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**Jon Schubert.** *Working the System: A Political Ethnography of the New Angola.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. xvii + 247 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5017-1370-5; \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-1369-9.

**Reviewed by** Vasco Martins (Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES), University of Coimbra)

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**Commissioned by** Philip J. Havik (Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical (IHMT))

*Working the System: A Political Ethnography of the New Angola* is Jon Schubert's first monograph, a work that is timely, compelling, and well written. The book is based on one year of fieldwork the author conducted in Luanda between 2010 and 2011. In it Schubert takes us through life in contemporary Luanda, first by positing the city's experience within the vaster history of Angola, then by addressing its quirks and peculiarities, exposing quotidian devices and arrangements to survive and perhaps thrive in the hard, demanding life that is Luanda's. To do so, the author presents an urban ethnography of the places and peoples in the city intermingled with the country's political environment and state power, to show how in the particular context of Angola, "spheres often thought of as separate—people and power—are caught up in and thus reproduce the same discursive framework" (p. 5). Yet, Schubert's book is not only about power narratives, how they are constituted, and how they are imposed upon the populace. It is also about lifting the layers of normative life, dogmatic speech, and action, to look for the agency of a people who have lived in the context of an authoritarian regime for many decades. In doing so, Schubert invites the reader to walk with him through the city's harsh work environment, where "one meeting per day must already be counted as a great success" (p. 55). As an academic working on Angola who has conducted research on politically sensitive topics, I am all too familiar with these challenges and frustrations.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter the reader is presented with a very brief review of the historiography of Angolan nationalism to discuss the "post-war master narrative as the discursive under-

pinning of the system" (p. 29). These are selective readings of the history of the Angolan conflict that allow the author to explore "why the MPLA's [Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, after the Portuguese Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola] relationship with its past is so tenuous, and why memory politics in Angola focus on the liberation struggle rather than on the post-independence Angolan conflict" (p. 31). This work on memory politics and materializations of memory is continued in the second chapter, where Schubert makes use of Luanda's *bairros*, its streets and places, as the scaffolding material that allows him to piece together people and crucial events in contemporary Angolan history. And in connecting all these seemingly distinct threads, the author dissects the events of May 27, 1977, and the post-electoral violence of 1992-93. But he also discusses the former open market Roque Santeiro and the inescapable Bairro Operário in Sambizanga municipality, a neighborhood well known for its rooted Angolan nationalism. This second chapter is innovative and carries great explanatory power; it is certainly one of the high points of the book and a must-read for anyone working on memory in Angola.

Chapter 3 shifts the momentum by looking at *angolanidade*, that is, Angolan national identity, through the vernacular uses and the official silences on race and class. It asks why identity discourse is not prevalent or even mobilizing in party politics when it is common in popular imagination. He notes that "using the language of racial identities is an inherently positional strategy to make sense of and talk about social inequalities outside politics" (p. 102). Situating class and ethnicity within

very porous narratives, Schubert accentuates the contradiction often invisible to many Angolans by underlining a common paradox. While class and ethnicity are situationally invoked to assert an Africanness that counteracts the MPLA's "hegemonic vision of multiracial *angolanidade*" (p. 82), this Africanness is also rejected to assert "a specifically urban identity, distinct from the uncultivated people of the bush (*matas*)" (p. 103). Such are the prejudices and dividing lines that may be found in Angola.

Chapter 4 focuses on the currency that allows the system to work: *cunhas*, an instrument for advancement or survival, dictated by both "familiarity and hierarchy" (pp. 112-13).[1] The author argues, "*cunhas* are not primarily about corruption," and sets to find in this practice a "political and moral ordering of the world" (p. 115). Noting that real or imaginary relations of kinship are constantly invoked when ordinary Angolans activate a *cunha*, the author also observes that "the MPLA very rarely invokes the symbolism of paternal narratives," which he links to "its ambivalence toward anything traditional and African" and its carefulness to "present itself as a modern, developmental regime, denying any allegations of unfair privilege" (p. 131). While the elite enjoy emphasizing their "humble upbringing," "attributing their business fortunes to skill, hard work, and dedication" (p. 131), unfair or privileged access to public resources is one of the more mainstream features of the contemporary Angolan system. Its harsh realities nurture informal ways—such as *cunhas*—for the great majority of Angolans to escape their continuous marginalization from these public resources.

