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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disrupted dreams of development: neoliberal efficiency and crisis in Angola

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Abstract

Thanks to oil revenues, since the end of the war in 2002, Angola has largely eschewed the usual donor conditionalities in its state-led reconstruction process; the 2014 oil price drop, however, revealed the limits of this economic miracle. Coupled with a long-overdue political transition inside the ruling party, this moment of designated crisis has opened up spaces for elites to inject their continued projects of accumulation with the moralizing language of neoliberalism – talk of efficiency, responsibility, and the proverbial tightening of the belt. Based on fieldwork around the recently modernized transport hub of Lobito, the article examines how these tropes have been deployed and adapted, first to position Angola as a 'business-friendly' environment, and then to justify largely self-inflicted austerity measures. By examining the everyday working of real existing neoliberalism through the eyes of the port's users, the article suggests that Angola's turbulent history provides a fertile ground to advance, in this moment of crisis, agendas of capital capture, cloaking them in the mantle of common-sensical reasonableness and national solidarity.

Résumé

Grâce à ses revenus pétroliers, depuis la fin de la guerre en 2002, l'Angola a largement échappé aux conditionnalités habituelles des bailleurs de fonds dans son processus de reconstruction dirigé par l'État ; la chute du prix du pétrole en 2014 a néanmoins révélé les limites de ce miracle économique. Conjugué à une transition politique qui n'avait que trop tardé au sein du parti au pouvoir, ce moment de crise désignée a ouvert des espaces aux élites pour imprégner leurs projets continus d'accumulation du langage moralisateur du néolibéralisme, en parlant d'efficience, de responsabilité et du proverbial serrage de ceinture. Basé sur des travaux de terrain menés autour de Lobito, plaque tournante de transport récemment modernisée, l'article examine comment ces tropes ont été déployés et adaptés, d'abord pour positionner l'Angola comme un environnement favorable aux entreprises, et ensuite pour justifier des mesures d'austérité en grande partie auto-infligées. En examinant les rouages quotidiens du néolibéralisme réel à travers le regard des usagers du port, l'article suggère que l'histoire tourmentée de l'Angola constitue un terreau fertile pour promouvoir, dans ce moment de crise, des projets de capture de capitaux en les couvrant du voile du bon sens rationnel et de la solidarité nationale.

On 1 June 2018, I am sitting in the air-conditioned great hall of the Lobito municipal administration, waiting with around eighty other seated attendees for a one-day conference on 'Private Investment in the Transport Sector' to start. Dr Valdino, the chair of the organizing Benguela Province chapter of the Angolan Order of Lawyers, is moderating, and after the obligatory singing of the national anthem and perfunctory words of welcome by the municipal administrator (mayor) of Lobito, Dr Izata, from the board of the state-owned Port of Lobito, takes the floor. Dressed in a cream suit, and opening with a Sporting Lisbon football reference that has everyone but me chuckling, he acknowledges that the economy 'has experienced a bit of a wobble [*um abanão*] because of excessive exposure to the commodity petroleum' – an understatement to say the least, given the deep, systemic recession the country has been in since world oil prices dropped in late 2014, from around US$100 per barrel to under US$40. Sprinkling his presentation with Latin quotes here and there, he emphasizes how privileged the province of Benguela is, with its fantastic transport links: the Port of Lobito, recently upgraded and equipped with 'the newest and noblest equipment', a dry port, and the revamped Benguela Railway (CFB), which connects this port on the Southern African Atlantic coast with the Angolan highlands and (on paper) with neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia.

Two law professors, one from Angola and one flown in especially for the occasion from Portugal, both detail changes to the juridico-legal framework governing private investment in Angola. The Angolan jurist stresses that the next step is to develop logistics platforms along the railway line in all provinces, and to link up the CFB with transport networks in neighbouring countries. 'Creating the conditions for private investment is crucial, especially now that the African Union Free Trade Zone declaration has been signed.' The Portuguese professor repeatedly says that 'this is the legal framework, the rest is pure economic logic', and that more efficient transport networks mean cheaper products. More competitive business, while tendering out concessions for transport to private enterprises, minimizes the risk for the state.

This article seeks to chart how this kind of 'pure economic logic' and the invocation of market principles have become dominant modes of organizing economic and social relations in Angola, while all the evidence from the years since independence in 1975 show that 'the market' has been neither free nor transparent. By looking at the everyday work of people involved in making imports happen in and around the port – food importers, shipping agents, customs brokers, customs agents and port workers – the article then unspools a story of crisis and disrupted dreams of development in Angola. Through this, I trace how, in a specific moment of economic crisis, neoliberalizing ideals of market efficiency – scripted in opposition to public-sector wastefulness and the country's socialist past – are being deployed by a variety of actors, both to express a wider range of popular hopes and frustrations and to reinject a moral discourse into what are ultimately elite enrichment projects. Such an approach allows us to understand the bricolage and heterogeneous nature of projects of neoliberalization, by looking at how neoliberal economic ideas, in very different contexts, have seeped into rationalities of governance, social imagination and everyday lives. At the same time, the specificities of the Angolan case – the country's deeply dysfunctional, oil-dependent political economy – reveal the limitations of such growth- and market-based dreams of development, offering us insights into the work of neoliberal economic ideology.

My argument is set in Lobito, a secondary port city on the central Atlantic coast of Angola. Lobito is the endpoint of the colonial-era Benguela Railway, which was rehabilitated in the past decade with oil-backed credits. Its historical importance as a trade hub and its ongoing centrality to regional economic life and to initiatives designed to smooth the flow of goods into and out of Angola make it an apposite site to investigate the dynamics of the country's political economy in everyday life, especially in the current moment of crisis, when imports have come to a near standstill. As such, the article is based on material from a larger research project, 'The Afterlives of Oil-Backed Infrastructures in the Port City of Lobito', which seeks to disaggregate resource dependency through the lens of the city's economic infrastructures in the *longue durée*.

