

Pineda, M. & Udogu, E.I. (2011). [Book review of] *Human Rights and Social Movements*, by Neil Stammers, *Africa Today*, 58(2): 154-156 (Winter 2011). Published by Indiana UP (ISSN: 0001-9887). DOI: 10.2979/africatoday.58.2.154.

## Book Review

Stammers, Neil. 2009. *HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*. New York: Pluto Press. 286 pp. \$30.00 (paper).

In *Human Rights and Social Movements*, Neil Stammers provides readers with a decent publication, set forth in eight chapters, notes, an extensive bibliography, and a helpful index. Central to his thesis in this volume is that social movements have powerful influences on the conception, development, and practice of human rights; alternatively, social movements are especially effective in advancing issues of human rights worldwide. Within the context of the preceding postulation, Stammers suggests in chapter one that misunderstandings about the character of human rights occur primarily because past and contemporary literature on the subject does not often show the connection between human rights and social movements. Consequently, the literature on human rights creates what Stammers terms a “hall of mirrors” (p. 39). In that context, observers see reflections, not their realities or their practical effects on populations.

In chapter two, Stammer expands on the foregoing supposition by arguing that these reflections occur when scholars analyze texts and their narratives without substantial historic context. In short, academics tend to apply to the whole of history the relationships or patterns they observe in historical retrospection. Some students of human rights tend to focus on claims of individual rights, rather than on those of a community. Eurocentric analytic assumptions approximate this point of view (pp. 67–69).

In chapter three, Stammer argues that another cause for the missed connection between social movements and human rights occurred in the “lost 19th century” (p. 70). Self-determination struggles by groups for freedom were worldwide in that century, and they demonstrated common

characteristics in their fight for whatever politico-social situation seemed best for them. The most significant development in that century, notes Stammers, was a demand for collective rights; however, past and modern scholars have paid little attention to the activities of that century, as a consequence of which many academics have missed important aspects of the history of demands for human rights. Features such as the claim for collective rights, the similarity between social and national questions, and global self-determination struggles have been insufficiently and inadequately examined. Be that as it may, Stammers arguably places too much emphasis on the influence of written works on the conception and analysis of advocates for human rights. This view is informed by the fact that an individual's conception of human rights is rarely limited to that of scholarly literature. In truth, an individual's conception of human rights may be primarily what is personally considered fair or right for him- or herself or his or her family.

In chapter four, a new aspect of human rights is brought to the forefront in what Stammers calls the "paradox of institutionalism" (p. 102). This paradox occurs when something that was once a social or grassroots movement becomes institutionalized. The notion of institutionalization generates a discourse about the universality of human rights and the particularity of human rights. This division has significant consequences on the expansion of human rights and how observers see that development. Claims of human rights may be seen as a challenge to a power structure in a polity. Stammers's most critical argument is that institutionalization, like human rights, is a social process, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

His point regarding the relationship shift created when groups and ideas that once challenged the role of power in society and later became part of the power structure itself is significant to disciplines outside of the study of human rights. Social movements and their activities regarding human rights historically challenged the status quo and the social structures that favored aristocracies. Once these movements joined or formed successful political parties, issues relating to human rights were incorporated into societal laws. As a consequence, there is a tendency for observers to forget the origins and importance of these movements. Paradoxically, actors in these movements within political parties—who once championed the tenets and values of human rights—sometimes when in power participate in promoting injustice.

In chapters five and six, Stammers does historical studies of a few countries in different regions of the world (for example, Haiti, France, and the United Kingdom) to test his hypothesis on the impact of social movements and the advancement of human rights. He provides contrasting analysis of other authors' works, in which he highlights points of agreement and disagreement. He contends that the moments before provisions of human rights become law in a polity are crucial for constructing issues of human rights as law; it is those instants that determine the nature of the law on human rights and the impact it may have on a polity. Moreover, he notes that while the law may cement identities of human rights, the law should not be considered historically permanent in any way (p. 189).

In chapter seven, Stammers introduces the theme of the “new globalization” and how it concerns human rights. He avers that practices of human rights and their developments are affected by the past and present aspects of globalization (p. 190). Considering that this is the age of multiculturalism and globalization, it is important and appreciated that Stammers gives consequence to the effect of globalization on human rights and vice versa. An aspect that he does not consider fully, however, is the varying cultural understandings of human rights (i.e., relativism in the parlance of human rights) and how globalization may make these cultural misinterpretations collide more often. He does not offer much of a suggestion on how to mediate between these cultural collisions; however, he at least introduces into the dialogue on human rights the probable effects of the “new globalization” on society.

In chapter eight, Stammers alludes to the status of human rights today and suggests ways in which their implementation can be more effective. He contends that for human rights vis-à-vis social movements to survive, they must return to the historical origins that challenged arbitrary power and privilege.

A minor critique of this book is that Stammers overrates the importance of the recognition of grassroots influences on human rights without sufficiently noting the extent to which individual and group interests can trump the provisions of human rights. The lack of a concluding chapter leaves an incomplete feeling, because adding a simple conclusion may have summed up his thesis and given the book a stronger finale.

This book is well organized, and it transitions smoothly from chapter to chapter. It is an important book, which will benefit especially students and scholars of human rights who are interested in the role that social movements have played, and may continue to play, in promoting human rights worldwide.