Chapter 5 poses a question that, as Schubert recognizes, has long puzzled academics and observers of the Angolan political scene: "why there is not greater popular contestation of the regime in a context of such evident socio-economic inequality" (p. 138). In a chapter titled "A Culture of Immediatism," the author sets out to dissect the neoliberal craze in the country by "looking at the effects of Angola's turbo-capitalism on those who are, overall, excluded from its benefits" (p. 139). More specifically, Schubert inverts the question by asking why in such an unequal society people still appear to support the status quo. He shows how, grounded in imaginaries and aspirations that pertain to the domain of the aesthetic and the ostentatious, the "MPLA's image as the party of successful entrepreneurs and its effective command of economic means, induces people to support it" (p. 155). But "ordinary citizens are not helplessly caught up in the webs of false consciousness imposed by a domi-

nant system of thought" (p. 157)—at least not in Luanda—and the idea of "wealth and flashy cars" in addition to the "desires for the state, its services, and a normal life" cultivate "the consent of large parts of the citizenship" (p. 157). In this, Schubert holds a mirror up to Angolan society: while showing how the country is contaminated by the authoritarian tendency of the state and its immense disruptive capability, he also compels ordinary Angolans to look at their own responsibility for the country's poor state of affairs.

The sixth and last chapter contains a "somewhat Gramscian argument about the reproduction of hegemony, arguing that even explicitly oppositional political action has to tap into the repertoires of dominant ideology to be effective" (p. 159). Looking at antigovernment demonstrations organized in 2011, Schubert invokes a historical *habitus* pervasive in Angola to demonstrate that "the repertoires of Angolan political culture that were mobilized ... show how the dominated and the dominant jointly inhabit and recreate their life-worlds" (p. 177). Setting his analysis upon three vectors, "the reference to political killings, the insertion into a revolutionary history, and the dominant discourse of peace and stability" (p. 167), the author starts defining this historical *habitus* by invoking the memories of May 27, 1977,[2], which has become a "symbol of the broken promises of the liberation struggle" and a "signifier for equality, social justice, and people's power" (p. 169); the curious case of war name adoption by some of the protesters, which Schubert sees a reflection of "a revolutionary tradition" (p. 170) to fight "for the 'real independence' of the country against the dictatorship of ... the ossified leadership of a monopolistic party" (p. 169), a tradition that competes with the MPLA's assumed genetic legitimacy to govern the country and underpins the author's notion that the end of the civil war represents the "Year Zero" of independence; and finally the discourse on peace and stability, particularly the government's constant tacit suggestion that any type of protest or political activity risks a return to war, which is the perfect recipe to incite fear and "popular anxieties" (p. 171).

The last chapter is clear on how the MPLA party-state is a well-oiled machinery experienced in strategizing, co-opting and removing competition. I commend the author's depersonalization of the system by steering the "analysis away from the person of president dos Santos and his reshuffles" (p. 17), which was a very central and important cogwheel in the system, but a single "master cogwheel" nevertheless. Schubert summons the masses of Angolans, to whom we tend to apply the victim-with-

no-agency tag, to explain how they are part of the system, which is a working organism wherein “the seemingly powerful and the dominated jointly produce—and are caught up in—a common framework that defines the parameters of the political in contemporary Angola” (p. 12). This is patent in the story of Senhor Adriano, who “might not agree with the path the country is on, but if forced to do so would still protect ‘their’ government against ‘outsiders’ before turning against the MPLA” (p. 61). In this, I believe, lies the greatest strength and novelty of Schubert’s contribution: his summoning of ordinary people to show how they also “constantly negotiate and reproduce the system” (p. 15).

Nevertheless, I would have welcomed additional problematization of the notion that Luanda is indicative of more generic dynamics in a “New Angola.” The author asserts that empirically the “book is centred on Luanda because both in practice and in imagination this New Angola is constituted as essentially urban—upwardly mobile and inspirational—with rural areas left behind.... In the New Angola, Luanda epitomizes both a lived reality and a political project that stands for the entire country” (p. 5). Luanda certainly captures the imagination of Angolans. But extrapolations of lived realities in Luanda without a framework of comparison to other places and cities in the country risk silencing the diversity of economic, social, and political experience outside Luanda. One must ask how this New Angola is echoed in the abuse-ridden diamond regions of the Lunda provinces or in the much less developed eastern, southern, and northernmost regions. This issue of representation is recognized by the author, who adds a footnote noting that “a quarter of the entire population of the country lives in the capital” (p. 5n6). Yet, looking at Angola through Luanda’s lenses is always a political issue, one that served narratives of opposition during the civil war and pertained to different political projects of state and nation exposed by the two contending belligerent parties, the MPLA and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, after the Portuguese União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola). Although exposing the term “New Angola,” the book essentially investigates “the symbolic and material effects of power on social formations and relations in a specific social and historical context” (p. 5), which is Luanda and not the entirety of Angola. This in itself is an important point, as it summons the question of whether this truly is a “new Angola” or rather an old, familiar one traditionally focused on the shape-shifting city of Luanda.

