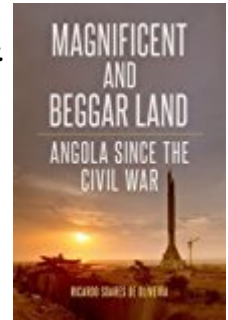


**Ricardo Soares de Oliveira.** *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola since the Civil War.* London: Hurst Publishers, 2015. 320 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-025139-0.



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*Magnificent and Beggar Land* is the first comprehensive study of Angola since the end of the country's twenty-seven-year-long civil war in April 2002. The book mainly focuses on the first decade following the Luena Peace Agreement (2002-12). This is the period during which Angola regularly hit international headlines for being one of the world's fastest growing economies, with an average GDP growth rate of 15.5 percent between 2002 and 2008; for the exorbitant costs of living in Luanda, making it purportedly the world's most expensive city for expats; for being home to Africa's first female billionaire (Isabel dos Santos, first daughter of President José Eduardo dos Santos); or for—briefly—overtaking Nigeria as sub-Saharan Africa's biggest oil producer with just over two million barrels per day. Following up on his previous work, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira provides an in-depth analysis of the political economy of postwar Angola, explaining in a lucid and remarkably clear language the dynamics of the postwar transition, the country's phe-

nomenal economic boom, and the regime's "authoritarian reconversion."<sup>[1]</sup>

After close to four decades of war, the "outbreak of peace" in Angola was a tremendous relief for all, especially since the last phase of the war (1999-2002) had hit civilians particularly hard, leaving thousands of casualties and tens of thousands of severely malnourished people.<sup>[2]</sup> The end of the civil war brought about fundamental changes for Angolan society, as goods and people were free to move around the country thanks to the reconstruction of destroyed infrastructures and the de-mining of the main transport routes. Peace, especially because it was achieved through the military defeat of the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the death of its historic leader Jonas Savimbi rather than by means of a negotiated settlement, was also a sea change for the government. For the first time since independence, the country was under a single power, and the regime was faced with the challenge of governing the whole territory, instead of protecting the oil fields and controlling

what Soares de Oliveira aptly calls an “archipelago of cities” (p. 23), their surroundings and the main corridors linking them. In the mid-1990s, at the height of its military power, UNITA controlled up to 80 percent of Angola, including the country’s main diamond mines, but none of the main cities, except Huambo, albeit only for a few months. As the author shows, however, the most important aspect of the postwar transition lies precisely not in these changes but in the continuities in the power structure and the reproduction of the regime’s hegemony.

At the core of the book is a reflection on the nature of power and its institutionalization by the regime put in place by José Eduardo dos Santos, who took over from the country’s first president, Agostinho Neto, in 1979 and has been in power ever since. Soares de Oliveira shows in great detail how the regime was built around two main elements: the state’s “official” institutions on the one hand, and what he calls the “parallel state,” on the other. The main argument of the book is that the regime’s strength and its longevity rest on the sedimentation as well as on the expansion of the “parallel state,” which was built on three pillars. The first is Sonangol, the national oil company created in the 1970s by the then Marxist-Leninist Movimento popular de libertação de Angola (MPLA)—but, in a twist of irony typical of Angola’s rather “pragmatic” take on socialism, with support from the US consulting firm Arthur D. Little and with none other than Marc Rich as exclusive oil trader between 1976 and the early 1980s. Sonangol has been the regime’s financial lung, especially since the end of the war. It has played a key role as the country’s main source of foreign currency since independence and the book shows remarkably well how President José Eduardo dos Santos used it in order to ascertain his own power and that of his immediate entourage both during and after the war. The Futungistas, the network of people nicknamed after the presidential palace during the 1980s and 1990s (called Futungo de Belas), constitute the second pillar of the regime.

They are its political, security, and economic backbone. In particular, the *Casa civil* and the *Casa militar*, two super ministries directly under the control of the presidency, have been central in implementing the regime’s policies and, for the latter, in the reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure since 2002 through the National Reconstruction Cabinet. The third pillar is the MPLA, the party in power since independence in 1975. The party is at the same time the repository of the regime’s historical legitimacy, its preferred transmission belt, and a powerful instrument of social and political control.

