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How Important Was Marxism for the Development of Mozambique and Angola?

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Abstract

Mozambique and Angola both had nominally Marxist governments after independence in 1975. This paper discusses the extent to which this may have had an effect on development policies in subsequent years. The conclusion is that while there may have been some influence, the colonial history and material conditions of the countries had a far greater impact than did the ideological affiliations of ruling parties.

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Angola and Mozambique - What IS Marxism in the African Context?

Many of the most important differences and similarities between Angola and Mozambique predate the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. When we put the question of Marxist economic orientation in this context the two decades of so-called Marxist development seems rather a small issue when compared to half a millennium of colonial history. The pre-existing conditions in each country had much more influence on their development prospects than do their years of Marxist economic policy. In fact, in many ways it is difficult to pinpoint actual “Marxist” policies distinct from those followed by other similar countries at the same level of development.

In terms of broad similarities, both countries contain within their borders a variety of African ethnic groups many of which had no sense of common identity prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Both countries also contained substantial kingdoms, with well defined borders and centralized political control, most notably the Kongo kingdom on the west coast of Africa, which had its capital in what is now Angola (though it extended northward into what is now Zaire and the Congo), and the kingdoms of Sofala and Muenemutapa in Mozambique.

The goals of the Portuguese were not primarily ones of conquest and settlement. Rather, the principal aim of the early explorers was to open routes for extraction of commodities, among which were spices, gold, ivory and slaves. This had important implications for the local populations as it meant that there was no overriding need for the Portuguese to control territory or to rule directly. Rather, it was more convenient for them to reach accommodations with local

political leaders in order to develop trading relationships which would allow them to extract the desired export commodities. While land grants, called *prazos*, were made by the Portuguese crown, these grants were more akin to zones of extraction than they were to colonial land grants made by other European powers. For the most part, there was no concerted effort to promote economic development nor to settle Portuguese on these lands, and this remained the case until the 20th century.¹

Angola and Mozambique differed markedly in terms of international economic relations prior to the European arrival. While trade with interior areas to the east did exist in the Kongo kingdom, there was no well developed network of commerce via seaborne trade. In contrast, the Mozambican coast was part of an extremely well developed Indian Ocean maritime trading economy dominated by Arab trading centers such as Zanzibar and Kilwa. Accordingly, the role of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean was more to displace the current dominant trading powers than to open up new trade relations as was the case on the west coast of the continent. Here, the dominant export was slaves; it is reported that approximately 3 million slaves were sent from what is now Angola mainly to Brazil over the period from the first Portuguese contact in the late fifteenth century to the 1830's when the trade was effectively abolished.²

Until the partition of Africa by European powers in the late 1800's there was little effort by the Portuguese to settle or directly control the interior of either country. However, at that time it became clear that the main criterion for colonial borders was to follow the dictum "possession is 9/10 of the law" – or 100% in this case. Accordingly, the Portuguese began to push into the interior of both Mozambique and Angola, an effort that picked up speed in the 1930's when Portugal sought among other things to alleviate its own unemployment problems by exporting large numbers of settlers and peasant farmers abroad.

This massive influx of Europeans resulted in a situation in which virtually every formal sector job in the economies of both countries were dominated by whites. Every salaried job,

¹ See Issacman 1983; Isaacman and Isaacman 1996; Pitcher 1994 and Newitt 1995 for a discussion of the colonial era.

² See Austen 1987 for a summary of the slave trade in Portuguese Africa. See also ZA and JM Konczacki eds. *An Economic History of Tropical Africa* Frank Cass 1977

including taxi drivers, waiters, ticket takers, etc. was held by Portuguese, leaving no role whatsoever for Africans in the formal sector. Agriculture too, became heavily Europeanized, with a large smallholder African peasant sector coexisting with a commercialized sector of medium sized European farms and large plantations. Equally important was a virtual monopoly by the Portuguese on the network of rural traders who linked all agricultural producers to the market. These bush traders and shopkeepers provided an outlet for peasant production and in return served as providers of agricultural inputs, consumer goods and informal credit.

This essay argues that “Marxism” as practiced in the Lusophone African context is virtually indistinguishable from authoritarian extractive regimes of any political stripe and that the extractive regimes of post-independence Angola and Mozambique are in many ways simply extensions of the old colonial regime under new management. Though the newly independent governments in Angola and Mozambique were openly and avowedly Marxist, this was more of a label of convenience than a real indicator of ideological conviction. The true conviction in each case was a determination to replace colonial hegemony and control with that of the ruling party, a goal which is shared by many political persuasions in Africa and around the world.

What does it mean to be a Marxist state in the immediate post-colonial era of the 1970’s in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique? If Marxism means state ownership of the means of production then we are in something of a definitional quandary because there simply *wasn’t* very much in the way of “means of production” in either of these countries at independence in 1975. Nevertheless, to be avowedly Marxist certainly meant something to the governments in question so it is worth looking at exactly what it meant and how it evolved as time went on. By 2013 it is safe to say that Mozambique has taken a decided turn toward a market economy not just in rhetoric but in fact. Angola has taken a similar turn in rhetoric and to some extent in reality but clearly lags behind Mozambique in its market reforms.³

³ These changes in direction were due in part to prodding by donors such as the World Bank and the IMF who strongly promoted the “Washington Consensus” as laid out in Williamson 1989. But in many cases the turn to the market was simply an official recognition of ongoing commercial activity – i.e. simply allowing “shadow economy” to be sanctioned by the government.

