

FORUM SECTION ANTHROPOLOGISTS DEBATE (IN)EQUALITY

INTRODUCTION

With Euro-American political virtues like equality, freedom and democracy animating public and academic debate in ever more fraught ways, the idea of bringing ethnographic analysis to bear on them has become compelling. In this Forum we draw on such work to tackle these issues through a new format: a series of comments on sections of Harri Englund's *Human Rights and African Airwaves: Mediating Equality on the Chichewa Radio* published in 2011 by Indiana University Press.

As early as 2006 Englund's *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (University of California Press) had presented a critical perspective on the new culture of democracy that had been introduced to countries like Malawi after the Cold War. Englund's focus was on the diverse meanings and uses of human rights in this context, particularly with regard to linguistic translation, civic education and legal aid. The book was awarded the Amaury Talbot Prize of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In *Human Rights and African Airwaves* Englund shifts the focus to a popular radio programme—*Nkhani Zam'maboma*—which gives the Malawian public a chance to air their grievances in local idioms and familiar narrative forms. A key conceptual issue in the book revolves around equality, which Englund relates to both anthropological theory and liberal moral philosophy.

Here four anthropologists comment on and extend Englund's provocative thinking, followed by a response from the author himself.

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ENTANGLED IN/EQUALITIES IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

A RESPONSE TO HARRI ENGLUND'S *HUMAN RIGHTS
AND AFRICAN AIRWAVES*

• VITO LATERZA •

The publication of Harri Englund's landmark book on local discourses of equality and inequality on Malawian radio presciently pre-dates the explosion of scholarly and policy interest in inequality, largely influenced by Thomas Piketty's bestselling book *Capital in the 21st Century*. It remains to date one of the few in-depth analyses of discourses and practices concerning equality and inequality in contemporary anthropology.

Englund's ethnography centres around the production and reception of stories broadcast on *Nkhani Zam'maboma*, a popular Chichewa-language radio programme on Malawi's public radio. Stories are sent to the newsroom by listeners, and edited versions of them are narrated on air. Many stories express moral views about abuses and excesses of power in everyday life, from schoolteachers busy eating porridge rather than teaching pupils, to a worker forced to feed his children with beer because his employer failed to pay his monthly salary. Englund skilfully assembles this rich material to explore local views of power, authority and social justice in an African context, providing a powerful platform for voices that are usually unheard in the mainstream of regional and global development discourse. He engages directly with local perspectives on equality and inequality, moving seamlessly from a critical treatment of the tenets of Western liberalism to complex aspects of subjectivity and relationality in Malawian society.

Englund's masterly ethnographic analysis grounds theoretical debates of inequality in the fine-grained reality of Malawians' everyday life. By doing so, it offers a much needed counterpoint to 'big picture' studies and top-down analyses that have so far dominated scholarly and policy circles outside anthropology. Englund's nuanced theorising is driven by ethnographic insight, which makes it one of the best examples of anthropological work engaging with the big questions and pressing challenges of today's world. Building on his previous work and a growing field of Africanist scholarship, Englund's provocative take questions much that is taken for granted about equality and inequality.

The book warns of the danger of unreflexively extending Eurocentric views of equality to other social contexts that do not share the basic assumptions of personhood and subjectivity implied by such theories. Mainstream liberal discourses of equality presuppose a view of individuals as endowed with inalienable rights and acting as separate and discrete entities in the social world. Of course social institutions that go beyond the individual are taken into account, but they too share in this framework, the autonomy and independence of individuals: at least in principle, both individuals and social actors can be categorised and identified with relatively clear boundaries. Achieving equality is then intimately linked with the question of measurement. The philosophy of individual autonomy lays the basis for the development of technocratic means to implement laws and regulations that work towards an equal distribution of outcomes, for instance in health levels, income and social status. Individual and social characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity and religion, are conceived as quantifiable variables when measuring the extent of unequal distribution of outcomes among individuals and social groups, and implementing actions to reduce it. The long-term aspiration is to equalise all outcomes. As Englund puts it, liberal democratic discourses posit equality as an inevitable and desirable goal. Perhaps one of the most successful examples of this logic is the Nordic welfare model, frequently cited by progressive policy makers as the best model for all other countries around the world to follow if they are serious about equality.

The discourses and practices of the listeners and story-tellers of *Nkhani Zam'maboma* do not seem to fit well with such conceptions of personhood. Englund's grounded analysis shows us that this world is not marked by clear boundaries and separations between individuals. Social life in the Malawian context unfolds in a complex web of cross-cutting relations that make subjects mutually dependent on each other. Autonomy and separation are conceived as either outright impossible, or indeed the work of evil

forces like witchcraft. In a reality of entangled subjects, equality and inequality are not matters external to the individual. Rather, they become conditions for the emergence of subjectivity and social relations among subjects. Inequalities in power, status and wealth among individuals are mitigated by a complex set of obligations that imposes a substantial moral and social burden on the more powerful party in a relationship to provide for the basic needs of the weaker one.