The proposition of this article is a more modest one: to use the Angolan case to study neoliberalism and its effects, not as a unified package (cf. Hoffman *et al.* 2006: 10), but rather as *real existing neoliberalism* – a 'mobile technology', polymorphous and adaptable (Hilgers 2013: 78) – that is, a highly malleable ideological template that, in context-specific ways, serves to entrench the interests of capital over others, while selling this entrenchment as a moral project (Mikuš 2016: 211). The aim here is not to engage in conceptual redefinitions of neoliberalism, but rather to probe the workings of neoliberalism in social life, beyond the strictly economic, while interrogating the various practices by which people deal with its influence. While the argument that neoliberalization primarily serves the interests of capital is not entirely new, the distinctiveness of the Angolan case – especially its transition from socialism to capitalism and its post-war oil-fuelled boom – allows us to better grasp how elements of this ideological project are taken up, often enthusiastically, in different population sectors.

When, in late 2014, the oil price collapsed on the world markets, Angola found itself plunged into deep recession after ten years of economic boom. This translated into galloping inflation and depreciation of the national currency, the kwanza, and a drastic reduction in food imports, with a concomitant rise in the cost of living. To find ways out of this crisis, the new president, João Lourenço, elected in August 2017, embarked on a high-profile anti-corruption drive. Some regime figures tied closely to the family of the former president, José Eduardo dos Santos, were tried and found guilty, and their assets were frozen. In parallel to these rather popular, public moves, the government took additional steps to 'tighten the belt', including phasing out fuel subsidies, introducing value added tax, and cracking down on tax evasion. However, despite these measures, intermittent rebounds of the oil price, and the successful negotiation of a US$3.7 billion 'Extended Fund Facility' agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in September 2018, the living conditions for most Angolans have gone from bad to worse.

The 2014 oil price drop thus revealed the limits of Angola's post-war economic 'miracle': in a context in which nothing really works as planned, and where dreams of development and modernity seem constantly deferred, this article looks at how actors, involved in making the business of imports work, negotiate and reconcile daily the tensions between neoliberal, crony-capitalist and socialist-era, state-*dirigiste* logics that are played out around Lobito's transport hub. By looking at how processes of neoliberalization have seeped into life projects, social relations, work practices and institutional settings, we can chart how a moment of designated crisis offers opportunities for some social actors to mobilize the moralizing language of market-friendliness and sacrifice to reinvent their projects of accumulation and dispossession.

After a conceptual discussion to position this article's contribution to these debates, I first give some context to the Angolan case to demonstrate how the country has successfully been established as a 'business-friendly' environment; this includes the new measures taken since the latest drop in oil prices. I then examine how vaguely defined market ideals have become pervasive in everyday discourse, preparing the terrain for self-imposed 'corrective measures' of austerity. Finally, I probe how, at a very local and mundane level, this specific moment of crisis has allowed seemingly neoliberal projects of market efficiency to further advance processes of accumulation and dispossession. In doing so, I seek to show how processes of neoliberalization have gradually moulded people's life projects, relationships, work practices and institutional settings, and how these are worked with and around in everyday practice.

Africa as a radical testing ground?

'Neoliberalism' is often presented as a coherent and unified package (cf. Hoffman *et al.* 2006: 10) and described as a concerted ideological project to dismantle the welfare state and open up free markets to finance and private property *à la* Thatcher and Reagan, and/or as a more diffuse logic of governmentality requiring state intervention in health, education and housing to produce autonomous, self-governing individuals (Kipnis 2007: 385). Yet neoliberalism is far from being one overarching, coherent and all-dominating idea; rather, neoliberal logics and their consequences unevenly affect individuals and groups according to class, gender, occupation and ethnicity/race (Bear *et al.* 2015). The call to particularize (Kipnis 2007) or provincialize neoliberalism, while still necessary and overdue, is a classic anthropological move: to focus on everyday practices, and how they might support, contradict or remake neoliberalism's heterogeneous hegemony. This means going beyond seeing the diffusion of neoliberal ideology across the globe as a simple process of translation or 'curious local manifestations of global norms'; rather, we need to think of 'real-existing neoliberalism(s)' as 'sets of theories and practices about the world that are fundamentally the products of local history and experience – much of it shaped by colonialism and its aftermath – and impactful of lived daily reality' (Goldstein 2012: 305).

At least since the 1980s, Africa has been a 'radical testing ground for neoliberal policies' (Hilgers 2012: 83). African economies were 'bludgeoned into austerity' (Zeleza 2019: 158) by the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the IMF, which imposed the shrinking of state services and the opening up of markets in both public services and state-controlled sectors of the economy (see, for example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). Given Africa's uneven and still structurally dependent insertion into world markets (Taylor 2016) and the generally low level of public services and state reach at a more capillary level of governance, this has, however, rarely meant the rollback of the state and the introduction of new technologies of (self-)government; rather, it has entailed the dismantling of the state and the privatization of formerly state-owned assets

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(Ferguson 2010: 173), for the continued extraction of 'imperialist rent' from African economies and populations (Amin 2012: 16).

One criticism of (critical) analyses of neoliberalism is that 'neoliberalism' is used so loosely to characterize anything and everything that is wrong with contemporary global political economy that it has become meaningless. Yet, while neoliberalism is 'an unstable and evolving regime of accumulation, rather than a fixed and harmoniously functional configuration of political economic power' (Harvey 2019: 29), it serves as a useful – that is, polysemous and attractive – ideological template for capital holders to promote conditions for profitable capital accumulation. This is often through anti-democratic reconfigurations of the state, with the objective of restoring class power to the richest strata of society. Working from this premise, an ethnographic approach can yield insights on how, in context-specific and historically contingent ways, a rhetoric of market friendliness is deployed for 'the remaking of households in a manner that denies social justice ... [and] the remaking of states along antidemocratic lines' (Bruff 2019: 364).

The case of Angola allows me to make a threefold contribution to these discussions: first, I look at 'processes of contextual assemblage, articulation, and translation' (Clarke 2008: 135), to examine how neoliberal logics are deployed in Angola, and which registers are used to do so. Through this, I also probe further the link between neoliberal logics and moments of crisis. Consistently, 'neoliberal policymakers and framers have displayed a capacity to "lean into" crises of their own making, extemporising "downstream" responses in the resulting disarray, but at the same time nudging the programme of liberalisation-cum-desocialisation forward on a zigzagging course' (Peck and Theodore 2012: 179). The Angolan case, I suggest here, allows us to examine how this nudging is taking place – and is even accelerated – in times of crisis.

