are engines of neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Scholars interested in internationalizing media and journalism history will find this book a challenging provocation as Englund makes a compelling case for the need for more studies of media production and reception in the global South; however he also dismisses en toto existing critical scholarship on news and news production as critically flawed while displaying little substantive knowledge of it.

Englund's larger argument is not unique, but he adds weight to it through detailed analysis of stories told by impoverished Malawians in the Chichewa language. Although both English and Chichewa are official languages in Malawi, the relationship is asymmetrical, favoring English, which is widely used in urban centers, in the legislature, and by educated elites. Conversely, Chichewa, the language of the majority of the population–the poor in rural, "underdeveloped" regions–is disparaged by educated Malawians, expatriates, and aid workers.[2] One of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, Malawi ranked 164th out of 177 countries on the United Nations human development index in 2004, with 76 percent of its population living on less than two U.S. dollars a day. The country's internal income inequality was the third worst in the world when Englund conducted his ethnographic fieldwork at the beginning of this century.[3] Malawi has also been especially hard hit by the AIDs pandemic.

Despite its expansive title, *Human Rights and African Airwaves* actually reports on Englund's ethnographic study of the production and reception of a popular radio program, *Nkhani Zam'maboma* (News from the districts), broadcast in the Chichewa language by Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), a public broadcasting service. Englund's theoretical reach is even more expansive. He not only challenges the universalism of human rights discourse and international human rights NGO policies and practices, but also the premises of liberalism more generally, as well as, for example, Jürgen Habermas's reconstruction of liberalism, Martha Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism, Pierre Bourdieu's advocacy for the disenfranchised, the legitimacy of American media sociology–indeed social science itself– and much more. Englund's critique is primarily informed by Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, and Jacques Ranciere.

This is a heavy theoretical load for a radio study to carry, even though radio is the primary medium of mass communication in Malawi. A 2002 survey indicated that radio had far greater penetration than newspapers or television, with 58 percent of Malawian households owning at least one radio as compared to only 3 percent owning a television. Radio has a long history in Africa: the BBC began international broadcasting in South Africa in 1924 and in Kenya in 1927. The first station on the African continent was established in Harare in 1932. All of these early initiatives were intended to address white audiences exclusively. However, World War II created incentives for colonial governments to begin broadcasting to African audiences since Africans were being conscripted to fight in the war. The development of the transistor radio in 1954 made radio a truly mass media in Africa.

Under colonialism, Englund contends, the "production of an African public [by radio] was inseparable from the wider colonial project of creating subjects that could be ruled and enlightened at the same time" (p. 25). He maintains that this paternalistic legacy continues to influence African nations and broadcasting through developmentalism. As a state-sponsored organization, MBC has been particularly vulnerable to this criticism. Although Malawi has been a multiparty democracy since 1994, MBC still maintains close ties with the party in power, and the partisanship of its reporting is widely recognized internally and abroad. Article 19, the widely respected free expression NGO, has called MBC journalists "slavish apparatchiks" (p. 14).

Englund acknowledges MBC's propaganda functions and paternalism. To illustrate these shortcomings, he cites a typical news bulletin from 2006, which announced, "Government says it is committed to ensuring the rural areas are developed" (p. 23). News on MBC is not about the "new," but rather it is intended to convey the legitimacy of the state. Consequently, MBC's headlines have a timeless quality: Englund points out that this news story might have been broadcast any time since Malawi gained independence in 1964.

But Englund argues that *Nkhani Zam'maboma* is different: a difference that is confirmed by the fact that it remained popular even after most of MBC's audience deserted public broadcasting when new private radio stations went on the air. Englund maintains that as a singular exception, the program complicates MBC's reputation, but does not exonerate it.

In the course of his research, however, Englund did develop some empathy for MBC's producers who, he argues, struggled to create some semblance of professionalism, despite the oppressive institutional constraints under which they worked. The production of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* entailed a complex set of relationships involving the regular staff of the station and locals, some of whom supplied stories to the program and became known as "correspondents." The correspondents occupied an ambiguous social status, which could easily alienate them from members of the community if they were perceived as scandalmongers. Yet, they remained committed to accurate reporting to avoid jeopardizing their positions with the program's producers, who scrupulously monitored the veracity of reports from the villages. The producers took pride in the program, which they believed redeemed their journalistic integrity.

Englund agrees, claiming *Nkhani Zam'maboma* breaks through the silence imposed by the hegemony of statism, as well as human rights and development discourses. The program illustrates his contention that there is a significant disconnect between the lifeworlds, values, interests, and objectives of the Chichewa-speaking Malawi poor and those of human rights organizations and activists, including educated English-speaking Malawians. This gap, he argues, is especially evident in their respective views of equality: "The challenge here," he asserts, "is to understand what constitutes equality in the absence of an egalitarian ideology" (p. 14). While universalistic human rights discourses assess equality in Western Enlightenment terms, Englund argues that impoverished Malawians conceive of it hierarchically, in terms of reciprocity of obligations. This, he reports, is a recurrent theme in the stories broadcast on *Nkhani Zam'maboma*, which emphasizes the "relationships that tie masters and servants in mutual dependence" (p. 47).

