

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (2015), *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War*, London: Hurst, ISBN 9781849042840, 288 pp.

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira has written a book that is set to become the next definitive account of Angola's post-war political and economic landscape. Its publication is timely and most welcome, as despite its growing economic importance and increasing subregional and international influence, Angola remains sorely under-researched. Because of the gap in research during the years of war, and due to current difficulties of access (costs, visas, and everyday logistics), it is an exceedingly difficult place to conduct in-depth research; thus, it is a testament to the author's decade-long, sustained engagement with Angola that this book presents the reader with such a wealth of new information.

In many ways, *Magnificent and Beggar Land* does for Angola's post-war years what Tony Hodges's *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State*¹ did for the 1980s and 1990s (though in a style that is even more accessible and simply a pleasure to read): it charts the trajectory of Angola's ruling elite in parallel to the country's transition from war to peace. By analysing in great detail the various elements that make up the Angolan political economy, Soares de Oliveira demonstrates how President José Eduardo dos Santos (JES) and the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) have, over the 36 years of his rule, extended their tentacles into virtually every domain of social life, keeping a vice-like stranglehold on all institutions. As the author very cogently argues throughout the book, politics and economics – as well as party, state, and government – are inseparable in contemporary Angola. This is not the result of an accident of history but, rather, by design, as the regime evinces a highly adaptive strategy of maintaining and consolidating power through periods of dramatic and rapid change.

The richness of the material presented and the highly revealing quotes of his informants throughout the book paint a vivid picture of the machinations at the top level of economic and political power in Angola. There are mind-boggling accounts of overt corruption, blatant incompetence, and base manipulation, as well as a necessary, repeated emphasis on the tacit or open complicity of foreign investors and governments in establishing and maintaining the current clientelistic dispensation. And

1 Hodges, Tony (2004), *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

yet, although the book has been criticised in Angolan state media as a baseless, biased, “imperialist,” polemic pamphlet, it is in fact judiciously balanced and fair, rightly criticising the weaknesses and problems of the “Angolan miracle” but also giving government actors credit where it is due. It is easy for long-time Angola observers to become jaded, but the author’s great affection for Angola and its people shines through on every page.

Throughout the book, theory is applied with only a light touch, and yet the author makes some very important conceptual points. Most importantly, as he restates in the excellent conclusion, the Angolan experience, far from being an exception, is actually “a magnified version of a dynamic occurring across many resource-rich states around the continent” (206). This makes the book relevant to a broad audience interested in contemporary neo-authoritarian, resource-rich states.

It is difficult to formulate a critique of a book that is so wonderfully researched and elegantly written, but perhaps two points are worth mentioning. The first regards the author’s use of informants. As he rightly observes, in Angola there is still a widespread fear of speaking openly and critically about politics, and his informants are thus, with rare exceptions, anonymised. This is necessary and logical given the context. And yet, the stories and anecdotes the author has garnered from his informants will sound familiar to anyone acquainted with Angolan realities. Indeed, most Angolans have similar stories to share, and rumours and gossip abound in the streets of Luanda. As “everyone” has an uncle who is a commander in the army, or a sister-in-law in the administration, everyone “knows,” for example, that President dos Santos “is the boss of” the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht, or that Minister X has “eaten” a big commission on procurement project Z. I am in awe of the privileged access the author gained to people who are evidently extraordinarily well placed, and who were surprisingly candid in their encounters with him. I do not want to diminish this accomplishment, as it is definitely a boon to scholars and the public at large to finally have such information in writing. Nonetheless, because of the sparing information the reader is given about the people behind the stories, their revelations are ultimately somewhat unmoored, and thus end up strangely mirroring the everyday gossip that circulates in the streets, thereby reinforcing the mystique of the all-powerful JES.

The second point is linked to that same, very pervasive imagery of power. As Krohn-Hansen rightly points out in his research on experi-

ences of the dictatorship in the Dominican Republic,² there is a dominant Western discourse on autocratic rulers that is based on the idea that one man wields power, resulting in an obsession with personal rule. President dos Santos is nothing if not a shrewd political operator, but “even in the most repressive regimes, political power is far more dispersed and transactional than is most often assumed” and “even a form of dictatorial rule may have a (surprisingly) broad backing among the population, or parts of the population” (Krohn-Hansen: 8–9). That is certainly the case in Angola. As the book is by design an account of top-level, elite politics, “ordinary Angolans” only factor in fleetingly, while the role of foreign experts and the skilled workforce as the handmaidens of the system is repeatedly underscored. Thus, at moments, the author’s account betrays a certain fascination with the cleverness and ruthlessness of Angolan rulers that reinforces rather than deconstructs this imagery of power. It would have been interesting to read more about the more “transactional” elements that sustain the MPLA’s political project, even if the author very convincingly charts the challenges to the regime’s dominance in his conclusion.

Rather than a fundamental critique, the two points above should be taken as signalling possible avenues for further research. Overall, this is a truly magnificent book and certainly, at the current moment, the best introduction to, and overview of, a country still largely unknown to an English-speaking, Western public.

■ Jon Schubert

2 Krohn-Hansen, Christian (2008), *Political Authoritarianism in the Dominican Republic*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.