

Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2014), *Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Labour, Capital, and the State in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana*, New York: Routledge, ISBN 9780415744096, 252 pp.

Franklin Obeng-Odoom's *Oiling the Urban Economy* is essentially an account of Sekondi-Takoradi, a city that has recently entered the spotlight with the discovery of commercial oil in Ghana. The book makes a compelling case for interrogating the synergies linking the extraction and utilisation of resources with the trajectories of urbanisation, which are often treated as distinct processes by the mainstream literature. The author's status as an "outsider within" and his impressive record of publication mean he is well equipped to accomplish this task.

The central theme of the book is that Sekondi-Takoradi is undergoing significant oil-induced transformation with ramifications for land, labour, capital, and the state. The author eloquently underlines the lopsided nature of this transformation as largely neglecting "indigenes" and favouring members of certain other social categories: expatriates, landowners and landlords, men, chiefs, and "wealthy strangers" from other cities in Ghana. Though relying on a rather antiquated literature, the author employs an array of data sources drawn from in-depth interviews, documentary sources, and unobtrusive observation to support his arguments.

The book's analytical gaze, as outlined in Chapter 2, is premised on a "heterodox property rights approach," which is informed by Henry George's "common property for common purposes," David Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession," and various postulations of the "rentier state," as presented by Hossein Mahdavy and Chibuzo Nwoke. Apart from exploring the effects of oil, the author employs these "critical" perspectives to highlight intervening factors like the historical, institutional, and global context. Scholars who have been yearning for a book that approaches Ghana's oil industry from the standpoint of serious intellectual scrutiny will be pleased with Obeng-Odoom's attempt to historicise, contextualise, and problematise it within the purview of critical political economy. Nonetheless, this prospect is dimmed by the fact that he over-stretches these analytical instruments into less structural narratives and experiences, which constitute the bedrock of his original contribution.

The empirical insights begin from Chapter 3 with a general overview of Ghana's oil industry, highlighting the evolving institutional structures and how they remain enmeshed in contentious national politics. The chapter also engages with ongoing debates about whether Ghana's oil is susceptible to the so-called "resource curse," shorthand for poor developmental outcomes from resource endowment. The author urges us to

think beyond the binary of “resource curse” vs. “resource blessing,” but his conclusion is generic to the mainstream presentations that have dispelled fears about a “resource curse” in Ghana. Specifically, he argues that “there is no evidence of total neglect of human and social rights, oppression, and systematic and widespread corruption at this stage” (63). This position beggars belief not least in terms of his own assertion about the lopsided developmental processes in Sekondi-Takoradi, but, more seriously, when paired with other analyses that have noted critical areas of institutional fragility, policy exclusion, and a poor anti-corruption environment amid Ghana’s impressive democratic performance (e.g. an assessment by USAID-Ghana of democracy and governance in 2011).

Between Chapters 4 and 6, the book traces the centrality of Sekondi-Takoradi within various patterns of global and domestic economic exchange and politics, which stems from its ports, resources, and lively political environment. However, the author argues that over time the city was shunted to the margins as a result of elite manipulation and market-led reforms. Subsequently, the oil industry has rekindled interest in the city with increasing activities in sectors like services, employment, transportation, and real estate development. Here, Obeng-Odoom identifies various groups, specifically the landless class, “indigenes,” women, and others whose livelihoods are tied to aquaculture and agriculture, among the overwhelming majority of marginalised actors from the oil-induced transformation in Sekondi-Takoradi. His caution not to attribute every change in Sekondi-Takoradi to oil strengthens the linkages that he draws here. However, his use of “indigenes” and “non-indigenes” is generally arbitrary, especially given the book’s portrait of the dynamic and fluid demography of Sekondi-Takoradi.

The remainder of the book is devoted to a diagnosis of various policy options that could address different revenue shortfalls from the oil industry. It is at this stage that the author’s analytical gaze, especially in terms of property taxation, begins to unravel. This flow is, sadly, curtailed in Chapter 9, when he attempts to recommend ways to “socialise” oil revenues with an explicit preference for investment in education and railway transportation. Apart from the analysis on taxation and transportation, where there is a serious attempt to link theory with data, the presentation of these policy options are generally haphazard. In the case of education, for example, he touches on a contentious national debate over free secondary education, which dominated the 2012 elections. Unfortunately, his dismissal of criticisms about its feasibility requires a more rigorous verification, as he largely relies on analysis offered by the opposition New Patriotic Party (168–169).

Some of the gaps in Obeng-Odoom's heterodox approach deserve special mention. Notably, while stressing the strengths of Harvey, especially in emphasising how "processes of accumulation are dispossessing others in oil cities" (38), there are significant shortcomings. A case in point, outlined in the book, relates to commercial sex workers, who are continually exploring ways to cash in on the oil industry, amid various structural barriers. Many studies of urban informalities, including those compiled by Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega's *Globalization from Below*, suggest that Harvey's constraining barriers may be exaggerated. Another problematic area relates to Mahdavy and Nwoke's "rentier state." Perhaps, in his haste to dismiss the "resource curse" literature, whose diversity in terms of approaches and analyses makes any single account untenable, Obeng-Odoom is uncharacteristically incoherent about the aspects his preferred approach seeks to address. A deeper appreciation of this literature would have revealed that Ghana's oil output, which was recorded in 2011 at 1.2 per cent of GDP, is far from what Mahdavy and Nwoke anticipated. This is a grave oversight, given that the threshold by which established political economists, such as Terry Lynn Karl, associate oil with specific economic and political outcomes is usually set at 10 per cent of GDP and 40 per cent of total merchandise exports.

Ultimately, those interested in the intersection of natural resources, urbanisation, and development, especially in Ghana, will find *Oiling the Economy* captivating. My own impression is that Obeng-Odoom succeeds in amplifying marginalised voices in Sekondi-Takoradi, which have been eclipsed by Ghana's fast-growing oil industry. For all its merits, I remain less convinced about its theoretical contributions.

- Nelson Oppong