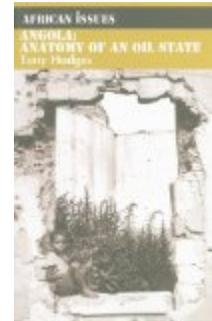


Tony Hodges. *Angola from Afro-Stalinism to Petro-Diamond Capitalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. xxii + 201 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-21466-9.

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Why Angola Fights: Interpretations of the War

'Why Angola Fights: Interpretations of the War'

Angola's "30-year war" has served as a laboratory for scholars seeking an explanation for such prolonged conflicts. Various theories have been in and out of fashion, depending upon the "conventional wisdom" prevailing at the time as well as the alignment of political forces in the outside world. Since Tony Hodges began writing on Angola during the independence war in 1975—initially collaborating with Colin Legum on *African Contemporary Record* publications—he has been a participant in these changing interpretations. Mostly, however, his emphasis has been on the political economy of Angola (writing for The Economist Intelligence Unit and UN development agencies in Angola), which now appears to be the dominant mode of enquiry. Even Angola's President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, not one given to reflection or speculation, has followed this trend, telling an international conference at the Agostinho Neto University last May that, while his ruling MPLA cadres were formerly reviled as "agents of communism and terrorism", more recently they have been criticized as "incompetent and corrupt gangsters."

To account for the longevity and the persistence of the Angolan conflict, Hodges has advanced (if not invented) the term "resource war" to suggest that "a large part of the answer lies in Angola's endowment of mineral resources". The "terrible, shocking paradox" he explains, is that "one of the best resourced endowments in Africa has been associated not with development and relative prosperity, but with years of conflict, economic decline

and human misery on a massive scale" (pp. 1, 167).

This view is shared by scholars such as Philippe Le Billon and Barry Munslow, with the latter applying it to contrast the far more successful example of Mozambique in terms of achieving both peace and development.[1] Others talk about "the loot-seeking motives for civil wars", claiming that "the highest risk is reached when primary exports represent 28 per cent of GDP", which Angola's oil easily does. And yet others employ a typology to give Angola many of the features of a "predatory" rather than a "developmental" state in which the rent from oil is used primarily to "finance the means for retaining power through expenditure on security and patronage" (p. 171). As Hodges sums up these views, "the conflict has become a raw struggle between rival elites for the control of the resources generated by oil and to a lesser extent diamonds (p. 172). And the fact that neither side can completely deprive the other of its source of material support—the oil is offshore and the diamond trade is secured by an international network of smugglers and profiteers—has prolonged that struggle indefinitely.

This view is, of course, a far cry from the anti-communist and Cold War rhetoric of the 1970s and 80s used by scholars (and also politicians) to account for the Angolan war and, in some cases, to justify US intervention in support of UNITA. But remnants of this interpretation still appear, most notably to attribute Angola's political as well as economic failures to its Soviet legacy. The very title of this book is a case in point, since it presupposes that Angola was a "Stalinist" state (at least an

African version of one) until it became a “petro-diamond capitalist” state during the 1990s. However, the chapter on “Governance: The Contradiction of a Stalled Transition” does not bear out such an interpretation, since the author shows that the political system inherited from Portuguese colonialism was “already highly centralized and authoritarian”, and that the creation of a “strong state” was undermined by “the lack of popular participation, a dearth of qualified personnel, the spread of the South African/US-backed UNITA insurgency and, from 1986, an unsustainable debt burden” (p. 43). This discrepancy between political ideology and practice has been the central theme in Angolan political development, as Inge Tvedten has also pointed out, in his study of Angola: “A political ideology that places a strong emphasis on the party and the state stands in contrast with a party without a real political base and a state apparatus with serious deficiencies”.^[2]

Another interpretation of the war, given some attention but not much credence by this author, is ethnic rivalry, positing the Ovimbundu-dominated UNITA of the central highlands and the Bakongo FNLA of the northeast against the Mbundu-dominated MPLA of Luanda and its hinterland regions. This is the approach of much of the writing on the Angolan conflict which is sympathetic to, or in outright support of, UNITA and its Ovimbundu people (e.g., Linda Heywood and Martin James, respectively). However, as Hodges points out, while ethnic cleavages may have been significant in accounting for the foundation of, and then the fighting among, the three rival parties (armed and abetted by their respective Cold War foreign sponsors), after the MPLA victory in 1976, the FNLA largely disappeared as a significant political force as its members were co-opted into the Angolan government and the informal economy. Also a factor diminishing the importance of ethnicity has been the rapid urbanization of the population (nearly half live in cities) caused by successive waves of wartime displacement, which has brought about a “greater interaction among peoples of different origins” and a “cultural fusion highlighted by the increasing use of Portuguese at the expense of African languages” (p. 21).

The “ambiguity” of the ethnic factor, as Hodges describes it, can also be seen in the large numbers of Ovimbundu who, ironically, were driven out of their “homelands” by UNITA rebel troops and obliged to seek protection and employment from the Angolan government, including enlistment in the national army (FAA), of which they constitute about one-half. Nevertheless, UNITA remains a fundamentally Ovimbundu party, albeit an ever

diminishing one, the hard core of which would continue to fight on, as the author predicts, “in the absence of effective systems for popular participation and equitable resource management” (p. 28).

Finally, there is the personal factor, or the “great man in history” interpretation of conflicts (such as Fred Bridgland’s hagiography *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* [3]) although to apply this term to Savimbi would have to be in the same sense as applying it to Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun. Hodges admits that his “resource war” thesis has to be qualified to take into account Savimbi’s “failure to convert from military to political leader” and his “psychological inability to accept short-time defeat” (as in the 1992 elections), even when tempered by the offer of a vice-presidency and “a share of the looting” in the form of legalized diamond mining (p. 72). For Savimbi, however, nothing short of the leadership of Angola was ever a real option, and he would continue the fight to achieve it even if it meant destroying the country and killing his own people.

In his conclusions, the author explains that Angola in the 1990s was incapable of meeting the enormous challenges of a “quadruple transition”—from war to peace, from humanitarian emergency to reconstruction, from one-party authoritarian rule to pluralistic democracy and from a command to a free market economy—because it lacked the necessary human and institutional resources to do so. Furthermore, since the four dimensions of the transition were intertwined, with progress in one depending on one or more of the others, the failure to achieve a sustainable peace has derailed attempts at economic and social reconstruction as well as the democratization of political institutions.

Although the author concedes that the resolution of the threat from UNITA would not in itself guarantee good governance or a more equitable distribution of the country’s wealth and resources, it would still open up new opportunities for progress. For a start, ending the war would remove “an alibi to justify mismanagement and a pretext to curb democratic freedoms”, especially for the media. It would also raise expectations of a better life and diminish the “psychological shackles of fatalism and fear” bred by decades of brutal armed conflict. And, finally, peace might even change the political landscape by encouraging “the emergence of a credible civilian opposition with an agenda for progressive change” (p. 173).

Notes

- [1]. Philippe Le Billon “Angola’s Political Economy of

War”, *African Affairs* 100, 398, 2001: pp. 55-80; and, Barry Munslow, “Angola: The Politics of Unsustainable Development”, *Third World Quarterly*, 20, 3, 1999: pp. 551-68. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997): p. 35.

[2]. *Angola: Struggle for Peace and Reconstruction*

[3]. Fred Bridgland, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1986.

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