The three pillars of the regime, the author argues, are all the more solid as they are based on the MPLA’s “visceral belief in its own legitimacy to guide Angola in the modern world.” And, he adds, this belief is all the more powerful as it is more than just a smokescreen behind which a handful of families would hide in order to rule over the entire nation. In this sense, the Creole/*assimilado* elite model should thus be seen as “a compelling social logic whereby Angolan upward mobility is historically equated with hoisting oneself to the level of these elites, behaving in accordance with their standards—and seeing the country through their eyes and from their perch in Angolan society” (p. 19). It is this “compelling social logic” and its translation into power balances and institutional arrangements that the book analyzes.

Throughout the war years, the Angolan oil sector has remained an island of efficiency, as shown in chapter 1. Oil was not only the country’s lifeline in the immediate post-independence period but also the backbone of the state apparatus. Angola’s dependency on the oil sector explains, together with the civil war, the high degree of centralization of power. Control over the army and the security forces went hand in hand with control over the country’s main natural resource and foreign currency earner.

Chapter 2 turns to the tremendous and in many ways remarkable reconstruction effort that

took place immediately after the war. When OCDE (Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development) countries refused to set up a donor roundtable in order to finance the rebuilding of the country's infrastructures, Angola turned to China, which has been one of its main economic partners ever since. Indeed, "by 2009, public and private Chinese loans to Angola amounted to at least US\$13.4 billion (according to some estimates, US\$19.7 billion), and bilateral trade had grown thirty-five times in the eight years up to 2008" (p. 55). But, moving beyond mainstream literature on China-Africa relations, Soares de Oliveira shows that these massive investments, far from amounting to a cut-price sale of the country's assets to Beijing, were instrumental for the regime in two ways: in financing the reconstructing effort and supporting the impressive boom in construction, especially in Luanda; and in reshuffling the cards of Angola's foreign partners, putting pressure on its former allies in the oil sector, an archetypical example of strategies of "extraversion."<sup>[3]</sup> Most important, the chapter shows how the reconstruction effort was embedded in the regime's "high-modernist" vision of development. That is, a centrally controlled modernization drive translated into "large-scale, signature project[s]" that transformed Luanda and some other cities but had little to offer in terms of responding to the needs of Angola's rural populations (p. 62).

One of the striking features of the period covered by the book is that it marked the return of a kind of "one party-state" system in Angola. Not exactly, of course, in the same way as the (officially) Marxist-Leninist MPLA-PT (MPLA-Partido dos Trabalhadores—Workers' Party) ruled over Angola between 1975 and 1992, but because the ruling party's hegemony has been more complete—the 2002 military victory meant that for the first time the MPLA was to rule over the whole country—and unrivalled (UNITA's defeat was as much political as it was military) since 2002 than it ever was before. This important process is analyzed in chapter 3. Soares de Oliveira first shows how the

MPLA has developed as a family-like organization that provides security to its members while at the same time setting the "cost of dissent" (p. 99, following Jason Brownlee's analysis of authoritarian states) at a very high price. This is crucial in explaining the ability of the party to manage internal dissent and extend its control over society: while criticism within the MPLA is tolerated—and to a certain degree welcome if it can make the regime's democratic varnish glossier—all the members of the family know that crossing the red line of dissent can be a matter of life and death. The 1977 Stalinist purges that followed the attempted coup by Nito Alves are a case in point.<sup>[4]</sup> Or, concomitantly, as has been the rule since the late 1970s, it can lead to exclusion from clientelist networks of political redistribution. However, and this is a crucial characteristic of dos Santos's hegemonic strategy within the party, disgrace is never absolute, nor definitive—and, as the author notes "since the coming to power of JES [dos Santos] in 1979, no senior official has been killed" (p. 99). Those banned from the MPLA's inner political circle usually find solace in a rather comfortable financial purgatory—the case of Lopo do Nascimento who has become one of the country's wealthiest businessmen after falling out with dos Santos in 1998 comes to mind here—or even be reintegrated into the inner circle after years of political exile. An example of the latter is João Lourenço, who was ousted in the mid-1990s after showing too much ambition as a potential successor to dos Santos, but was eventually appointed vice president of the MPLA roughly ten years later.

The MPLA's hegemonic project over the past ten years was of course not restricted to the party itself. Indeed, the book shows how it extended its control, first to urban areas mainly by co-opting important sectors of civil society, in particular churches, and by expanding its political control over society through the multiplication of party cells in all neighborhoods.<sup>[5]</sup> The party-state's hegemonic drive toward the Angolan periphery is

more complex and by far not complete. But, as Soares de Oliveira shows, it is “driven by two unspoken assumptions. The first is the notion ... of the superiority of the Portuguese-speaking, urban and coastal core of the state vis-à-vis the backward periphery. The second is that modernization and ‘development [are] virtually coterminous with control’ of rural populations and the expansion of the party-state” (p. 127).