The publics Englund engages with do not condemn inequality *per se*, but rather the excesses of individuals in position of authority who do not fulfil their obligations towards their weaker dependents. Employers are not expected to redistribute their wealth according to some abstract measure of equality, but moral outrage *is* expressed when they are not able to provide for the basic needs of their employees (see also Laterza forthcoming). Schoolteachers enjoy the benefit of high social status and are widely respected, but they are expected in exchange to make sure that they provide children with an excellent education. Englund's highly original argument is that such moral claims and disciplining by the poor, through the medium of the public radio broadcast, of figures of power and authority are only possible because a relationship of equality holds between the two. Equality then is not a goal to be achieved through specific policies, but rather a pre-condition of any social relation worthy of the name. This existential condition of equality is constantly fostered and nurtured in multiple ways, from sharing food, drinks and familial affects in conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2002) to bodily and symbolic communion and exchange in ritual and religion (Devisch 1993).

Englund's insight provides a double critique. The first, more explicit, is directed at the kind of egalitarianism born out of liberal conceptions of equality, clearly showing that it is not and cannot be the privileged lens through which to understand equality in Malawi and other African contexts. The second, perhaps more implicit, refutes views of African societies as inherently hierarchical. Englund's ethnography presents a world of interdependent subjects that are moving in a complex and flexible space that does not easily lend itself to a two-dimensional picture along simple lines of verticality and horizontality. To borrow a term from Deleuzian discourse, Englund's nuanced analysis of African subjectivities is inherently transversal: it cross-cuts the equality/inequality binary. It provides a different and complementary angle to recent attempts to 'rediscover' inequality in Africa that tend to overemphasise the vertical dimensions at play in local relationships (e.g. Ferguson 2013).

What should we make then of Englund's critique of liberalism? Is Englund's anthropology inherently 'conservative'? It is clear from the book that he is not trying to dismiss liberalism outright. Rather, his ethnography indicates a need for pluralism—thus giving renewed emphasis to one of liberalism's main tenets. Englund's critique is not a way out of political engagement. He indicates a different kind of liberal politics yet to be, through a deep engagement with the voices of those who currently have very little say in the development mainstream. Englund's work offers powerful evidence that it is possible to conceive and develop other kinds of liberalism that break away from Western mainstream thinking. Anthropologists' critical engagement with local realities make them best positioned to investigate these alternatives.

His grounded view of equality and inequality in Malawi's popular discourse has important policy implications. We could perhaps start by reframing progressive

discourse that remarks, in its own contested terms, that while most African countries have experienced high rates of economic growth for several years now, socio-economic inequalities are on the increase. Although African middle classes are visibly growing, most people are reaping few benefits, if any, from the boom.

In the people's own terms, it might not be so much an issue of Nordic-style inequality between classes that can be identified and addressed quantitatively. The African poor are calling upon the wealthy and powerful to fulfil their obligations towards them, as mutual dependents in an entangled world. Yet the excesses of flexible capitalism and deregulated markets are denounced all the same. But claims and demands from people on the ground are different from progressive policy discourses advocating the implementation of welfare systems along Nordic lines. Their moral outrage springs from a sense of betrayal of unavoidable obligations and neglect of existential ethical responsibilities towards fellow human beings, here perceived as mutually constituted entities. This ethical drive might appear on the surface to be just another local variant of the 'universal' validity of human rights and equality. In practice it is far removed from the kind of technocratic equality that underpins Nordic welfare models.

Human Rights and African Airwaves is a powerful reminder that in practice, for all their noble intentions, uncritical adaptations of the Nordic model are unlikely to work in African contexts. A grounded understanding of key questions of subjectivity, social relations and moral frameworks of the kind provided in this book is a necessary precondition for designing and implementing effective development interventions.

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ANTHROPOLOGY, (IN)EQUALITY AND (IN)EGALITARIANISM

A COMMENT ON HARRI ENGLUND'S *HUMAN RIGHTS AND AFRICAN AIRWAVES: MEDIATING EQUALITY ON THE CHICHEWA RADIO*

• BJØRN ENGE BERTELSEN •

For the last two decades, Harri Englund has consistently been concerned with perspectives external to the domain of the globally powerful, more specifically informed by long-term work in various urban and rural contexts of Malawi. Englund's work has always been important to debates not only on Africa but in a variety of fields of anthropological concern, such as Pentecostalism, conflict and war, migration, labour, witchcraft, poverty, politics and—more recently—mass media, public discourse and human rights. Particularly for this latter engagement he should be commended in an anthropological discipline increasingly concerned with general discursive formations, and the mass-mediated varieties of such, at the expense of broadcasts (and discourses) in African languages. In such a way, this important book contributes to recent work on African media, which people as diverse in their concerns as Francis Nyamnjoh, John and Jean Comaroff, Katrien Pype, Richard Fardon, Lila Abu Lughod, Richard Vokes and others have undertaken. As in all of Englund's writings, the arguments are clear and relate logically to the methodology—in this case ethnographic fieldwork in the radio studios of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation as well as in in various rural and urban contexts among listeners to the radio programme *Nkhani Zam'maboma*.

