development of the legal and political spheres of the country, they are outshone by the five subsequent 'investigative' chapters, which offer outstanding detail on the myriad (and often horrifying) abuses faced by Eritrean citizens at the hands of their government. Particularly moving are chapters six (on the harrowing 'archipelago' of secret detention camps around the country); chapter seven (on the groups most vulnerable to detention and forced disappearance by government forces); and chapter ten (which most convincingly makes the case for the 'African garrison state' thesis).

Only very minor critiques are warranted. The work – somewhat by necessity – sometimes feels repetitive in the information it presents. While the authors explain the reasons for this choice (p. 21) one still feels as though one is reading rephrasing of the same expository facets in multiple chapters. Indeed, the employment of such a tactic – which usefully allows every chapter to stand on its own – has the unfortunate effect of making the book's essential 'garrison state' thesis sometimes feel an ancillary rather than central claim of the book. While certainly not a drawback per se, *The African Garrison State* sometimes thus reads as being as much a primer on Eritrea writ large as it is a work of social scientific argumentation.

Nevertheless, one is left impressed with the extent of information and analysis that the authors have cultivated in this notable work, particularly given the difficulties of conducting research of any kind in the country. The book's illumination of the deplorable state of affairs in Eritrea will hopefully serve as the basis for much-needed scholarship on the country well into the future.

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Understanding Namibia: The Trials of Independence by HENNING MELBER
London: Hurst & Company, 2014. Pp. 300. £40 (hbk)
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In this 'monograph' on Namibia since independence, Henning Melber offers a 'stocktaking exercise' of the post-independence period (pp. xv, 1). The book builds on two of Melber's previous edited volumes, *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia: Political Culture since Independence* (2003) and *Transitions since Independence: Which Changes for Whom?* (2007), picking up, he suggests, where Marion Wallace's (2011) book with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia, From the Beginning to 1990*, left off – with a 'focus on the shift from the meaning and content of emancipation and solidarity during the anti-colonial struggle days to a critical reflection on the limits to liberation once a liberation movement assumes government' (p. xiv). Melber notes that Wallace described Namibia as 'one of Africa's least understood and studied countries', but that her book contradicted that in presenting an immense and diverse literature on the country, pre-independence (p. xiv). Melber does likewise. While he does not confine himself to the post-independence period, he seems to have cited every piece of research and scholarship on Namibia, from inside and outside the country including local media, covering the last 25 years. That

alone is an enormous contribution to our understanding of an independent Namibia.

That said, it is not immediately clear how much this volume adds to our understanding of an independent Namibia. What is very clear is the author's great disappointment in Namibia's first 25 years of independence. On the one hand, Melber's disappointment is understandable given his own participation in Namibia's liberation struggle from his teenage years as a German immigrant to the territory in the mid-1960s, a ban after leaving in the mid-1970s and a return in 1989 with an enthusiastic commitment to building a new Namibia – and what we have seen so far of the post-independence trajectory. On the other hand, the likely post-independence trajectory was evident very early on. Many of us who were there conducting research right after independence, while Melber was directing the Namibia Economic Policy Research Unit, could recognise that right away. Outside scholars like myself, Lauren Dobell, Colin Leys and John Saul, in our respective books, *Labor and Democracy in Namibia, 1971–1996*, *SWAPO's Struggle for Namibia, 1960–1991: War by Other Means*, and *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two Edged Sword*, all published in the 1990s, confronted the quick abandonment of the socialist orientation of the liberation struggle years (had it not been a nationalist struggle all along?) in favour of 'national reconciliation', the suspicion that a democratic outcome might elude a movement that had engaged in armed struggle for 25 years and arrived at independence through a negotiated 'elite pact', the knowledge that the movement in power had once been a revolution that was 'consuming its own children'.

Perhaps the extent of the disappointment was not so evident during the 1990s, however, and for that Melber's subsequent stocktaking is important. And yet in that regard, one might ask if Namibia, with its two million people, was in any better position than countries across the continent to overcome some of the challenges of independence – such as consuming what it does not produce and producing what it does not consume (p. 136). Or even some of the enduring challenges of the recent democratic political transitions; while some African countries have managed to create multiparty political systems in which there is real electoral competition, in many others, in particular those in which dominant parties are 'associated with important historical legacies', a dominant party political system is as yet impossible to overcome – as scholars such as Doorenspleet and Nijzink, in their 2013 book, *One-Party Dominance in African Democracies*, remind us – and indeed as cited by Melber (p. 83).

Still there is no question that the trends are worrying and disappointing and Melber has been one of those to constantly call attention to the danger of the heroic narratives, the existence of only a 'minimalist democracy' and even that democracy under siege, the terror of structural violence, failed land and industrial policies, the rise of 'fat cats' and increasing economic inequality, squandered international opportunities and a growing gerontocracy – all despite the fact that there have been some very real changes to people's lives as some of the quotes from 'born free' commentators during the 2009 election revealed: tarred roads, new schools, piped water, an ability to interact with others without the trauma of the past (p. 52). The 2014 elections held just after the book was published strikingly reaffirm some of Melber's concerns

and yet also demonstrate some of the nuance: 72% of the population voted in Africa's first election using electronic voting, with SWAPO candidate Hage Geingob remarkably winning 87% of the vote for president and the SWAPO party remarkably winning 80% of the vote – more than ever before – for parliament. And this election was for an expanded parliament – 96 directly elected seats and eight appointed in comparison to the previous 72 directly elected seats and six appointed. The expansion of the National Assembly was SWAPO's response to a recent party congress decision mandating 50% women on party lists; so as to be sure this did not deprive too many men of seats, the party increased the size of the National Assembly! A gendered perspective more generally is missing from this book and this tale would have been another to add to Melber's concerns. Hopefully Namibian scholars and researchers will continue to closely scrutinise Namibia's first decades of independence. In the meantime, as Wallace observed and Melber quotes (p. 1): Namibia's story may remain: 'as it always has been, a story of power, inclusion and exclusion'.

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