The foundation of Angola’s successful post-war recovery has been the unprecedented economic boom that it went through between 2002 and 2012. Although the boom was based mostly on the high market prices of oil on international markets, it was also accompanied by what Soares de Oliveira describes in chapter 4 as the main achievement of a new generation of technocrats, in other words, macroeconomic stability. This in turn allowed for the development of a strong private bank sector—private but very tightly controlled by the regime and its cronies—with bank assets rising from approximately three billion US dollars in 2003 to about fifty-three billion US dollars less than a decade later (p. 137). But, as the chapter shows, “the actual beneficiaries of the post-war economy [have] consistently [shied] away from productive sectors and the rural world and reveal little appetite for medium- and long-term strategic investment” (p. 148). The main result of the boom years has therefore been the consolidation of a group of oligarchs that followed in the footsteps of what Christine Messiant had dubbed the “oil nomenklatura” of the Angolan regime in the 1990s.[6] The accumulation of wealth and capital typical of the boom years in Angola have been widely reported, especially around the figure of dos Santos’s daughter, Isabel dos Santos. Soares de Oliveira goes one important step further in showing how the Angolan oligarchs have not only accumulated wealth and privilege but also, in spite of being criticized by most Angolans, set the cultural and symbolic standards of what Angolan society aspires to when it comes to social upward mobility and redistribu-

tion of wealth. As the conclusion to the chapter warns, this is a potentially risky situation since the Angolan elite “are a ‘political aristocracy’ with an unproductive understanding of their role in the economy that is the exact opposite of their entrepreneurial status in the regime’s public discourse” (p. 162).[7] And indeed, the current crisis that the country has been facing ever since the price for oil on international markets plummeted in late 2014 shows just how risky this is.

The last chapter logically turns to Angola’s foreign (economic, financial, and political) policy, another aspect of its successful transition from the civil war. To explain this, the author first looks at the enabling environment that supported it: the oil prices and renewed interest for Africa’s natural resources on the one hand, and, on the other, “the emergence of a new ‘state capitalism’ pursued by resource-rich and often illiberal states,” which we see at work in countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia (p. 169). In the post-Washington consensus era, the latter seems to provide authoritarian regimes with a new “virginity” within the international community, provided they have what can be marketed as a developmental agenda. Against this backdrop, Angola’s outgoing strategy after 2002 has alternated between consolidation and diversification. China has undoubtedly been the main beneficiary of Angola’s diversification strategy. But, as was noted earlier, China was mostly instrumental in helping Angola recast its relations with older allies in accordance with its own interests, and, however important, economic ties with Beijing remain second to others, such as the United States. The drive to diversification, lastly, not only was noticeable in the opening up toward new trade partners but is also a key feature of the expansion of Angola’s capital overseas, and the Angolan elite pursued a particularly offensive investment policy in Portugal and other countries.

*Magnificent and Beggar Land* is undoubtedly one of the best books on Angola’s recent history, and it will remain for quite some time the stan-

dard reference on the political economy of post-war Angola, both in its English and Portuguese versions. At the same time, it offers avenues for further conceptual thinking on such issues as the quest for and social construction of hegemony in authoritarian regimes, as well as state formation through civil wars. But it also lends itself to debate.[8]

The book's main argument is built on a distinction between formal institutions and "the parallel state." And, as indicated above, it is in the development of the latter that Soares de Oliveira sees the strength of the regime. Yet all the evidence put forward in the book and the author's own analysis show, I would argue, that the distinction between a "formal" and a "parallel" state is somewhat misleading. Indeed, Sonangol, the Futungistas, the party, and the web of formal and informal relations that dos Santos and his entourage have woven over the years are all part, together with the formal and "visible" institutions of state governance, of the one and very same state. In this sense, the state formation process in Angola offers a good example of what Joel Migdal and Klaus Schlichte call the "dynamics of states,"[9] in other words, the complex interplay between "images" and "practices" of the state that takes place at the frontier between private and public or formal and informal spheres.