Richly ethnographic, the book is also concerned with the ethics of representation. Englund's analysis of the 'counter public' being created by the programme's stories, narratives that engage with abuses of power by people holding positions of authority, is therefore carefully laid out. He sees such mass-mediated engagements as providing particularly important contexts for dealing with notions of equality but not in the usual mode of celebrating the 'African point of view'—at least if this is taken to mean privileging communalism and relationality against the purported Western notion of individualism. In an understatement very much in keeping with his sense of humour, Englund therefore underlines that '[c]laims of rights-bearing individuals did not feature in such stories, however much their subjects and narrators may have been exposed to human rights talk' (p.47). This crucial point alludes to the richness of the reflections concerning questions of power, equality and relations that the programme harbours as contrasted against the sterile conceptions of the human rights talk advocated through English-language, rights-centred and individualizing discourses and campaigns. Demonstrating the importance of this alternative locus of moral discourses is one of the great accomplishments of this excellent book. However, there are a few points raised by this piece of work—especially concerning uses of the notions of 'inequality' and 'equality' and the way these are invoked in the analysis undertaken by Englund—that I would like to comment on.

One may ask if Englund's analysis really (or solely) concerns 'equality' and 'inequality', especially as these are notions often firmly embedded in the sterile terrain of rights talk which Englund seeks to avoid and/or criticize. Or, by contrast, does the constant deployment of this binary by Englund smuggle in problematic ideas of sameness in

terms of economy, of riches, so to speak? My sense of the arguments being made by Englund—and he is successful in making them—is that his material relates to far wider and more encompassing dimensions than can somewhat reductively be seen as questions of ‘equality’ and ‘inequality’. Englund may also, of course, be aware of this—as suggested in a key passage on page 14, commenting on how the ‘liberalism’ of the African airwaves informs our understanding of the ‘fundamental liberal value of equality: The challenge here is to understand what constitutes equality in the absence of an egalitarian ideology’.

The existence of some notion of ‘equality’ beyond what he (rightly) calls ‘the freedom-focused human rights talk’ opens up the whole question not only of inequality and equality understood in a narrow (often economic) sense, but of a wide range of questions concerned with what one could call egalitarian and inegalitarian orders. Now, egalitarianism does not seem to be defined very clearly by Englund—he makes several references to ‘liberal egalitarianism’ (as on pp. 48–49), and to ‘egalitarian sentiments and practices’ in Africanist anthropology (as on p. 224), and then there is the key section from page 14 (quoted above) where Englund refers to ‘equality in the absence of an egalitarian ideology’. All instances, however, seem to project an image of ‘equality’ as a category open to the realities exposed in and mediated through the radio programme while ‘egalitarianism’ is often cast as being within the purview of liberal ideology and human rights discourse—effectively a tool in the hands of the ideologues of procedural democracy.

I read egalitarianism differently and I would be interested to hear if Englund agrees that one may alternatively see this as, broadly speaking, orientations, practices and outlooks which undermine, destabilize or in other (material and immaterial) ways challenge hegemonic structures, systems of governance or wider socio-cultural orders. Further, I would argue that the notion of egalitarianism is centred around a more fundamental binary than that of equality/inequality, namely the tension between, first, the purported universal nature of egalitarian orientation or potential and, second, the idea of Europe as a form of diffusionist centre in the post-enlightenment period. More concretely, on the one hand you have then the birth of notions or ideas that we can order under the term egalitarianism in the Western post-Enlightenment period—replete with notions of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*; on the other hand, and as anthropology has shown, there are non-Western socio-cultural orders where one may identify what may be seen as egalitarian possibilities, potentialities, orientations, dynamics and practices. The tension between two such readings begs questions of where one should locate egalitarianism (or ‘equality’, for that matter) if it is found to be universally relevant. At a supra-ideological level or a supra-ontological level, perhaps?

Any analysis of the thin notion of human rights (focused on notions of freedom but not on notions of equality) so eloquently critiqued by Englund (see also, e.g., Englund 2006) is profoundly important to anthropological work on what egalitarian orientations and potentials *might be* or might *become*. Concern about what this might be also seems to be informing his underlining of ‘equality in the absence of an egalitarian ideology’ (p. 14). So, at one level Englund seems concerned with *precisely* the tension that I have described: that of Western-centred notions (i.e. human rights and freedom talk in his case) versus those outlooks that are irreducible to such notions (i.e. Englund’s concern with African, non-human-rights informed discourses as exemplified by the radio programme).

