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Book Review: Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War by Ricardo Soares de Oliveira

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Soares de Oliveira, Ricardo. *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvii + 291 pages. Paperback, \$34.95.

Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War is the culmination of African Politics professor Ricardo Soares de Oliveira's work on Angola during the post-war period that began in 2002. Soares de Oliveira argues that the ruling *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) party and President José Eduardo dos Santos forged a stable and peaceful Angola by consolidating the country's vast oil wealth and redistributing it to a small subset of important party elders, generals, and business leaders. The chief benefactor of this "parallel system" within the state was and continues to be dos Santos, in power since 1979, who easily remains the richest man in Angola (p. 25). By divvying up both state patronage and rents from his personal business empire, dos Santos and the MPLA leadership have built a stable and prosperous Angola that, unlike other African and oil rich states, controls its own relations with foreign creditors and investors. Beneath this rosy picture of profitability and stability, Soares de Oliveira details the growing angst among ordinary Angolans, who still wait for economic opportunities to reach those outside of the nation's ruling elite.

This is an important book that explains Angola's complicated past and illuminates its unique challenges and triumphs for a general audience. Presented as the recent story of the post-war period, this is in reality a comprehensive modern history that reaches back to the sixteenth century and concludes in 2015. This long view incorporates Angola's struggle for independence, and the subsequent civil war, in a clear and succinct way that focuses on how the MPLA and dos Santos built a political apparatus capable of defeating internal enemies and reaping immense wealth from Angola's oil reserves. Those unfamiliar with Angola's past will gain an understanding in not only how the country emerged from civil war as an economic juggernaut, but also how much "Angola's swagger literally hangs from the price of oil" (p. 199). For Angola specialists, the book provides an interesting synthesis of works available on the MPLA enriched by countless anonymous interviews with party elites that both celebrates the successes of the regime while carefully critiquing its avaricious and authoritarian tendencies. This expansive and approachable account of post-conflict Angola is the most complete history to date of Africa's least understood economic marvel.

Soares de Oliveira joins a growing list of recent authors who have enjoyed the first major scholarly access to Angola since the end of the war. *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War* joins Lara Pawson's *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* (2014) and Todd Cleveland's *Diamonds in the Rough: Corporate Paternalism and African Professionalism on the Mines of Colonial Angola, 1917-1975* (2015) as accessible new works that address major gaps in the historiography, respectively the MPLA purges of May 1977 and Angola's diamond industry. Soares de Oliveira builds upon Tony Hodges' *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State* (2001), which extensively details the development of Angola's oil wealth and how it fueled four decades of violence there. *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War* differs from Hodges' book, in that rather than stressing oil's role in perpetuating the war, Soares de Oliveira instead focuses on how the MPLA leveraged oil profits to achieve total victory and to ensure that reconstruction buttressed party control in peacetime.

Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War demystifies the past decade of development and growth in Angola, explaining how those gains relied on perilously high commodity prices and the resurgence of foreign investments in the region. It succeeds in providing a rich and thorough description of how the MPLA grew from a small cadre of socialist rebels into a dominant ruling clique of rich capitalists. This is a story in progress, however, whose end is uncertain; with oil prices reaching new lows, the MPLA faces not only threats to its economic strength, but also the looming exit of President dos Santos, who – after thirty-seven years in power – refuses to anoint an heir apparent which could lead to the unravelling of the post-war peace. Soares de Oliveira’s assessment of Angola’s likely responses to these challenges will ultimately determine the lasting significance of *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War*. However, such is the norm for scholars of Angolan history; in the words of the late John Marcum, whose work during the 1960s continues to prove true to this day, “Writing of a revolution in progress may be like exploring the crater of an erupting volcano – one may succeed only in getting burned.”¹

NOTE

¹ John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution - Vol 1: The Anatomy of an Explosion (1950-1962)* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), vii.

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