Second, I seek to break up a still often implicit equation of 'neoliberalism' with an ideological programme diffused from the West to the Rest. It is undeniable that IFIs such as the World Bank have played an important role as 'ideational entrepreneurs' in spreading certain economic ideas to Africa (Mkandawire 2014: 182; see also Baron and Peyroux 2011). However, cases such as Angola's reveal precisely that there is 'no single *fons et origo*' for neoliberal thought (Peck and Theodore 2012: 183); rather, they show the malleability of certain ideas and principles and their adaptability to different contexts. In the Angolan case, for example, the transitions from colonialism to socialism to market liberalism, and from war to peace, inform the way in which 'market principles' are invoked and acted out. Can we speak of neoliberalism with a Chinese accent, for example (cf. Chu 2019), and how a Beijing model of development that marries economic liberalization with political clampdown has found fertile ground in many African polities (Guerrero and Manji 2008)? As Basile Ndjio pessimistically writes, 'the genius of African dictators' lies precisely in their capacity to adopt 'teleological meta-narratives' (Ndjio 2008: 119) of democracy, development or market liberalism to 'reformulate the old modes of accumulation and domination and redistribution of state resources' (*ibid.*: 120). So, what elements of neoliberal rhetoric have been adapted and adopted in Angola, and for which purposes?

Third, the article goes beyond a purely Angolan story that would just provincialize neoliberalism by looking at its incarnations in Angola; it considers more broadly how Africa is constructed as 'economically useful' through rankings, risk assessments and the deployment of neoliberal logics. How has Angola successfully positioned itself, in the language of business consultancies and economics magazines, as an 'attractive destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)' and a 'business-friendly environment' when in practice very little works as promised? Together, these points show how malleable ideas and processes of neoliberalization are diffused and find fertile ground even in an atypical case such as Angola.

For reasons of context and chronology, I develop these steps of the argument in reverse order, starting with how Angola – and, by extension, African states – are positioned as business-friendly, then looking at the diffusion and adaptation of loosely understood neoliberal market ideals, and finally probing how a moment of crisis has allowed elites to further advance projects of accumulation and dispossession.

Constructing the 'business-friendly' African state

A brief historical parenthesis is required to advance the first point: while Portugal had developed a presence on the Angolan coast as early as the sixteenth century, it did not have to demonstrate actual control of the territory it claimed until the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, when European powers divided up most of the African continent among themselves. It was a further step from claiming control to effectively developing the territory of Angola, and Portugal in the early twentieth century lacked the resources to do so on its own.

While neighbouring Benguela, the capital of the eponymous province, had been a centre of the Atlantic (slave) trade since the early 1600s, Lobito is very much the product of twentieth-century colonial extractive capitalism. The city, with its natural deep-water bay, was founded in 1843 but only really took off after the turn of the century, when the Scottish engineer Robert Williams (an associate of Cecil Rhodes) flew over the area to locate the best spot to build a port as the end point of the Benguela Railway. In 1902, he received a ninety-nine-year concession from the Portuguese government to build and operate the railway.

Construction on the port started in 1903, with quays gradually being expanded until World War Two. The railway, known as the CFB from its Portuguese name Caminho de Ferro de Benguela, was a marvel of British engineering. By 1929, a 1,544-kilometre rail link stretched from the Atlantic coast to the country's eastern border, and in 1931 it linked up with the mineral heartlands of Katanga in the Belgian Congo (today the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC) and the Northern Rhodesian (now Zambian) Copperbelt (Duarte *et al.* 2015: 16). Lobito was thus geared from its inception primarily towards bringing African raw minerals to the industrial centres of Europe. Nowadays, it is a secondary port on the Atlantic coast, employing about 2,000 dock workers, and serving mainly for the import of food and construction materials. This history underscores how logics of outsourcing and concessioning that are commonly associated with a recent 'neoliberal turn' were in fact part and parcel of Europe's colonial and imperial expansion (cf. Hönke 2012; Schubert forthcoming 2022).

When other European powers gradually started to withdraw from their colonies following World War Two, Portuguese colonialism shifted into high gear, shrouding the intensified settlement and economic exploitation of its 'overseas provinces' in the veil of a civilizing mission. This translated into a flurry of modernist urban construction projects (Gastrow 2020: 101; see also Buire forthcoming) but also investment in dams, bridges and roads, to bring about development of the territory.

Following a protracted, brutal, anti-colonial liberation war (1961–74), independence finally came in 1975. However, unlike in many other African countries, there were three competing liberation movements active in Angola instead of just one. And so, immediately after independence, the country was plunged into a civil war, which, exacerbated by Cold War dynamics, pitted the nominally Marxist MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola/Popular Liberation Movement of Angola) as the recognized government of Angola against the 'rebel', nominally pro-Western UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola/National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). After a brokered peace agreement in 1990, the MPLA abandoned Marxism and prepared a shift to multiparty democracy and market liberalization, leading to a first wave of 'wild' privatizations that benefited the MPLA elite (Hodges 2004; Soares de Oliveira 2015; see also Pepetela 2005 for a thinly fictionalized account). However, these first elections in 1991–92 were derailed, and the civil war resumed with some brief periods of lull until 2002, when government troops killed UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

Following a military-technical agreement to end the fighting, the MPLA government was secure in its position, and it set out to rebuild the war-torn country on its own terms – a large-scale programme of 'national reconstruction' that discursively and effectively replaced any other processes of national reconciliation (Schubert 2015). The end of the war coincided with the onset of a new 'commodity supercycle': thanks to growing demand from Asian countries and technological advances, oil production expanded, and prices rose. With the price of a barrel of crude between US$60 and US$110 for most of the decade, the government was flush with oil money.