According to Englund, Chichewa storytelling is animated by moral arguments and "rich in allusions that are not made explicit" (p. 46). The success of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* stems from its ability to celebrate and refine popular Chichewa narrative conventions into a hybrid media genre: newsreading as storytelling. Englund recounts a tale that MBC broadcast about a European breed of goats disrupting a funeral procession, which illustrated how the Chichewa storyteller viewed white peoples' concerns about animal welfare as a way of maintaining their position as strangers to Malawians. This kind of indirection was apparently common in Chichewa narratives, for example, stories ostensibly about witchcraft were used to raise other issues.

Where moral models were made explicit, Englund reports that it was without didacticism: "Because no egalitarian vision was projected into the distant future, equality was an aspect of the here and now, the expectation of improved conduct giving some hope for the near future" (p. 179). The ideal, then, was that everyone should be treated with respect, "a respect that revealed mutual dependence between sharply unequal subject positions" (p. 179). Englund contends that Chichewa narratives about the moral failures of individuals, including chiefs and religious leaders, actually testify to the belief in the strength of Malawian institutions, rather than their weaknesses, as they affirm expectations that these institutions can remediate grievances. In his view, these stories negate the common complaint that Africa lacks democratic and developmental institutions; he believes that *Nkhani Zam'maboma* demonstrates that scholars and activists need "to look harder for African-language resources to imagine equality and justice" (p. 227).

Given his scathing indictment of liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and human rights discourse and activism early in the book, Englund's final chapter is modest, even conciliatory in its conclusions. He contends that he is not arguing against "strengthening the conventional institutions of liberal democracy, but the key conclusion of this book is methodological ... analysts will do well to allow alternatives to their own assumptions to rise from the investigation itself" (p. 228). This is, of course, a fundamental tenet of social science methodologies, including anthropology, whether its practitioners profess scientific or humanistic allegiances.

This move is, however, characteristic of Englund's "bait and switch" style in which he makes sweeping claims, often using a quote as a foil, such as Ranciere's somewhat mystical characterization of Bourdieu's work: "In this sociology, 'all recognition is misrecognition, all unveiling a veiling' " (quoted, p. 51). Then, Englund seems to distance himself from his provocations by following them with so many qualifiers and digressions that his own position is obscured. In short, he throws rhetorical bombs and then runs for cover. Some of these incendiaries do hit their targets, but as they accumulate, others implode into contradictions. For example, Englund indiscriminately condemns NGOs in Malawi as agents of neoliberalism, without distinguishing among the diverse types or agendas of NGOs, such as religious groups, aid agencies, UN representatives, neoliberal front groups, etc. Yet, he also acknowledges the crucial role that Catholic bishops played in democratizing Malawi in 1992 by defending free expression and advocating for diversification of radio outlets and programming. Nor is Englund a lone wolf in undertaking narrative analysis of Malawian storytelling as he seems to imply; sociologists have developed methods for doing so in Malawi with far more methodological rigor than Englund displays, although not, to my knowledge, in Chichewa.[4]

Englund's use of the term "equality" also requires interrogation. A term of Latinate origin, it generally implies a measurable entity, relative parity in access to resources: land, money, power, status, etc. Consequently, it seems reasonable to ask if it makes sense to try to define relationships within a hierarchal system, between "master" and "servant" (Englund's descriptors), as "equal." Finally, since Englund's mission is exposing the silences in human rights discourses and practices, his own silence regarding what is arguably the most important contribution to this field in recent decades is puzzling, specifically Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* (2009). Sen directly confronts critiques of liberalism and attempts to universalize justice discourse, enriching it with concepts of justice drawn from non-Western, primarily Indian, sources. He regrounds Rawlsian-inspired justice studies in on-the-ground realism that provides strong intellectual rationales for interventions in humanitarian crises such as famines. Sen deals with the debilitating effects of extreme poverty and posits a strong argument for the kind of freedom of expression that the narratives of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* cultivate. Sen also takes on neoliberalism, exposing its embrace of market fundamentalism as a profound misreading of classical economics. This oversight is troubling since Sen has extensively explored many of the issues that Englund presents as new or unique to Malawi.

These criticisms are not intended as a dismissal of Englund's effort, but rather as an attempt to contextualize it. The account he offers of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* is intrinsically interesting: it posits a convincing claim that human rights and aid workers ought to remain open to alternative views of justice and morality. The modest evidence–ethnographic study of a single radio program in a single country–does not, however, provide a warrant for Englund's specious criticisms of sociology, media studies, cosmopolitanism, discourse theory, Western legal thought, human rights theory and activism, or even a viable platform for generalizing about African airwaves.

Notes

[1]. In addition to the present volume, these are *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006); *From War to*

Peace on the Mozambique-Malawi Borderland (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002); *A Democracy of Chameleons: Politics and Culture in the New Malawi* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002); *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*, with Francis B. Nyamnjoh (London: ZED, 2004); and *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge Centre of African Studies, 2012).

[2]. See for example Alfred J. Matiki, "Language Planning. Legislative Exclusion in the Legislative Process in Malawi," paper delivered at the World Congress in Language Policies, Barcelona, April 16-20, 2002.

[3]. Englund uses 2004 statistics although later figures, which show some modest improvements in Malawi's status, are readily available on the Internet. `http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/20206.html.`

[4]. Anne Esacove, "Love Matches. Heteronormativity, Modernity and AIDS Prevention in Malawi," *Gender and Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 83-109.

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