As already mentioned, one of the main merits of the book is that it does not draw a line between war and peace, and that it focuses on the continuities in terms of power structure and the nature of the regime's hegemony rather than the discontinuities of the postwar period. Against this backdrop, it is surprising to see how little there is in the book about the legacy of the war itself—in two related aspects. First, the fact that the war ended with the military victory of the MPLA over UNITA deserves more attention. Indeed, the 1999 military offensive that eventually led to Savimbi's death in February 2002, was, of course, a strategy to win the war, but, more important, a strategy to

win the peace by delegitimizing those within civil society—first and foremost the churches and their interfaith peace committee COIEPA (Comité Inter-Eclésiástico para a Paz em Angola)—who were calling for a negotiated settlement.[10] The military victory, accompanied by a general amnesty, is what allowed dos Santos to recast the war as a historical absurdity created by the greed for power of one man, Savimbi, and his allies, rather than as the result of deeply entrenched social and political divisions within Angolan society that the postwar period would need to address. In this context, any public discussions that might echo the divisions of the war period are easily portrayed as an anti-patriotic, anti-peace, and therefore subversive act. This strategy of public oblivion is an important support to the regime's authoritarianism.

Secondly, if the book is clear about the overall contribution of the war in the state formation process in Angola, there is very little about the security apparatus that, as a direct legacy of the war years, forms the backbone of the regime. The author makes us feel the presence of the security system throughout the book rather than providing us with a detailed analysis of its role. In particular, it would have been useful to learn more about the trajectories of (former) UNITA and MPLA generals and other officials of the various branches of the security sector and their reconversion in various sectors of the postwar economy, from private security firms to big agricultural farms or *fazendas*.

The book ends on a cautionary note about the stability of what the author in the book's conclusions calls "post-postwar Angola." Based on the near total dependency of the Angolan economy on oil, Soares de Oliveira questions the long-term sustainability of the regime. And indeed, the sharp and sustained drop in oil prices since late 2014 has plunged the country into a serious economic crisis, exposing in passing the vacuity of the government's discourse on economic diversification. Coupled with popular discontent as ex-

pressed by the youth in regular demonstrations since 2011 and the recurring question of dos Santos's succession, "post-postwar Angola" might stand on thinner ice than the apparently total hegemony of the party-state would have us believe. Whatever may be the way that the country will find out of its current crisis—or into a much larger one—*Magnificent and Beggar Land* provides the empirical depth and analytical lenses we will need to make sense of it.

#### Notes

[1]. Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf of Guinea* (London: Hurst, 2007); Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "Business Success, Angola-Style: Postcolonial Politics and the Rise and Rise of Sonangol," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 4 (2007): 595-619; Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "Illiberal Peacebuilding in Angola," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2011): 287-314; and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, "'O Governo Está Aqui': Post-war State-Making in the Angolan Periphery," *Politique Africaine*, no. 130 (2013): 165-187. On "authoritarian reconversion," see Didier Péclard, "Les chemins de la 'reconversion autoritaire' en Angola," *Politique Africaine*, no. 110 (2008): 5-20.

[2]. Justin Pearce, *An Outbreak of Peace: Angola's Situation of Confusion* (Cape Town: David Philipp, 2005); and Christine Messiant, "Fin de la guerre, enfin, en Angola: Vers quelle paix?" *Politique Africaine*, no. 86 (2002): 183-195.

[3]. Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion," *African Affairs* 99, no. 395 (2000): 217-267.

[4]. See Lara Pawson, *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

[5]. Didier Péclard, "The 'Depoliticizing Machine': Church and State in Angola since Independence," in *Religion and Politics in a Global Society: Comparative Perspectives from the Portuguese Speaking World*, ed. Paul Christopher

Manuel, Alynna Lyon, and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2012), 139-160.

[6]. On the question of oligarchs, see Gilles Favarel-Garrigues's contribution to a debate around Soares de Oliveira's book in the journal *Politique Africaine* (Didier Péclard, coord., "Autour d'un livre: R. Soares de Oliveira, *Magnificent and Beggar Land*," *Politique Africaine*, 139, no. 3 [2015]: 181-183). Christine Messiant, *L'Angola postcolonial. Tome 1: Guerre et paix sans démocratisation; Tome 2: Sociologie politique d'une oléocratie* (Paris: Karthala, 2009).

[7]. The phrase "political aristocracy" is quoted from Thomas M. Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[8]. These points and others have been developed in the debate around the book published by *Politique Africaine* 139, no. 3 (2015): 171-194, with contributions by Juliana Lima, Michel Cahen, Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, and myself, followed by a response from the author.

[9]. Joel Migdal and Klaus Schlichte, "Rethinking the State," in *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination*, ed. Klaus Schlichte (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 1-40.

[10]. Christine Messiant, "Les Églises et la dernière guerre en Angola (1998-2002): Les voies difficiles de l'engagement pour une paix juste," *Sciences sociales et missions* no. 13 (2003): 75-117.

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