In contrast to many other post-conflict countries, Angola was thus able to rebuild on its own terms after the war, largely eschewing any conditional assistance by multilateral donors. Unlike other instances in the global South, where large-scale infrastructure programmes benefited foreign investors through financialization (Bear 2017), the profits of the Angolan construction bonanza flowed more or less directly into the offshore accounts of politically connected elites, often without financial markets even acting as intermediaries (although with the complicity of auditing firms and financial service providers from the global North).[1] This oil-fuelled post-war development coincided with the growing global dominance of neoliberal logics of practice. As I will show, the latter provided an attractive ideological template to cloak processes of extraversion enabled by the former in the boom years. This template has then been reconfigured under a language of entrepreneurship, individual responsibility and austerity in the more recent moment of crisis.

Indeed, the government was able to successfully position the country as a business-friendly and stable destination for FDI. This success, by and large, was primarily due to the ready availability of oil millions, feeding subsidiary industries such as construction and banking with no questions asked (Ennes Ferreira and Soares de Oliveira 2019). Yet the government was also very adroit at adapting a language of market efficiency, introducing 'efficiency reforms' and cutting red tape for investors, for example in the streamlining of investment laws promised at the

[1] Carlos Pacatolo, public lecture on the SADC Free Trade Zone at ISP Lusíada, Lobito, 25 May 2018. See also Raposo *et al.* (2012) and documents published as #Luandaleaks in January 2020 (for example, at Fitzgibbon and Torres 2020).

conference discussed at the opening of the article, and the creation of 'single-window' IT solutions for the registration of new businesses and for the payment of taxes and customs duties (Schubert 2021). This approach was reflected in the country's higher rankings in the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business' report, and improved ratings from the big financial ratings agencies such as Moody's and Standard & Poor's: while the oil money was flowing, Angola was considered a stable, attractive destination for FDI.

As the Angolan case aptly illustrates, the 'Doing Business' report 'primarily approaches laws and regulations as they are written and not as they are applied', allowing for cross-country benchmarking and comparison of hypothetical scenarios, but its 'indicators are a poor match for the inherent complexity and uncertainty of legal [and commercial] norms and practices' (Muñoz 2018: 6). That gap between formal reforms and actual practice is also evident in management processes at the port, as I will detail below.

However, circumstances have changed drastically since the boom years: in late 2014 the price of a barrel of Brent crude oil dropped from about US$110 to US$62, and it fluctuated between US$60 and US$35 per barrel for most of 2015–17. This – ostensibly – plunged the country into a deep recession. In terms of rankings, Angola now counts again as one of the ten worst countries in Africa in which to do business and is unlikely to 'escape' its 'least developed country' status before 2024, according to business observers (Kennedy 2021). But while oil prices have intermittently risen and fallen again, the situation for the Angolan population has not improved – quite the contrary.

I say 'ostensibly' because, while the oil price was held as the root cause of the crisis, it was in fact the mismanagement of the Angolan political economy by the country's long-term ruler, President dos Santos, and his family that caused it (see Blanes 2019; Ennes Ferreira and Soares de Oliveira 2019). This pattern of mismanagement included lucrative subcontracting at every link of the public procurement chain, and unsustainable investments, especially in infrastructure projects of dubious utility to the population (football and roller hockey stadiums, for example), all serving the primary goal of capital accumulation abroad.[2] The oil price drop made this mismanagement plain for everyone to see, including people inside the MPLA.

With popular dissatisfaction increasing (Faria 2013; Buire 2016; Mukuta and Fortuna 2016), the MPLA ran for the 2017 elections with the then defence minister, João Lourenço, as the party's presidential candidate. Seen as a dos Santos loyalist and a man of continuity, Lourenço unsurprisingly won the elections, but since his election he has used the nigh-absolute powers of the presidency to move swiftly and decisively against the business interests of the dos Santos family and their allies. While this earned him popularity at home, these moves were primarily for 'external consumption' and directed at an international audience, which applauded them as steps to finally tackle corruption and undertake much-needed reforms that would 'open up' the Angolan economy to competition. Under optimistic headlines such as 'Angola's unlikely reformer', 'Angola: open for business' and 'Angola set to attract even more FDI in 2020', the usual suspects of IFIs, ratings agencies, boutique

[2] For Angola's political economy under dos Santos, see Hodges (2004) and Soares de Oliveira (2015).

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consultancies and the specialist press lauded Lourenço's 'courage' while hammering home the message about the inevitability of further reforms.[3]

To give just one indicative example of the government's focus on Angola's external image: in October 2021, the Minister of Territorial Administration, Marcy Lopes, held a conference at the Angolan consulate in Lisbon to inform the Angolan community in Portugal about how to vote in the upcoming 2022 general elections. Yet he also used his time to exhort the audience to 'not divulge the bad sides of the country' to the outside, saying that speaking of unemployment, poverty, hunger and the lack of water and electricity did nothing to help attract the investment of foreign entrepreneurs – a call that was widely panned as an exhortation to outright lying on social and independent online media.[4]

This echoes what Bram Büscher observes about the 'neoliberal turn' in Southern Africa, whereby 'attracting investment' has become a key policy goal in itself, equated with development and improvement and naturalized as something desirable (Büscher 2015: 728), very often superseding the actual development or diversification of the real economy. While this attitude has been heavily promoted as the One True Way by the normative might of transnational institutions such as the World Bank, it has also been espoused by many African governments and, to some extent, civil society actors as well (Lange 2011: 233–4; Schubert *et al.* 2018: 4). As such, neoliberalism and market-friendliness become common denominators in very different contexts and across periods of changing socio-economic fortunes – though not as a unified package. Rather, their malleability allows variously situated actors to invoke notions of efficiency and transparency in their work, and to strive for something 'better' than their current situation, while battling circumstances that are all but efficient and transparent. And this holds true for both the boom years and the more recent years of 'crisis'.

