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REVIEW ESSAY:

THE NEW SOCIETY:

The Angolan Revolution

by

Edward Ferguson

In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's People by Basil Davidson (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1972, 367 pp., \$7.95) is a work skillfully woven to integrate the traditional past and the revolutionary present of the peoples of Angola. The analysis is much deeper than in his other works. The framework and conclusions should be useful to all peoples in the Third World, and to others who seek to understand how the Third World became underdeveloped.

Davidson has put much into this work: his deep knowledge of the African past developed over more than two decades of writing African history; Portuguese sources; oral histories collected in Angola; and the works of present-day scholars such as Vansina, Duffy, Birmingham, etc. It was not easy to present such an array of sources and to cover such a broad sweep of time. For the present he was able to rely on personal interviews with Angolans and on documents made available to him by MPLA. For the past it is a different story. Practically no archaeological work has been done there, and oral histories have not been systematically collected and assembled. There are more accounts coming from explorers in the 1800's and early 1900's than one would expect, but here one is faced with the task of sifting through the records of many unsympathetic observers. As Davidson says, "Several singularly unpleasant Portuguese will pass through these pages..."

As for his contribution from personal experience, it is well-known that Davidson is not merely an "arm-chair" guerrilla theoretician. Enhancing his understanding of guerrilla warfare is his past with partisan guerrilla forces behind German lines in Yugoslavia. This experience was subsequently enriched by visits to zones under guerrilla control in Guinea-Bissau in 1967 and Mozambique in 1968.

But Davidson adds more than knowledge and experience. It is his spirit of camaraderie with African revolutionaries than gives him keen insight into the meaning of their struggle. It is the combination of all of these factors which makes this book interesting, but it is also this fraternal support of the Angolan revolutionary movement which gives the book credence. This "spirit" enabled him to travel some three hundred miles on foot through the liberated zones of eastern Angola during the summer of 1970.

In the introduction Davidson gives us his impressions of the country and people of eastern Angola. Then he divides the following historical segment into three sections: the formative, colonial, and present periods. In the final part, Davidson delineates how Angola became underdeveloped over the past 400 years and what development in the future might mean. In this last section he also includes a discussion of the aims and objectives of the revolutionary movement.

Those people familiar with Davidson's earlier works on African history will find familiar themes traced in Angola's past: the slow transition over fifteen hundred years ago from a hunting and gathering economy to one based on the domestication of plants and animals and metal working; the rise of new social formations, "proto kingdoms" or "proto chiefdoms," around 500 A.D.; the development of centralized state systems; and, of course, the slave trade, which linked the hands of African nobles and European "marauders from the sea" in an ignoble process. With the arrival of the "marauders" in the Kongo in the late 15th century, we might expect the familiar interpretations found in Davidson's *Black Mother*. Instead, Davidson introduces us to a new framework which gives us a much better insight into the nature of Portuguese motives in colonizing Africa during the last four hundred years.

For those readers who know there has been four hundred years of Portuguese presence in Angola, it may be enlightening to hear that the hinterland of Angola was not subdued and enclosed within the "extractive colony" until the 1920's. The process, however, is a familiar one. There are the two stages of military invasion to 1900 followed by "pacification" through the 1920's. And it was in this two stage invasion that we find the roots of another present day phenomenon in Angola--the use of black mercenaries or conscripts to buttress the power of

the white troops. Why or how did the blacks join in suppressing their fellow blacks? Most likely they were under duress, but Davidson does suggest a number of other possible reasons.

Once the interior was conquered and the boundaries of the present state were made coterminous with the system of extraction, Salazar came to power (late 1920's). He devoted his attention to "enlarging and modernizing the institutions of extraction." The colonial economy by this time was clearly a "projection of the metropolitan economy." In this latter respect the situation does not seem to differ greatly from the relation between other colonial powers and their colonies.

Davidson does, however, alert us to a fundamental difference in the colonial policies between the British and the Portuguese. The difference lies in their attitudes towards reform leading to independence. The British offered the option of reform to Africans and out of this grew "the idea of decolonization, of African political independence." On the other hand, Portugal never entertained the idea of reform; the only option left for the African people was revolution.

At this point, one wishes that Davidson would have taken his analysis a bit further and discussed why the British entertained the idea of reform and the Portuguese did not. I would like to put forth the analysis of the "reformist option" made by Bob Fitch in *Ghana: End of an Illusion* (Monthly Review Press):

The colonial governments yield administrative powers to the "natives" only when vital British interests are reasonably secure. These natives must show themselves willing and able to serve as post-colonial sergeants of the guard over British property: rubber in Malaya, land in Kenya, oil in Aden, bauxite in British Guiana. When no cooperative stratum has yet emerged, "independence" is delayed....The problem for the British in colonial Africa has been to shape a native ruling class strong enough to protect British interests, but still weak enough to be dominated.

