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Reviews

Prisoners of Freedom: human rights and the African poor by HARRI ENGLUND
Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 247. US$21.95 (pbk.).
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At the centre of this book are two very well observed Malawian organisations in the field of good governance and human rights: the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) and the legal aid activities of the Human Rights Resource Centre (HRRC). These chapters are preceded by one on the translation of human rights texts into Chichewa, and followed by a chapter around a body snatcher scare in an area of Lilongwe. The book argues that human rights may be presented as a universal set of rules, but that these are interpreted in particular contexts and can come to serve the status quo. In fact, the whole movement around human rights in Malawi affirms the privileged position of the elite, because of its ostentatiously non-political nature, and it maintains the highly exploitative situation in which the poor find themselves, because human rights discourse reduces problems to the level of the individual rather than seeing them as systemic. The observations in this book ring true to my experiences in Malawi, not only because of the way in which NICE is seen as a career opportunity or for the way in which the legal aid official identifies with the exploiter and not the exploited, but also because of many wider issues such as the deplorable state of education in Malawi. A particular value of the book is the impressive way in which it documents how ingrained it is in Malawian society to look down on those in poverty.

There are two serious problems with the book, however. The first one is a problem of interpretation. Englund describes the promotion of human rights and good governance as part of a neo-liberal project to maintain the status quo, and then goes on to say that the Malawian elite reinforces this disempowerment (p. 10). They have absorbed the human rights project to maintain their condescension towards the poor. This entails an important theoretical jump: whereas the first interpretation stresses structure, the second interpretation stresses agency. I believe, however, that agency is involved not only on the Malawian side but also on the donors' side. I will not deny that the discourse on a rights approach and, in the economic field, on poverty reduction, often implies that questions about exploitation are not asked. However, I do not think that this necessarily reflects a neo-liberal conspiracy. Englund is sarcastic about the expatriate manager of NICE who is preoccupied with keeping his project non-political in nature. In Englund's view, the manager has emasculated the transformative power of the human rights agenda. However, the manager's concern is understandable. He has to maintain the non-political nature as otherwise the project could be considered as interference in Malawian sovereignty, and that would be the end of it. Asserting NICE's non-political nature allows the project to operate in the

interstices of power. The discourse on rights can also be used in a more radical fashion, but that depends upon Malawians. For example, Englund mentions how the idea of rights entitlement led secondary school students to raise highly critical questions about the quality of education (pp. 65–6). The legal aid case shows not only the reification of Malawi's inequalities, but also the potential to challenge labour practices, if Malawian lawyers were interested in so doing. This difference in interpretation is a particularly serious issue, as it can have important implications for practical action involving, as it does, a radically different appreciation of human rights initiatives.

The second problem has to do with methodology. Englund considers the insights he presents as special because of the ethnographic method he uses. He refers, for example, to 'ethnographic witnessing' which has a connotation of superiority associated with religion. Englund presents, however, not only some good systematic observation, but also a lot of anecdotal evidence, illustrative examples, wide or wild conjectures, and simple opinions that do not warrant the authority he assigns himself. This is especially clear in the chapter on moral panics. His starting point: there is a scare or panic among parents of children in Lilongwe's primary schools. Rumour has it that they will be snatched and that their body parts will be sold on one of President Muluzi's trips abroad. Englund makes a link between this panic and the state of education in Malawi: the latter makes the panic understandable. He provides no evidence, however, that the parents made this link. It appears, rather, to be merely a supernatural explanation for wealth, as is the case with the other examples of such fears mentioned as being associated with shopkeepers. It is mere assumption to give to this and the common supernatural beliefs in Malawi a moral dimension, unless there is specific reference to moral issues. The book therefore requires scepticism from the reader, and it would have been better if Englund had been more sceptical about his interpretations.

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The Democratic Republic of Congo: economic dimensions of war and peace by MICHAEL NEST, with FRANÇOIS GRIGNON and EMIZET F. KISANGANI
New York: International Peace Academy, 2006. Pp. 162. US$15.95 (pbk.).
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Emanating from a project of the International Peace Academy, the book investigates a subject which has caught the limelight of research on contemporary conflicts: the economic dimensions of war (and peace). Contrary to what the title may insinuate, readers should not expect an in-depth analysis that refers to the greed *vs.* grievance debate with particular respect to the conflict in the DRC. The core of the book is dedicated to the question of whether and how attempts to solve the conflict have addressed economic agendas of the parties to the conflict. To this extent, international involvement for a lasting peace in the DRC emerges as the central topic of the book.

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, which draw a number of interesting lessons from the case of the DRC, the small volume consists of four chapters. Chapter 2 by Michael Nest provides a concise and useful overview of