For example: efficiency reforms pushed by the successive port directors in charge during my different periods of fieldwork (2018–21) were lauded by port workers as steps in the right direction, improvements that would help streamline and speed up the business of imports. Shadowing customs brokers and food importers in their daily work, however, revealed the arbitrariness and inconsistency of these 'reforms'. In fact, during my final fieldwork stay in September 2021, I accompanied my friend Milton, a customs broker, and one of his business partners, a young forwarding agent, to the port's cargo terminal. They were both extremely agitated when I met them that day; for the latest two containers of fish they were exporting on behalf of a Spanish seafood company, the port had clearly made a mistake in the form declaring the weight of the goods for export, including the weight of the tare (the container and the lorry) in the total taxable weight. Although tempers were running hot in the car, they adopted a rather respectful posture as they pointed out the mistake to the port agent in the operations department. All three scrutinized the one-page document at length, repeating the calculation and scribbling the verified numbers

[3] See Chazan (2019); 'Angola: open for business', Albright Stonebridge Group, 26 March 2018 <https://www.albrightstonebridge.com/news/asg-analysis-angola-open-business>; Van Der Schyff (2019).

[4] See, for example, 'Marcy Lopes sugere que mentira pode ser mais crível que a verdade para mostrar uma Angola inexistente', *Jornal o Kwanza*, 20 October 2021 <https://jornalokwanza.com/capa/marcy-lopes-sugere-que-mentira-pode-ser-mais-crivel-que-a-verdade-para-mostrar-uma-angola-que-nao-existe/>.

in the margin in pencil. 'It appears indeed that there has been a mistake here,' said the port employee, 'and I thank you gentlemen for bringing it to our attention. I shall clarify it with the *funcionário* [staff member] who issued the document.' We sat down in the lobby and waited for about twenty minutes, during which time Milton and his colleague grumbled sotto voce about the sheer incompetence of the port personnel. Then the port worker returned to the guichet and explained that the staff member in charge 'had thought it good' (*o funcionário achou bem*) to state the total weight on the form, as the port had now decided to issue these documents according to a new template. He then handed them back a form that correctly stated the weight of the goods (the fish), although it still listed the total weight of the loaded lorry plus the container measured at the weighbridge as the 'total'. Defeated, we left, with Milton and his colleague shaking their heads in disbelief – 'These forms follow an international standard, that declaration will also be used in Spain to compute import duties! This is not up to the personal ideas of a random port employee!'

The short overview in this section of Angola's positioning vis-à-vis international markets and investors since 2002 is illustrative of the way in which 'the business-friendly African state' is constructed: despite the supposed developmental benefits of foreign economic investment for African states (Taylor 2016), any attempts at stronger regulation and taxation of key sectors (which would help increase the benefits for the population) are decried as 'resource nationalism' or 'populist strongman tactics' and penalized almost immediately by lower credit ratings, higher interest rates for borrowing, or harsher conditionalities attached to multilateral lending (see, for example, Boateng 2018). The Angolan government, however, very skilfully deployed the language of efficiency and the lean state to construct an image of business-friendliness, which, with the complicity of Western investors, consultants and audit firms, served as a smokescreen for more unsavoury parallel processes of weak labour laws, heavy bureaucracy, kickbacks and the offshoring of profits (Fitzgibbon and Torres 2020). By following the approved procedures of market-friendly deregulation, 'speculative imaginaries' are constructed (Gilbert 2019), via reference to credit ratings, nominal benchmarks (such as GDP), and risk rankings and indicators (Gilbert 2015). In the Angolan case, adopting business-friendly measures such as single-window solutions and tax breaks in the boom years, as well as austerity measures in the crisis years, allowed the Angolan government to access international loans, even though these reforms had little to no positive effect on the lives of citizens.

A diffuse belief in the primacy of markets

Beyond attracting FDI for its own sake, the diffusion of neoliberal ideas of market efficiency, entrepreneurship and the rollback of the state can be traced in a number of contexts, recombining these sometimes vaguely or loosely understood ideals with specifically Angolan notions of hierarchy, decency and the public good. As Schwenkel and Leshkowich discuss for Vietnam, ideas we might term as 'neoliberal' circulate and emerge in complex, specific interactions, and include such diverse propositions as 'market economic and free trade discourses proffered as a means to achieve a higher quality of life; discourses of privatization and self-regulation for optimization; and the

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moralization of logics of efficiency, quality, and accountability as models for correct, modern, or civilized personhood' (2012: 382).

In Angola, too, we can see that, since independence, although 'the market' has been neither free nor transparent in practice, beliefs in the self-evident primacy of market mechanisms have proven remarkably persistent – not least thanks to strengthened economic and political ties with China. It is important to note here that, while the Chinese presence in Africa has gained wider media attention in 'the West' – often hysterically conjuring China's unstoppable takeover – we should be cautious about ascribing this to one monolithic 'China' as a supposedly unitary actor. In fact, a multitude of actors are active across the African continent, including official government and Communist Party contacts, state-owned and state-affiliated companies, private enterprise ranging from petty trade to heavy industries, and precarious menial workers, especially in the agriculture and construction sectors (Schmitz 2014; Chatelard 2016). Moreover, the language of 'new colonialism' obscures both the longer history of China–Africa relations (e.g. Monson 2013) and, more crucially, African agency in these interactions (again at all levels). Especially in the case of Angola, members of the ruling party elite have been particularly adroit at mobilizing Chinese economic interest and investment for their own personal gains (Power and Alves 2012). Throughout these exchanges, the Chinese model of economic development has proven attractive precisely because it marries oligopolistic state capitalism to tightened political control (i.e. renouncing democratic liberalizations for economic growth, supposedly for the benefit of the whole population). In the years of the oil bonanza, this relation also provided Angola with oil-backed credits for infrastructure reconstruction without the usual political conditionalities attached (Corkin 2013; Croese 2017).

However, beyond the renascent Chinese presence, the persuasiveness of a language of market efficiency must be evaluated against the backdrop of Angola's socialist past, and how this socio-political frame of reference is being evaluated in hindsight by Angolans today. While the period of socialism is often remembered with feelings of nostalgia when it comes to interpersonal relations ('people showed more solidarity towards one another'), the planned economy combined with the civil war to produce dire shortages, so that it is also recalled chiefly as a time of *falta* (lack). In a context of state planning failure, Angolans learned to rely on the illegal but flourishing black market (*candonga*) and to exploit the difference between official and informal exchange rates between the kwanza and foreign currency to survive. Even after the transition to 'democracy' and the 'free market', the management of public resources in Angola has been extremely wasteful, corrupt and inefficient. As many of the older cadres who installed this political economic dispensation were formed under socialism, it is hardly surprising that 'socialist mentalities' are in retrospect often seen as synonymous with incompetence and corruption. Both the previous and the current president received higher education in the Soviet Union, and most party cadres in government and public administration who came of age around independence shared educational trajectories in the Eastern Bloc and Cuba (Schenck 2016). These tensions are equally visible in Lobito.