If this analysis is correct, can we suggest that Portugal never entertained this reformist option simply because, using A. G. Frank, Portugal was a semi-colony of other European powers, and as a result, did not have the flexibility that ultimate control over the wealth of Angola would bring? In this sense, Portugal would be that "native" ruling class shaped by developed European powers to look after their financial interests in Angola? The extension of global capitalism makes for a "hierarchy" or "pecking order" of exploited countries (see A. G. Frank).

Whatever the case may be, the Portuguese did not entertain the reformist option, but some Africans in Angola did. They were never a majority but they were a literate and vocal minority who could be heard as early as the 1870's and 1880's. They were like their counterparts in other regions of colonial Africa seeking "to transfer to their own country the elitist assumptions of European nationalism." And it is at this point that Davidson, in his typology of resistance, gives us an insight into the thought and aspirations of these early Angolan nationalists - often intellectuals - who were resisting within the system created by Portugal. We are also exposed to those Angolans - usually peasants - who in their numerous revolts and rebellions resisted the system from the outside. This typology of African initiative and response is a welcome contribution to the ever-broadening continuum of modes of African response and reaction to European rule.

There are times in the historical process when repeated quantitative actions build up and give way to a qualitative change. To Davidson resistance movements, like other movements, involve mistakes and dead-ends before the movement builds up and gives way to a qualitative change in the nature of the resistance.

Such changes take place in Angola shortly after World War II. A handful of African intellectuals from the Portuguese African colonies - Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Mario Andrade, and Francisco Tenreiro - to name a few - conclude that there must be a new form of response to the Portuguese aggression. Previous forms were outmoded: no longer should one hold out for a restoration of the past and reform within the existing system. A new society had to be built, and this could only be done through a revolutionary struggle. If this sounds optimistic, Davidson notes that "pessimism is rich man's property," and these

were not rich men. Intellectuals yes, but also the "wretched of the earth." The question for these men was no longer whether or not, but how to carry out a revolution.

These ideas put into practice mark the beginning of the revolutionary process - "new decades," different in quality from the past. Davidson points out the weaknesses as well as the strengths as this movement unfolds over the next few decades.

The initial problem for the young revolutionaries was where to begin to build their base. They realized they were isolated from the people. They needed to bridge the gap between themselves and the common people. If there were to be a revolution, the people would be its moving force, but first contact had to be established with them. Hence, we find the nascent leadership going back to the people and "re-Africanizing" itself. The base will be built among the *petit* bourgeoisie - "African clerks, mechanics, male nurses, elementary schoolmasters, and small traders - the place to start is the *senzalas*, of the sand slums of Luanda."

There was no party in this early stage. The question of whether there should be a highly disciplined vanguard party never seems to have been totally resolved. MPLA was formed in 1956, and its programs and actions suggested a broad movement, a "united front," rather than a tightly knit party. One of the MPLA leaders, Spartacus Monimambu, said in 1968:

Today we are just a mass movement...popular movement, and not yet a real party... Tomorrow there will be a party with its philosophy, its determined ideology, and its structure.

This approach to the vanguard role of the party is different from that of the Bolsheviks or the Chinese. It is not that advocated by Lenin, so where does it fit in? Are they failing to pay attention to the experience of revolutionaries elsewhere? It seems that they are aware of these earlier experiences and ideas and they have found much of value in the works of Marx. However, as Davidson says, Angola is a different situation:

They were aware that the ideas of Marxism ...also needed "Africanizing"...if they

were to serve a useful purpose....If there was to be a revolution it would have to be rooted in African realities; it could never be imported from the outside.

The new movement got underway in Angola in the early 1960's, but not without costly mistakes. Angolan revolutionaries were practically eliminated in early 1961 when in Luanda, they followed the line that "all you need to do is begin and the rest will follow." The mistaken line of "spontaneity" was met with savage Portuguese repression. In the future, practice rather than unfounded assumptions had to be the guiding line.

One of the most enlightening sections of the book is entitled "Congo Diversions." It is devoted to the role of Holden Roberto and the UPNA/UPA/GRAE. In this chapter, Roberto emerges as a despicable opportunist backed by U.S. advisors and the Congo(K) government. Roberto's actions expose him as a fake revolutionary bent on promoting himself and destroying MPLA rather than on destroying the Portuguese system of oppression. But, today Roberto is a successful Kinshasa businessman, not a "revolutionary."