Towards the end of the book, for instance, Englund's use of 'equality' seems to come closer to how I would see 'egalitarianism', that is, in a more universal guise: 'These claims enable us to consider equality as a condition of human relationships, as an ethos rather than a policy, as an obligation to be realized in particular situations rather than an ever-elusive goal to be pursued' (p. 225). However, and here there is perhaps a tension in his analysis, he underlines time and again that what the radio programme expresses is a concern with honouring obligations, claims and dependencies within *hierarchical relations*. These hierarchical relations must be understood, argues Englund, as beyond individualism and communalism and he proceeds to differentiate temporally between the concerns of the human rights activists (orientated towards future utopias) while '[b]y contrast, equality as a condition of a relationship within which a claim is made is very much a matter of the present' (p. 15).

This seems to be a statement of huge importance regarding the potential for social change within the Malawian context, as it seems to underline the existence of fundamentally hierarchical political cosmologies and socio-cultural dynamics within which the notion of equality (if it is to have any emancipatory meaning) is problematic. Although one could say this reading, perhaps inadvertently, bears some similarity to the gradualism often associated with human rights activism, this would be an unfair reading of Englund. However, the point remains (see p. 3), that the nature of the engagement with 'equality' in the radio programme is not of a kind that incites violence or rebellion but rather provides insights into 'how obligations tying persons into mutual dependence have a certain prospective, aspirational quality'.

This brings me to a final point: There have been, also in Malawi, other and more direct expressions of political engagement for egalitarian horizons that seem to challenge the hierarchical dimensions analyzed by Englund. For instance in 2011, the year the book was published, there were large-scale demonstrations in Malawian urban areas organized, at least in part, by opposition leaders. In my work with Mozambicans who have participated in popular urban uprisings in Maputo in 2008, 2010 and later, I have heard these Malawian protests referred to explicitly (see Bertelsen 2014). Their importance to the politics of the Mozambican protests underlines how important it is also to include Pan-African connections—not just in the sense of the various political constructions emerging after independence (with which Englund also engages) nor in the Africa-centred attempts of African scholars (on the continent and outside it—the various assumptions of which are also challenged by Englund). Moreover, it is also crucial to include various forms of counter-politics that broadly speaking relate to issues of egalitarianism. Similarly to the radio programme analyzed by Englund, perhaps, these often assume shapes that are not easily categorized, such as the protests in Malawi and Mozambique (see also Obadare & Willems 2014), and they are often characterized by information about various events seeping across national and continental boundaries via the internet, mobile phones and through television and radio broadcasts that are not nationally confined. Nor are these dynamics contained by orderly notions of counter-publics, as Englund would agree (see pp. 59–60). Rather, I suggest that they evade co-optation and institutionalization. This is precisely due to their often acephalous and ephemeral nature—which characteristics are, I would argue, crucial components of all egalitarian orientations. These diverse events are of political importance, yet they remain uncaptured by the human rights domain,

just as they challenge the dominant logic of equality within hierarchical relations, as Englund shows so well. It would be interesting to hear how Englund would locate this type of event in relation to his analysis of radio-mediated discourses about equality—and whether these also express ‘an ethos rather than a policy’.

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WHAT DOGS TELL US ABOUT RACE AND INEQUALITY

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If white farmers stand for a particular history of racial division and inequality in southern Africa, their dogs symbolize them in turn. Farmers’ lush houses and gardens famously contrast with the overcrowded, barrack-like squalor of black workers’ compounds. And, as they command their ‘people’, iconic khaki-clad farmers do not appear alone—the picture is not complete without a large Alsatian at heel. Just like the white, expatriate doctor in Englund’s exploration of obligation and dependence in Malawi, farmers throughout the region are known to put their dogs first. Dogs sit in the front of the pick-up while workers crowd onto the back. They are most deeply trusted when it comes to personal security. And, when farmers address their workers, their dogs are a reminder that existing hierarchies could be defended violently should the need arise. Just like Englund’s invocation of the expat doctor, all of this underlines farmers’ denial of embeddedness in webs of mutual dependence, which are an important basis for acknowledging the equivalence between people.

For Englund’s Malawian informants, the expat doctor signalled his place outside proper sociality when, after a fight between a village dog and his pet Alsatian, rushing to a vet in the city was a far higher priority than tending to his own employee, who had also been injured. The doctor is presented as a way into a bottom-up, Malawian perspective on equality and inequality. Inequalities of wealth and power are understood to be the

way of the world. But a particular equality is asserted through hierarchical relationships: through the recognition that people in different positions depend on each other, and that their claims count for something. In other words, that they matter to each other and, even more fundamentally, that they equally make each other who they are.