The port of Lobito is still state-owned and state-managed, but apart from some port administration functionaries most of my interlocutors agreed that it would be much better if the port were concessioned out to a private company. This is comparable to other post-socialist African contexts, where citizens frame their experience of neoliberal reforms as one of either abandonment or 'liberation' from the shackles of socialism (see, for example, Cohen 2019: 718 for Guinea-Conakry). Here, too, time and again, I heard laments about state interference and inefficiency, and wishful sighs about the 'impending' (and, frankly, unavoidable) tendering of the port concession (which, between 2016 and 2021, never seemed to advance much). As Bob Naidoo, the Luanda-based South African manager of GSL Lines,[5] explained to me, in clipped vowels and hard, rolling 'r's:

> If they sign the agreement with the IMF it would be a blessing and help open up to foreigners, rebuild debt, and regain the confidence of international markets. You'd have to trim the fat of government. Here in Luanda the terminals are managed privately, more efficiently, but in Lobito it's a state-owned port. When it is public entities it's always complicated.

Similarly, in the view of the Lobito harbour pilots, who were organized in a private cooperative, the current moment combined the state's worst impulses: inefficient state *dirigisme* on the one hand, and market laissez-faire on the other. The pilots viewed their own training in Germany in the 1990s as superior to the socialist-era education that cadres at the port had received a decade earlier, and they were disheartened with the way the government was stifling initiative.[6] 'I wanted to do research, and mount a shipping simulator here,' Comandante Amadeu told me. 'I had already set my sights on a plot of land overlooking the bay, where we could have mounted the installations and trained people, also internationally, but *someone* wanted that plot of land for themselves and it didn't work out. This country makes people stupid, it keeps them down.' In their daily work, the pilots told me, state control impeded competition and independent price setting, and led to a lower turnover of vessels and goods at the port, while at the same time the state had completely abdicated its responsibility for the pilots' continuous professional development and the training of a new generation of Angolan pilots.

The need to 'revive the economy', most interlocutors agreed, was even more pressing in the current situation of economic crisis. While the port of Lobito was upgraded during the boom years with impressive, state-of-the-art equipment, following the onset of the crisis, during the period of my fieldwork (2018–21), there was almost no cargo coming in, much less going out. The little work that was being carried out used the single multimodal crane, or the ships' own cranes, as all but one of the new Chinese cranes procured by the government through oil-for-infrastructure deals were standing still. This fault was variously explained as being due to lack of maintenance, missing spares, corruption in the procurement process, or the general unreliability of the Angolan power grid.

Yet the market would sort everything out: Milhazes, who came from a family of port workers and lived with his young family in an airy, if slightly run-down, port

[5] All persons and companies are given pseudonyms here, except for government/administration figures on public record.

[6] In earlier fieldwork in Mozambique, I found that younger cadres trained in a market environment drew a similar opposition between their – allegedly superior – understanding of the market and that of older, socialist-trained functionaries (Schubert 2020: 552).

workers' *vivenda* passed down from his father, echoed this when he said that 'the crisis might do some good and educate people to make some savings and be disciplined'. The IMF's help would be crucial, he mused: 'We will feel the squeeze in the beginning, but then good things will come. The invisible hand will take charge and balance out the market.'

The expression of such ideas of discipline and market primacy can be taken as an indication of how normalized the language of neoliberalism has become; this normalization, in turn, also makes it easier to introduce 'corrective measures' (Blanes 2019: 40), as the Angolan government did from 2015 onwards.[7] While a permanent state of emergency has arguably been a reality for most Angolans at least since the start of the independence struggle in 1961, this latest, post-2014 economic bust has been discursively constructed as something different – *a crise* (the crisis), a calamity of almost biblical proportions due to the drop in oil prices. In fact, the price drop was only the trigger for a self-inflicted crisis resulting from years of terrible investment priorities. Tracking the ups and downs of the oil price as if it were a divine phenomenon (as many Angolans do) conveniently obscures the government's responsibility in perpetuating a wasteful, oil-dependent political economy during the post-war years (Soares de Oliveira 2015). Designating something as a crisis implies a deviation from an imagined norm and teleology, and 'allows certain questions to be asked and others to be foreclosed' (Roitman 2014: 94).

The *crise*, then, justified all sorts of austerity measures, backed by a discourse of fiscal responsibility, cutting back the wasteful state and tightening the belt, which were common in Southern Europe after the 2008–09 financial crisis (see, for example, Knight and Stewart 2016) but which were relatively new to Angola (Blanes 2019: 40). This entailed the imposition of hiring freezes in public administration, cuts to social spending (which were already languishing at laughably low proportions of government expenditure compared with the rest of the continent), and the introduction of new taxes and levies, such as VAT, through which the population did indeed 'feel the squeeze'.

In the view of fellow social scientists in Angola, this was 'self-inflicted austericide' – selective austerity measures such as the elimination of fuel subsidies or the scheduled introduction of much higher fees at public universities and for the issuing of identity documents, which hit the lower strata of the population hardest while leaving those responsible for years of wasteful spending relatively unscathed (Blanes 2019: 40, 43; but see also Frank 1976 on Chile). According to my colleague Francisco Xavier, the debate about the fuel subsidies was a false one:

> Fuel is cheap here by international standards, the equivalent of about 40 euro cents for a litre of petrol, and the IMF has been badgering Angola for years to remove subsidies [as they distort the market]. But why are we arguing with the IMF over one billion [which might be gained by cutting the subsidies] when we owe 20 billion in debt to China?

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[7] This is much like the job cuts that marketized universities have pushed for in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the UK, USA and Australia (see a thematic thread on the post-Covid university at <https://allegralaboratory.net/category/thematic-threads/postcoronauniversity/>).