I salute Schubert for the choice of case studies and

historical events, particularly for lifting the veil on many of the silences in the country’s history, such as the planting of human hearts at the FNLA’s (National Front for the Liberation of Angola, after the Portuguese Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola) headquarters in Luanda in 1975 to associate the “northerners” with cannibalism; the Pica Pau Massacre of 1975, in which MPLA militias assassinated several hundred UNITA militants; the grave and still reverberating events of May 27, 1977; and the Halloween Massacre and Bloody Friday after the 1992 elections. By doing so, Schubert repositions and revisits long-held scholarly dogmas often aligned with the MPLA’s narrative, by repacking them in a more visible, holistic form. This is shown in the references to denunciations of being UNITA’s people or a northerner, which were “often used to settle old scores” or “to appropriate someone’s possessions” (p. 63), or the author’s conclusion that “the 1992-93 killings in Luanda ... cannot simply be explained by Savimbi’s megalomaniac personality or UNITA’s ‘loss aversion’.... [a] reading of the conflict [that] prevailed throughout the last phases of the war” (p. 42). The mention of the “ethnic profiling of the victims” (p. 63) is also very much welcomed, although there remains much to be said not only about the Bakongo “northerners” but also the Ovimbundu “southerners,” epithets utilized to include or marginalize people and groups that remain relevant today. Nevertheless, Schubert closes the cycle by arguing that “distinguishing between the people and the non-people is a dehumanizing device that makes it possible that some should ‘die like ... dirty pig[s]’” (p. 63).

In my view, this is highly indicative of the recurring problems that the lack of official state-led reconciliation still pose after various decades of conflict between Angolans, particularly concerning a more generic reconciliation of two distinct notions of “Angola” that mobilized so many people. Senhor Adriano’s point that he would rather protect the MPLA against the outsiders before turning on it regardless of whether he agrees with the political choices the party has made ever since independence, only raises doubt that “the two nationalist projects were thus ultimately not that dissimilar” (p. 89). I would argue that these were mutually exclusive national projects that precluded the zero-sum, “winner-takes-all” game that unfolded until Savimbi’s death and the total elimination of UNITA’s national project from the political map. Schubert himself notes the existence of these two separate Angolas when he states that the “government’s military victory over UNITA in 2002 represented a victory of the coastal cities over the rural hin-

terland, of Portuguese over national languages, and of urban, creole cosmopolitanism over Africanness.... A victory of Luanda's citizens, who see themselves as having a different, superior culture than rural Angolans" (p. 103).

The idea of looking at *cunhas* as a form of setting a moral order of the world is innovative, fresh, and a good example of the author's capacity to read the Angolan system. His analysis is often reminiscent of John Lonsdale's theoretical take on those elements that disrupt the mechanisms that settle inequality in a society, which consequently animate a moral debate not only about collective governance and leadership, but also about individual valor.[3] In Angola's "culture of immediatism," gradual atomization and popular aspirations to replicate the elite's socioeconomic status, in true Gramscian fashion, have progressively degraded whatever "traditional" or modern mechanisms of combating inequality existed. This is why I believe at times Schubert comes across as attributing too much agency to ordinary Luandans in "re-making and renegotiating the system" (p. 115) in daily interactions. By looking at the *cunha* as an informal yet "institutionalized" work-around, the author risks downplaying how much it perverts the relationship between citizen and state. After all, isn't the system of *cunhas* a

way for people to attempt to possess or expand their own social and political agency because theirs is censored and oppressed by default? Even though some of these preoccupations are addressed in the last chapter of the book, a timely densification of the matter in chapter 5 would have further enriched the section.

Although the book is intended to be a political ethnography, it rapidly evolves into something more, becoming a vivid journey during which, anchored in the author's experience and mental map, the reader is masterfully taken through those "very real places" "where people live and die, and trade, shop, walk, love" (p. 54). Indeed, the novelty in Schubert's analysis of contemporary politics in Angola is that, through his enmeshed top-down/bottom-up approach, he masterfully connects people's memories, aspirations, and individual stories with the larger political history of the country. This allows Schubert to create a much busier and denser story—one more organized and easily read for those familiar with this specific environment, and more inviting for those who are not—but above all one that is humane and that dignifies the daily plight of Luandans, making it an absolute joy to read.

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