The reformist UPA, which Roberto leads, is many years behind in its conception of resistance and the needs of the people. It promotes a very narrow and exclusive nationalism, seemingly seeking restoration of the old kingdom of the Kongo, and quite willing to compromise with the Portuguese. Where do they fit into the broader picture of the development of revolutionary movements? Davidson assures us that this type of splinter group is always found as a result of the "hiving-off" process that takes place as the movement rolls forward. But laggards and people with small minds are inevitably left behind. The problem is, however, that UPA is also obstructionist. With the support of the Congo(K) government and army, they have done a good deal to prevent the MPLA from building a strong rural base in the north of Angola. UPA has not build one there, but still they want to keep the MPLA from making headway.

The obstructionist policies and actions of the UPA and the Congo(K) government were unable to stop MPLA. However, they seem to have forced MPLA to reconsider the region in which they would build their rural base. The

vast eastern area, furthest from the urban centers of Portuguese strength, and closest to sympathetic Tanzania and Zambia, was chosen as the region in which to build the new society.

This front has been open for some seven years and that is where the action is. Davidson gives us a vivid and sympathetic description of the activities of MPLA in this region. They are indeed building a society in which all people participate, but against tremendous mental and physical obstacles. An eight week march for supplies is enough to discourage many persons, but the people of eastern Angola are "in the eye of the storm," committed to the idea of revolutionary change. It is indeed heart-warming to read in this book the many excellent interviews with individuals in the guerrilla units and in the new units of local government (*kimbos*), for they are the doers, the ones who are making history.

Davidson stresses the dual nature of the struggle: on the one hand, the physical and mental obstacles, and on the other, the aggression of the Portuguese. There is much documentation in this book on the supplies given the Portuguese by NATO and then used against the Angolans. It is also clear that the Portuguese rely heavily on tactics used by the U.S. government against the people of Vietnam: napalm, herbicides, and strategic hamlets. But, like the Vietnamese fighters, the Angolans are not intimidated by these acts of bestiality. They know that oppressors of that kind will not disappear by themselves. War must be waged against them, and the peoples waging wars of national liberation are indeed in the forefront of what is looming as a world-wide struggle against a common enemy.

What or who is this common enemy? The author does not state it explicitly. However, the thoughtful reader of this book should know in the end. How? By an understanding of the framework, one presented to show us how the processes of development and underdevelopment take place. The phenomena of development and underdevelopment are the end result of almost five centuries of a special connection between the colonies of the past and the neo-colonies of the present and the West. Development and underdevelopment are not chance phenomena. A country becomes developed or a country becomes underdeveloped. Better yet, countries that became developed were able to do so only by underdeveloping other countries.

The special connection is a system of extraction, an integral part of capitalism. All capitalist nations constructed this type of system to draw the wealth from the colony to the metropolitan power. As the colony loses its wealth, whether human (slavery) or material, it declines through uninterrupted stages. It becomes underdeveloped.

Davidson skillfully applies this framework to Angola. He also exposes us to the work done along these lines by Egyptian economist, Samir Amin, by historian Walter Rodney, and by A. G. Frank, the person who coined the term "development of underdevelopment" and whose many works on Latin America show us the potential for creative analyses of the links between the developed capitalist world and the world it has underdeveloped.

These are a few of the main themes of Davidson's work on Angola. But there is one more point that the reader must think over. Just what is revolutionary change and what is a revolutionary? As I understand this book, it is saying that a new society can only be built on a new economy. The new economy, in turn, can only be undertaken if a nation breaks out of the world-wide capitalist system. African nations which followed the smooth road of reform to "independence" in the 1960's are still linked to that system. They experience "growth without development," a growth of the extractive system which milks them of their wealth with no possibility of development along self-sustaining lines.

How does a country "make the break" and start anew? How does one build a new nation? Amilcar Cabral puts it this way:

We do not like war. But this armed struggle has its advantages. Through it we are building a nation that is solid, conscious of itself.

For the people of the "Portuguese colonies" armed struggle can be considered the path of "creative change." Here I quote from Davidson's interview of Agostinho Neto:

"What is above all necessary," Neto has said, "is that the mentality of colonized people be

built anew, so that they think freely and feel themselves free...." It is precisely this that a revolutionary experience of participation can achieve. Therein lies the sovereign value of liberation war, which, by its very nature, is revolutionary war distinct from traditional revolt, outraged upheaval, or violent adventure.

Revolutionary wars are waged by revolutionary peoples. One has to ask further - what is a revolutionary person? Davidson's interviews with some of the professional revolutionaries lead us to conclude that at last their lives are meaningful. A young guerrilla commander of twenty-eight years says to us:

I am doing what I have to do, and I can tell you that I have realized myself in a way that I can never regret. I have thrown away my career, my personal career, and I am glad. I am working for my people. I am where I belong.

Yet for this man, commitment to revolution involved the supreme sacrifice, for two months after the interview the man was dead: "He must have hated dying, but not the road that led to his death." There are many such people who will not stop until, from the liberated life of the fighters, the new society has been built in Angola.

* * *

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