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Similarly, Rui Verde writes: 'Angola does not need austerity. It needs investment in infrastructures, roads, communications, ports, education, and health. In terms of public spending, what is imperative is to *rationalise* expenses and end corruption' (2018, emphasis added). From academics to Lobito's port employees, then, we see that the belief in the primacy of the market remains widespread, even if social scientists and economists disagree with the ways in which the government is organizing the markets.

Disingenuous neoliberalism, real-life effects

Yet even 'disingenuously applied' neoliberalism (Kipnis 2007) has tangible effects on people's everyday economic arrangements, shifting expectations and relationships towards 'the state'. In colonial times, the port of Lobito and Benguela Railway were run and understood almost like a 'state within the state', providing not only jobs, training and salaries for their workers but also housing and in-kind subsidies. Many of the former railway and port workers and their family members fondly remembered the time when they had a monthly supply card with which they could go to the port's or railway's own *armazém* (stores, warehouse) and receive a generous ration of basic goods (*cesta básica*, i.e. a 'basic basket' of food and household essentials, which also serves to index consumer prices). 'Port employees used to have a supply card; every month, each worker had a specific allowance, according to his function grade. They had shops inside the port, even a butcher,' as one of many mechanics and welders I spoke to recalled.

Some workers admittedly preferred immediate cash and opted to resell their rations only to find out later in the month that the monetary value they had received for their *cesta* did not allow them to sustain their family for the entire month, as opposed to the in-kind value. Most workers – at least in the retelling – were reasonable and thrifty, however, complementing the *cesta básica* they had received with home-grown agricultural produce, market purchases and a few luxury items.

In the view of workers, this was a great system, and fair – although this skips over the fact that port and railway workers were a comparatively privileged section of the population during the time of socialism. The common population at the time had access only to the *lojas do povo*, the 'people's shops', in which purchases were organized via ration cards and supplies were basic and irregular to say the least (see Gastrow 2019: 82). As the state professed to provide basic goods, it did so in ways that were never equitable (the *nomenklatura* and foreign *cooperantes* had access to privileged shops) and often failed completely, forcing the population to compensate for shortages on the black market.

Yet, while the system of port-owned shops for its employees was good for its beneficiaries, my interlocutors speculated that it did not allow for much extraction of profits for those in control of the scheme. Moreover, it depended on the port having access to, and being able to pay for, imported food stuffs. And this, with the crisis, had become much more difficult. My friend Nelson, an adjutant customs broker, explained: 'As it is difficult with the *divisas* [foreign exchange] now, I think they can no longer supply their stores, so they gave these *plafonds* [monetary maximum limits] instead.' The port closed its own *armazéns* and gave its workers a card for the supermarket chain Kero instead. This was essentially a prepaid payment card, loaded with 30,000 kwanzas (nominally about €70) per month, with which workers would then be able to purchase their *cesta básica* from the supermarket.[8] But, as before, the monetary value and the use value of such goods are completely out of sync, especially at an upmarket supermarket like Kero. Nelson again: 'Economically it doesn't make sense. With 30,000 in Kero, it's just enough for maybe a week, whereas by buying some *fuba* [manioc flour], a box of pasta, some oil, a crate of [frozen] chicken, a family can live for a month.'

Papá Estévão, a stevedore at the port, also complained:

> It's a great struggle. A box of chicken for 9,000 [at Kero], a bag of rice for 6,000? So, a worker prefers to sell the card on for 25,000, and buy rice, pasta, oil and chicken at LevantAngo [one of Angola's major importers of foodstuffs, which sells wholesale from warehouses across the country; cf. Schubert 2021]. One of my sons is seventeen, and he and two of my other children go to a private *colégio* where the monthly fee is 13,500. We don't have prepaid light, so between the school fees and the electricity bill we can't even buy a pair of shoes. I had to sell the empty card for 20,000 – the buyer then waits and gets the 30,000's worth the next month.

We can see here, from the privatization of education to the port's outsourcing of the provision of basic goods to its workers, how neoliberalizing logics impact people's arrangements and expectations. Time and again since the onset of the crisis in 2015, and even more so since Lourenço's elections in 2017, the Angolan government has mobilized the language of crisis and necessary sacrifices to rally the population behind its policy decisions. Lourenço's New Year's speech of 23 December 2019, for example, spoke of 'difficult moments to overcome' owing to the 'internal and external conjuncture of critical contours', and he thanked public and private entrepreneurs, civic and cultural associations, churches and civil society in general for their support.[9] Repeatedly, Lourenço appealed to the private sector to take their responsibilities seriously, saying that the government had merely a regulatory function.[10] Yet while the belt has indeed been tightened for the vast majority of citizens, the government continues to spend more on, for example, a presidential library and a dental clinic for the presidency than on equipment and running costs for public hospitals.[11]

But can we really talk of a coherent ideological project? I very much doubt it. Rather, the logics of practice of neoliberalism provide a fertile terrain for the justification and advancement of processes of capital accumulation. Lobitans speculated

[8] It is important to bear in mind that nominal/official exchange rates only very insufficiently indicate the actual local purchasing power of the equivalent amount in kwanza.

[9] See the Presidency's official Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/PresidedaRepublica/photos/mensagem-de-ano-novo-do-presidente-da-rep%C3%BAblica-jo%C3%A3o-louren%C3%A7o-dirigida-%C3%A0-na%C3%A7%C3%A3o-n/2735821443144329/>.

[10] See, for example, 'João Lourenço apela para que setor privado "assuma as suas responsabilidades" na economia nacional', DW, 23 November 2019 <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/jo%C3%A3o-louren%C3%A7o-apela-para-que-setor-privado-assuma-as-suas-responsabilidades-na-economia-nacional/a-51385555>.

[11] See, for example, 'Clínica e biblioteca da Cidade Alta custam mais do que a construção de 17 hospitais', *Novo Jornal*, 24 July 2020 <https://www.novojornal.co.ao/sociedade/interior/clinica-e-biblioteca-da-cidade-alta-custam-duas-vezes-mais-que-a-construcao-de-17-hospitais-90866.html>.