The expat doctor is removed from this perspective on everyday relationships. His actions become grist to the mill of morality tales—a lesson in what not to do, and in what white foreigners are like. Indeed, such behaviour is indicative of a particular individualism: the doctor's prioritization of a pet over human employees, we are told, is a logical corollary of the liberal view that all people should be independent.

Farmers do not deny dependence, but they often present it as one-way. Their self-understandings as providers for their 'people' run against the grain of liberal thought: they take workers to hospital, look after earnings for them, give small birthday presents, shoot game animals for feasts, offer hand-me-downs, and retain employees even when they are old. But they present *themselves* as individualized protagonists in their own stories. Tales of taming the bush efface black workers' labour. What is underlined is the solitary life of the farmer, despite the presence of hundreds of workers and their dependents on the land. Here, then, is an interesting case in which superordinates partially recognize their place in hierarchies of dependence. They are embedded, and workers evaluate them according to how well they live up to expectations. Yet their position at the top is justified *both* by their participation in what they see as an African system of paternalism, *and* by their pioneering, visionary individualism. There appears to be claim-making from below here, but not the mutual recognition—the equality-amidst-inequality—that Englund shows us in Malawi.

Farmers and their dogs raise fresh questions about dependence and difference—but these are questions that Englund's perspective helps to illuminate. Underneath farmers' explicit self-presentations are moments in which a more complex interdependence is acknowledged. A case from the farm where I conducted long-term fieldwork, on South Africa's border with Zimbabwe, is illuminating here. Benjamin, a senior black worker, would often attempt to explain the intricate relationship between him and one of the white farmers. Eventually he resorted to a story about the farmer's dog. Both were based in the farm's workshop, and so spent their days together. Occasionally, the farmer would order Benjamin to run to get something, knowing full well (as did Benjamin) that the Alsatian would attack him as soon as it looked like he might be running away. In doing so, the dog was responding to racial stereotypes, learned from its owners. And, for the farmer, these very stereotypes were easily manipulated in the service of a quick practical joke. For Benjamin, the whole process was rather less funny, and of course it was physically painful. But he also read such moments as revealing a shared understanding between farmer and worker. Both knew that they were pranks. What is more, Benjamin read them as a private language, which in turn reflected an acknowledgement that the farmer needed him as much as Benjamin needed his employer. This reading was based on a long, close working relationship, and a particularly good understanding of the farmer's own sense of physical vulnerability, despite his considerable height, after a motorbike accident had damaged his neck. The point of this story for Benjamin was always the mutual recognition of dependence, alongside inequality. Here, then, is a different story from the one white farmers usually like to tell—one of two-way support, albeit acknowledged in a moment

that also reasserted racialised hierarchy. Where does this leave us in relation to equality-amidst-inequality?

In fact, for our purposes in this forum, the point of the story is quite different from the case of Englund's expat doctor. The case of the doctor served to reveal a sharp distinction between those who recognize the importance of mutual dependence in an unequal world, and those who simply do not grasp this. The farmer and his practical joke present us with a tricky middle ground. There is a private understanding of mutual dependence here, but the farmer would never have set his dog on a white person. How should we understand this kind of inequality? Does mutual recognition produce a kind of equality built into the conditions of their relationship? Here, mutual dependence and understanding co-exist with the basic assumption that people are absolutely different—ontologically different, even. To label these 'constitutive obligations' as 'equality as a condition' seems to empty the concept of equality of any discernible content.

But my intention is not just to argue about semantics. It is to explore what lies between shared membership and its opposite, and what understanding that tells us about inequality. In this very brief comment, I would like to do so simply by highlighting two points. The first is a reminder that, while claim-making from below is surely important in understanding moral-political understandings, the view from above remains a key part of the puzzle. To be sure, Englund wishes precisely to get away from an undue emphasis on the view from the top in existing political theory. Too many elite thinkers tell the disenfranchised what they (should) want, in a language either of individual rights or of its opposite—subsumption in an abstract collectivity. Instead, Englund proposes, we should listen to those at the bottom. And what we hear in Malawi (and elsewhere) is the articulation of claims in *specific relationships* and, in the process, the mutual obligation and the equality-amidst-inequality described above. But, if we follow this line of thought, the next question must be: what about those at the top? Publicly, southern Africa's white farmers often only acknowledge part of the dependence. Englund's starting point suggests we listen still harder. And what we hear are acknowledgments of mutual dependence that nevertheless assert an absolute difference. The point is to examine the degree to which superordinates in different settings actually recognize a kind of equality on the basis of mutual obligation and dependence, and how they go about denying or only partially acknowledging it.

