Henning Melber’s newest Namibia book Namibia – Gesellschaftspolitische Erkundungen seit der Unabhängigkeit was published in early 2015, just a few months after the same author published his Understanding Namibia – The Trials of Independence with C. Hurst and Co. Publishers in London. Since both books deal with Namibia’s development since independence, one might suspect that the contents of both books would be largely identical or that one is merely a German translation of the other. This is definitely not the case. Namibia – Gesellschaftspolitische Erkundungen seit der Unabhängigkeit is an original work and complements rather than duplicates Understanding Namibia. Although there is inevitably some overlap between the two publications, the foci of the books are different, as are the respective target audiences. Namibia – Gesellschaftspolitische Erkundungen seit der Unabhängigkeit is aimed at German-speaking readers interested in Namibia and at the German-speaking population within Namibia. Understanding Namibia, on the other hand, addresses a more international readership.

As a consequence, this ‘German’ book contains chapters that are of particular interest to this German target audience. The first chapter “Im Schatten des Völkermords: Deutsch-Namibische Beziehungen” (In the shadow of genocide; Namibian-German relations) analyses the development and present status of the complicated ‘special relationship’ between Germany and Namibia, which is a result of Namibia’s history as former German colony and Germany’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with the burden of the Herero War. Another of these ‘German’ chapters summarises the history of the Reiterdenkmal which is an important historical symbol of identification for Namibia’s German-speaking community. The chapter analyses (in Melber’s usual critical style) the history of the monument from its erection in 1912 to its sudden removal and transfer into the courtyard of the Alte Feste in a cloak-and-dagger operation on the evening of 25 December 2013. Another chapter of particular interest for the German community is a virtual city walk across Windhoek. Even Windhoekers who think they know their city inside out will discover a wealth of interesting historical background information on the city and its main landmarks in this chapter.

The remaining sections of the book are of general interest for all readers. Particularly interesting is the chapter “Allmächtige und ohnmächtige Präsidenten” (Omnipotent and helpless presidents) in which Melber analyses the constitutional role of the president and how differently the two previous presidents Sam Nujoma (1990–2005) and Hifikepunye Pohamba (2005–2015) interpreted their mandates as head of state. At the end of the chapter the author outlines how the new president Hage Geingob might use the quite substantial power of his position. According to Melber, Geingob is much more of a ‘doer’ than his direct predecessor and thus likely to use his
position more forcefully and authoritatively than Pohamba. The first year of Geingob’s presidency (which began in March 2015) has since confirmed Melber’s assessment in this respect. As Melber predicted, Geingob interprets his role as that of a ‘CEO’ of Namibia who directly takes charge of and responsibility for whatever action is required, quite in contrast to Pohamba, who saw his role more as being a consensus-securing moderator of the political discourse.

Other chapters of this book deal with the transformation (or rather the lack of transformation) of SWAPO from a liberation movement into a political party, the role and interpretation of democracy in a post-colonial society dominated by one party, the economic development, the role of ‘land’ and land reform for the social stability in Namibia and the development and role of the tourism sector. The final chapter “Quo vadis Namibia” offers a view of how the country might develop in the next few years.

Not all chapters of the book were compiled from scratch. For some parts of the book – especially the ‘German’ chapters – the author made use of earlier publications in a reworked and updated form. The book is thus not a typical textbook where each chapter builds on the previous. It is more like a collection of essays with each chapter focussing on a particular stand-alone topic.

Nationally as well as internationally, Henning Melber is well-known as a highly competent but at the same time decidedly critical Namibia expert, who comments regularly on issues and developments in Namibia, not only in academic publications, but also in newspaper articles, radio interviews and public presentations. Though Melber has been a member of the ruling SWAPO party since the mid-1970s, he does not shy away from open and direct criticism of the situation in Namibia and its past development.

With his new book the author also lives up to this reputation as advocatus diaboli, who puts the (undeniable) achievements of the country since independence into perspective, by pointing out undesirable, negative developments and missed opportunities. His yardstick for the country’s performance is quite rigorous, looking less at what has been achieved, but rather at how much more the country could have achieved.

Melber’s critical and outspoken judgements on Namibia and its development do not make him popular with his former ‘comrades’ in the ruling part. But his critical statements are not confined to SWAPO and the SWAPO-government. Melber does not shy away from criticising German public figures (incl. previous ambassadors), sections of the print media (as well as their readers), and elements of the Namibian population of German origin in the same outspoken manner. However, as harsh as his criticism may sometimes be, it is always well-founded and well-researched. (In that respect, the extensive use of approximately 330 (!) sources speaks for itself!)

Like his Understanding Namibia, this too is a passionate book. Melber was an active supporter of the liberation strug-
gle in the 1970s and 1980s and paid for this support with 14 years of forced exile. After independence, the author returned to Namibia with high expectations, but over the years the widening gap between his hopes and the reality on the ground turned Melber into one of the most pronounced critics of developments in Namibia. For an author with this vita it is difficult to maintain a critical distance and the author does not hide his own opinion. This may not be in line with strict scientific research, but the author’s ‘insider perspective’ makes the book a fascinating read.

In conclusion: The book is written by undoubtedly the most knowledgeable expert on Namibia and its development. It is an extremely well researched and lucidly written work, with an entertaining style which makes for easy and enjoyable reading. It is quite likely that not every reader will fully agree with all of Melber’s opinions and conclusions, but his new book is definitely a must and an invaluable source of facts for all those, who want or need to understand the ‘Land of the Brave’ and its development since independence.

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