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(and it seems likely) that Kero was chosen because the supermarket chain is owned by politically connected individuals, who stood to benefit from the deal with the port – a pattern of preferential contracting and kickbacks that is repeated across most sectors of the Angolan economy (cf. Schubert 2018).[12] Following the downfall of the dos Santos family and their allies, supermarket chains Kero and Candando were then expropriated as ill-gotten gains of corruption and nationalized. At the time of writing, they are slated to be privatized again in a public tendering process likely to recombine new national and international stakeholders in fresh networks of profit making.[13]

Neoliberalism has been described for much of the global North as a concerted project of state crafting, with the bureaucratic field as the key instigator 'that puts disciplinary "workfare", neutralising "prisonfare" and the trope of individual responsibility at the service of commodification' (Wacquant 2012: 66; see also Kalb 2012: 320 for a critique). In Africa, too, mainstream donors have propagated the idea of a minimal state (Chinigò 2019: 80). Seen from Lobito, however, the deployment of neoliberalizing logics and tropes seems a much more haphazard, improvised process. A pathologizing view of 'the African state' as is still widely held in media and policy discourses in the global North would likely chalk up this difference to widely diverging state capacities – after all, is not the USA, where Wacquant develops his analysis, a vastly 'more developed' state than Angola?

Apart from the questionable culturalism that undergirds such assumptions, this is based on reified notions of both the state and neoliberalism as coherent and finished. Rather, it appears that the ideological seductiveness and seeming common sense of certain key refrains of neoliberalism – the 'common-sensical' assumption that private procurement cards are more efficient and liberatory than port-owned stores, for example – have allowed for their adoption and adaption in very different contexts to enrich 'the holders of capital, while leading to increasing inequality, insecurity, loss of public services, and a general deterioration of quality of life for the poor and working classes' (Ferguson 2010: 170). So, while I do not think that neoliberalism, in this current moment, is the single, dominant organizing principle in Angola (Clarke 2008: 138), its ideological force has been harnessed by a variety of actors in a moment of crisis to inject their projects of accumulation and dispossession with a moralizing discourse. Positioning the new president as the defender of the interests of 'ordinary Angolans' vis-à-vis the demands of the IMF allows for appeals to solidarity among 'the people' – the proverbial tightening of the belt for the society as a whole to pull through – while squarely placing the blame for the depredation of public funds on

[12] Kero was owned by a holding company belonging to three of Angola's richest individuals, a 'triumvirate' around former president José Eduardo dos Santos: Manuel Vicente, the former vice president, General Manuel Hélder Vieira Dias 'Kopelipa', and General Leopoldino Fragoso do Nascimento 'Dino'. Similarly, when the former president's daughter, Isabel dos Santos, was installed at the helm of state oil company Sonangol in 2016, one of her decisions was to source luxury Christmas hampers for Sonangol's executives from her own supermarket chain, Candando. See, for example, '"Hiper" de Isabel dos Santos fornece cabaz de Natal a trabalhadores da Sonangol', *Observador*, 24 November 2016 <https://observador.pt/2016/11/24/hiper-de-isabel-dos-santos-fornece-cabaz-de-natal-a-trabalhadores-da-sonangol/>.

[13] See, for example, 'Governo avança com concurso público para privatizar rede de supermercados Kero', *Angola 24 Horas*, 13 June 2021 <https://angola24horas.com/sociedade/item/21370-governo-avanca-com-concurso-publico-para-privatizar-rede-de-supermercados-kero>.

the *marimbondos* (parasitic wasps) of the ex-president's regime. At the same time, paradoxically, appeals to the 'free market' remain an attractive template for ideas of social betterment for many Angolans, despite little evidence for the actual functioning of markets in their favour.

Conclusions

Africa has been a 'radical testing ground for neoliberal policies' at least since the 1980s (Hilgers 2012: 83). Thanks to its oil wealth, Angola has had a slightly different trajectory compared with many other African countries. However, we can observe how now, in this specific moment of crisis and regime change, neoliberalizing tropes of fiscal responsibility, individual thrift and entrepreneurialism, and market efficiency as opposed to state sluggishness, are gaining new traction. These are being deployed in the form of selective austerity measures that promise the diversification and opening up of the economy as a means to overcome *the crisis*. Ideals of efficiency (culled from the neoliberal phrasebook) to position Angola as 'attractive' are fused with state *dirigisme* to refashion and revive projects of elite accumulation. These ideals and buzzwords are melded with diffuse appeals to the primacy of the free market, through which a wide range of people beyond the elite express frustrations about the past and the present. These beliefs are, however, not buttressed by any evidence of functioning markets in Angola, but are animated instead by the government's mobilization of this dominant rhetoric, chiefly for external consumption.

The case of Lobito exemplifies, however, that while neoliberal ideas have indeed become so widespread as to appear common-sensical, their 'success' has by and large been limited to positioning Angola as an attractive destination for FDI, while there is little evidence for market efficiency elsewhere. The normalization of neoliberal discourse when thinking about possible pathways out of the crisis teleologically leads to very specific, orthodox policy prescriptions, such as austerity measures. These, in turn, allow a reconfigured political elite to reinvent their projects of capital capture and flight by cloaking them in the mantle of shared responsibility.

Efficiency is thus not just a 'regime of truth "diffusing" from' neoliberalism (Mosse 2013: 230) but a potent political imaginary that is mobilized by a variety of actors for their own aims and purposes, with varied, uneven outcomes. Akin to similar policy core tenets such as 'the deficit', or indeed 'Brexit', efficiency becomes a self-explanatory, 'sacred' mandate, a national necessity, purposefully vague, justifying a great variety of sometimes contradictory policy measures under its banner (cf. Morrell 2016).

Austerity, in Angola as elsewhere, is ultimately a narrative about the legitimacy of inequality. The work of ideology is precisely this: even in an atypical case such as Angola, an African country that has not been beaten into submission by SAPs (Amin 2012: 16–17), neoliberal logics visibly resonate with experiences and expectations across the social spectrum, making them a convenient and convincing repertoire to tap into for renewed projects of elite accumulation.

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