In Benjamin's example of the farmer and his dog, understanding the superordinate's perspective requires another lens—and this is my second point. As Charles van Onselen (1992) famously argued, paternalist dependence on white farms in the region was often the flip-side of violence. White farmers called the shots and gave gifts at their own discretion. Black workers lived with the results, or quickly felt the effects of physical coercion. Such explicit violence has disappeared from the farms where I have worked, yet the farmer's joke bears its trace. A relationship of mutual dependence is highlighted by resorting to a private, shared understanding. But, as the farmer reaches out to his most trusted worker, his cultural resources have physical coercion at their very centre. Moreover, such relationships are between men, and their intimacy sets the terms for wider, highly gendered patterns of dependency and violence. The power of senior black workers—because they monopolise access to accommodation and employment, and have the ear of their employers—leaves women and junior men extremely vulnerable. This should alert us to the ramifications

of, and the off-stage relationships surrounding, particular hierarchical dependencies. But either way, in developing a perspective on inequality that foregrounds relationships of mutual obligation, one key area for exploration is how asymmetries of brute force figure in people's perceptions and self-understandings. This, in turn, is an important entry point for asking what dependent relationships look like from both ends.

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THE PROMISE OF EQUALITY

• TIMO KAARTINEN •

Debates over political transformation in countries outside the orbit of affluent, Western democracies tend to be focused on human rights. It should not be surprising that such language coincides with a global agenda of economic liberalization. Neither is it a surprise that authoritarian governments reject the language of rights and frame their policy making as the pursuit of economic growth and social justice. The reader of a magazine like *The Economist* will be familiar with the face-saving argument that attempts to reconcile these conflicting development visions. According to this narrative, economic growth inevitably fosters an urban, educated middle class that forces its government to improve its record on freedoms and rights.

Anthropology has challenged this simple narrative by showing a huge variation in the conditions under which people actually invoke and make claims about political principles. In his thought-provoking ethnography of African radio journalism, Harri Englund describes a seemingly pedestrian and conformist genre of moral narratives that, on closer analysis, turns out to challenge dysfunctional institutions and the misuse of power in more potent ways than the liberal discourse of equality. By broadcasting these popular narratives, the editors and hosts of Malawian radio programs create a public sphere in which personal relationships—something that people normally recognize as an element of intimate and communal social life—are revealed as the source of moral

obligation. By reaching nation-wide publics, the radio programs extend this moral sensibility to the behaviour of public figures. At the same time, they give us a glimpse of vernacular counterparts to the global development rhetoric that often serves to weaken political agency (Ferguson 2006).

Much anthropological ink has been spent on analyzing the reception of universalizing moral and political messages among the authoritarian, poor nations of Africa and Asia. What particularly excites me is Englund's focus on the production of messages that do not resist or criticize institutional power in any obvious way, and yet manage to inflect its development rhetoric and to open up new moral and political possibilities (Zigon 2014: 761). Contrasting with James Scott's (1990) account of 'hidden transcripts' that conceal resentment in supplication when serfs address their masters, more recent anthropological concern with language ideologies, publics and mediation, such as Englund's book, has revealed other ways in which moral messages can be aligned with power.

Inequality continues to pose a political dilemma for anthropologists who confront it both as ideology and as manifested in social interaction. Banda Eli, the Eastern Indonesian village I began to study in 1992, makes no pretence to being an equal community. Its upper class affirms its historical ties to a regional trade aristocracy. This cultural heritage is used to justify the nobility's leadership over a servant class of mixed ancestry, and restrictions over women's marriage choices. Hundreds of villagers have moved to cities in recent years, and the ensuing experience of national modernity has meant that many now look at their native class and gender inequality as embarrassing anachronisms. Although national institutions represent a promise of equality, they in fact provide a channel for the rich into membership in the educated class and incorporate others into the working class. Particularly during Indonesia's economic and political crisis in 1998–2002, many displaced people struggled to replace old relations of patronage with some new form of incorporation.

The question is not whether one kind of inequality is more real than another—whether, for instance, it is more relevant to analyze socioeconomic structures and weak institutions rather than traditional hierarchies. Englund's discussion suggests that people often think about the effect of institutions on their lives within a similar moral framework as smaller-scale personal obligations. For instance, many people I know are thankful to banks and government bodies for resolving their housing problems after the crisis, but they are also mindful of the role of influential community leaders in making this happen. From their point of view, public institutions and social relations intersect as constituting levels of the same, lived world (James 1996: 38).

Is it possible to analyze the ethics and morality of such worlds anthropologically without imposing concepts that are alien to them? Jarrett Zigon (2014: 752) suggests that we might 'limit our analysis to that which emerges from a world rather than add value to it by means of moral concepts'. What seems to emerge in this case is a social concern that is grounded in pre-existing relations, but must be invented again in new conditions of institutional power. Zigon argues that such concerns do not arise from moral concepts that are already embedded in the lived world. To understand their ethical nature, we should instead 'find and create concepts that articulate the essential intertwining that constitutes being-in-a-world' (Zigon 2014: 752).

The obvious problem with morality that is embedded in social relations and practices is that it tends to appeal to historical precedent and status quo. Ambon, the provincial city where I did fieldwork in 2009, had recently returned to normal life after a three-year civil war that began in 1999. The war had been seen as a religious conflict, and reconciliation efforts sought to ensure equal settlement rights for Muslims and Christians in the city. Yet a new perception had emerged about the causes of the war: it was being blamed on immigrants and on the policies of the previous government that had encouraged their movement into the province. In the 1970s, a clove boom attracted many immigrants to the agricultural sector of Maluku, and they began to settle in the city area after the boom was over. The civil war displaced these people again, and afterwards they received new housing in a shoddy, quickly built area outside the city. Many of them worked in the Ambon harbour—an institution that guaranteed their incorporation into the state economy—but suffered ethnic and social exclusion.

Although the rhetoric of peace and inter-faith dialogue that upheld the new civil order was framed in local, cultural terms, it reverberated with national and global security discourse. At the same time it excluded the ‘BBM’, an acronym for ‘Bugis, Butonese, and Makassarese’—the three largest immigrant groups from outside Maluku. Upper class immigrants were able to shed this ethnic classification through intermarriage with indigenous, landowning groups. The rest had no space in the discourses that were available about what constitutes legitimate residence in the city.

The harbour—a state space separated from the rest of the city—may seem an unlikely site of intertwining between diverse personal, historical and ethnic experiences. Yet it provided the men working there with a firm sense of belonging and masculine pride. In the 1950s, the dock workers organized themselves into a cooperative that controls the recruitment of new harbour staff. The government was still fighting a pro-Dutch secessionist movement in the province and gave the management of the harbour to Bugis immigrants. In the following years they hired and trained people from several seagoing Muslim groups, including urban migrants from Banda Eli, as stevedores. The current ethnic composition of the harbour community reflects the shared history of these Muslim groups, all of which have pursued maritime trade since the 16th century. In 2009, I witnessed an initiative to represent this community politically in the city council—initially with success, although their candidate passed away suddenly after winning the election. He was born in Banda Eli, and was therefore part of the indigenous population, but his political network spread well outside the province.

We might take this as an example of efforts to make institutions work for people: to actually deliver the equality that is inherent in their ideological promise. Paradoxically this often happens when people appeal to historical, personal and ethnic solidarities—supposedly transcended by national and human equality. But this can only be productive if the emerging practice succeeds in transforming the conditions in which people live, or at least opens new possibilities for dwelling in them (Zigon 2014: 762). A discourse of rights—whether universal or local—often fails to capture these possibilities. Narratives and activities through which people historicize their situated lives carry more promise for the anthropological understanding of vernacular ethics. As Englund points out, equality is real, effective, and consequential when it is not a utopian goal of social transformation but something that can be actualized in the near future.

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EQUALITY IN THE VERNACULAR—RESPONSE
 BY HARRI ENGLUND

• HARRI ENGLUND •

If I wrote *Prisoners of Freedom* in a state of outrage, *Human Rights and African Airwaves* had its origins in an altogether more propitious realization. There was something almost cathartic about suspending criticism in order to explore what else there might be to Malawi's process of democratization since the early 1990s than the all too ubiquitous rhetoric about human rights as freedoms. To be sure, the new rhetoric was itself an area of considerable ethnographic interest and gave me the opportunity to consider, in the final pages of *Prisoners of Freedom*, the extent to which anthropologists might be able to reclaim the concept of freedom from the neoliberal agendas pursued by NGOs and 'democratic' politicians. Yet in order to reach further in my ethnographic revision of liberal moral and political theory, I had to look elsewhere. That elsewhere exposed human rights activists' own unwillingness to suspend criticism. As a bastion of state propaganda both before and after the democratic transition, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) stood at the end of a path that human rights activists dared to tread only as critics. What my friends in villages and townships told me, by contrast, was that one of the MBC's most popular programmes gave them a far better outlet to express and reflect on injustices than any NGO-led campaign they were aware of. *Nkhani Zam'maboma* (News from the Districts), an alternative daily newscast based on listeners' letters and phone calls, gave the anthropologist a perspective on equality that neither activists nor liberal philosophers were ever likely to encounter, ideologically and practically disconnected as they were from the vernacular.

The comments assembled here very generously extend my work into new contexts of inquiry and push me to address certain aspects of my argument. From the outset, it is helpful to recognize what my project tried to achieve. Timo Kaartinen puts it well when

he notes that in the general field of study to which I contributed, scholars have moved away from a concern with resistance, however 'hidden' some of its features may have been. *Nkhani Zamimaboma* diverged from the MBC's state-driven main agenda, but to conclude that it did so as overt or covert resistance against that agenda would be to give short shrift to journalists' commitment to the idea of public service broadcasting. Moreover, as Kaartinen also notes, a commitment to institutions of various kinds often comes to be expressed in terms of personal obligations. This lies at the heart of my argument, because it opens up the prospect of studying equality within hierarchical relationships. Few stories on *Nkhani Zamimaboma* sought to dispense with hierarchies. Yet broadcast on the radio in Malawi's most widely spoken language, Chichewa, they could achieve unique moments of equality between unequal adversaries. Here I contrasted my interest in equality to the concern with egalitarianism, which I took to refer to ideologies about the value of equality.

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen reiterates my point that liberalism has no monopoly over egalitarianism, as anyone familiar with hunter-gatherer studies can attest. Whether it is intrinsic to all egalitarianism to 'challenge hegemonic structures', as he also asserts, is a moot point and one that my book cannot address. For it was not egalitarianism that I discovered in Malawi but a public that was engaged in moments of equality *in order to* render hierarchical obligations and dependencies productive from the point of view of those who had suffered indignities. 'Another liberalism is possible' is how Vito Laterza puts it, summing up well my aspiration to insert the vernacular into the liberal mainstream. After all, neither the medium—Malawi's public broadcaster—nor the message—obligations and dependencies—was exactly a challenge to 'hegemonic structures'.

Is it at this point that my suspension of criticism has to be replaced with the more familiar social-scientific urge to unmask power and hegemony? This urge comes across in these comments in two forms, both highly thought-provoking. Bertelsen draws attention to what he calls 'popular urban uprisings' in Malawi and Mozambique to underline the possibility of 'egalitarian orientations' that challenge hierarchies. Protest and outright revolt are certainly features of Malawi's past and present, but I would hesitate to posit too sharp a contrast between the quotidian claims of dependence broadcast on *Nkhani Zamimaboma* and the aspirations sparking unrest. For what is remarkable about incidents involving the destruction of property and lives is how often the target is experienced to be outside of social relationships. From the 1915 revolt against the whites led by John Chilembwe to the moral panic over the occult, which I described in *Prisoners of Freedom*, to the more recent attacks on the Chinese I have studied in Zambia, violence has been targeted at those who have turned a deaf ear to claims of dependence and obligation. A similar point seems worth making in response to the other invitation in these comments to unmask power relations.

'What about those at the top?' Maxim Bolt asks, pointing out that dependence might look rather different in 'the view from above'. *Human Rights and African Airwaves* tried to show how unequal partners became entangled through a particular mass-mediated forum for framing and making claims. The 'view from above' here involved paying careful attention to village headmen, school headmasters, religious leaders and men in abusive relationships with women. Because failure to honour obligations could result in

embarrassing exposure on national radio, such people sometimes found themselves in a conflictual and unhappy predicament. My suspension of criticism, in other words, served the methodological purpose of discovering what moral and political resources Malawians themselves had to discuss and criticize power. I would have violated this methodological principle—key, in my view, to good ethnography—had I presumed to know who or what constituted power in this instance.

The view from above that Bolt advocates recalls the point I made about a distinction between those who stand outside of relationships—and are therefore not subject to claims for dependence and obligation—and those whose obvious advantages in life make them especially attractive to the less advantaged. He quite rightly contrasts the story that began the chapter entitled ‘Obligations to Dogs’ with a dog story of his own. Here the white farmer’s dog mediates a relationship, however scandalized we (as the story’s distant audience) might be by its brutality, not least because of the history of racism to which it belongs. Yet the story usefully asks us to consider how far we are prepared to go in order to identify democratic potential in such relationships when the shortcomings of formal democratization in Southern Africa are so plain to see. Farm workers in South Africa may have nothing like *Nkhani Zam’maboma* to hold their superiors to account. Their predicament may well be marked by the ‘brute force’ that at times indexes dependence and obligation. Whether it makes their relationships with white farmers inherently undemocratic is something that the English writer G. K. Chesterton may have wanted to comment on. ‘There is nothing’, he wrote in 1905 with an example from his own times, ‘particularly undemocratic about kicking your butler downstairs. It may be wrong, but it is not unfraternal. In a certain sense, the blow or kick may be considered a confession of equality: you are meeting your butler body to body’ (Chesterton 1905: 267). The pieties of democracy were turned on their head in his further remark that ‘the really undemocratic and unfraternal thing is the common practice of not kicking the butler downstairs’ (ibid.: 268). Bolt’s dog story likewise confronts the pieties of democracy, but its denial of equality in any form is a far cry from the social world described in *Human Rights and African Airwaves*. Such denials are of course the way of the world, not least when equality becomes the subject of deliberate planning and policy. Hence, I have tried to argue, the need to study equality in the vernacular.

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