The story of how these countries became “Marxist” in the first place was strongly influenced by the fact that their colonial occupiers were Portuguese and were therefore members of NATO. When the entirely predictable and indeed necessary independence movements began to coalesce in the 1960’s there was no way they were going to get any assistance or encouragement from other NATO allies – their only viable sources of support were the communist bloc countries, particularly the USSR, East Germany and to some extent Cuba. Getting assistance and advice from these sources carried with it the mindset and developmental prejudices that came with it - a bias toward state control of the economy and a deep conviction that the political primacy of the party was more important than anything else. Accordingly, FRELIMO in Mozambique and the MPLA in Angola took power over all aspects of the polity and economy from top to bottom.⁴

To a very great extent this was forced on them. It is estimated that 95% of Portuguese settlers evacuated from both countries in the year during which Portugal relinquished power.⁵ Some of them were reluctant to lose their Portuguese citizenship while many were scared off by the Marxist rhetoric of the incoming government and were unwilling to stay if all of their assets (farms, factories, etc.) were to be nationalized. Given the extreme socio-economic segregation along racial lines enforced by the colonial rulers, this meant that managers and owners of virtually every economic entity from large plantation down to rural convenience store departed and in many cases destroyed their assets rather than leave them to whoever was to come next. While both FRELIMO and the MPLA tried to continue established companies and plantations as going concerns, they quickly ran into a bottleneck. The racial laws preventing education or assimilation of most Africans meant that there was an extreme dearth of experienced managers after independence. Indeed, one observer in Mozambique stated that there were only 33 college graduates in the entire country after 1975.⁶

A colonial legacy that is equally important is the fact that the fascist Salazar regime exercised state control over the economy that was scarcely less comprehensive than what existed

⁴ See Messiant 1998 for a discussion of this in Angola and various FRELIMO documents from party congresses in the case of Mozambique

⁵ Kyle 1990 and 2005 contain a discussion of the effects of the independence related evacuation on the economy

⁶ Personal communication, Minister of Finance 1988

in many communist countries. Though large corporations did indeed control the “commanding heights” of the economy, the extent to which these were intertwined with government regulation and personnel should not be underestimated. Colonies were run with an eye toward extraction of surplus value and to the extent that corporations could assist in this they were encouraged and licensed by the government. Ownership of land and other productive assets was reserved for white settlers with the indigenous population relegated to less favorable zones where they were readily able to be called on for forced labor. Immigration was tightly controlled and the labor market explicitly segmented between occupations that were considered to be “white” (all formal sector jobs) or “black” (menial jobs). In this way the colonial occupiers had access to a very cheap labor force for agricultural labor or to rent out to neighbors to work in mines, as was the case in Mozambique where the government was paid in gold for Mozambican workers in South African mines.

Accordingly, it was no great leap to go from authoritarian “fascist” control of the economy and society to authoritarian “Marxist” control. Neither regime countenanced political rivals. Both employed police tactics to suppress opposition. Neither countenanced what we would call free market economies. Both vested ownership of major productive assets in the ruling class (or state if we choose the Marxist nomenclature of the newly independent governments). All that was required in the first instance was a political “decapitation” of the old colonial regime and its replacement with new leaders. But it would quite difficult to distinguish major differences between an exploitative centralizing regime run by Portuguese colonialists from an exploitative centralizing regime run by a small ruling clique.⁷

The degree of control and the institutional apparatus to enforce it were in some cases a holdover from the colonial era but also showed the influence of Eastern bloc advisors as in the formation of the “Economic Police” whose job was (putatively) to enforce pricing and distribution of goods but whose actual function was to serve as merely one more point at which surplus value could be extracted from productive activities via bribes or other forms of corruption.

⁷ See e.g. Government of Angola 1997, 2000 and 2006

The Continuation of State Control

The economic vacuum created by the departure of the Portuguese settlers and the ensuing chaos left the newly minted states little option but to take over major production units such as plantations and factories. Managing such enterprises proved more difficult given the near total collapse of economic value chains, the inexperience of new managers, and the disappearance of the old forced labor arrangements that supported the profit margins of many of these concerns. Externally funded insurrections – RENAMO in Mozambique, funded by the white Rhodesian secret police and later by South Africa and the USA; and UNITA in Angola, funded by South Africa and the USA as well as their own diamond mines – reduced the actual governable space to a mere fraction of the national territory in both cases with a consequent crash in economic activity.⁸

It could certainly be argued that the crash was a direct result not just of the civil conflict though that would have been quite sufficient for the result, but also from the misguided attempt to exercise total economic control down to the micro level. Evidence for this could be seen in the virtual emptying of government controlled marketing and distribution channels in favor of large informal markets which carried on outside of the regulatory regime. However, it was obvious in Mozambique by the early 1980's that not only was the government attempt at control failing to produce positive results, but external aid from the World Bank, the IMF and other agencies was conditional on a turn toward a market economy. In Angola the economic results of state control were no less obvious but impinged on the lives of the ruling elite far less due to their access to huge flows of oil revenue derived from newly exploited offshore oil fields.

Indeed, these oil fields contributed to Angolan elite cynicism about the motives of “development assistance” since the lip service given to market reforms and good governance was coupled with a willingness to countenance the most bloody and horrific civil war on the

⁸ See Kyle 1990 and Andersson 1992

continent so long as oil continued to flow. Not only that, but the ruling elite had little or no direct economic need to reform since their own needs and lifestyle could be amply supported by oil revenues. This promoted a mindset which unlike almost all other countries in the region did not see the need to cater to donor wishes. These attitudes were strengthened in Angola when the government won a virtually complete military victory over UNITA rather than negotiating a shared solution as recommended by donors. In short, their system worked quite well for them and they didn't feel a need to change.

Portuguese Law and Government Structure

As noted above, the newly independent governments of Mozambique and Angola, led politically by FRELIMO and the MPLA, were to a great extent simply handed the existing situation when the Portuguese military coup of 1974 resulted in the withdrawal of Portugal and independence for the African countries in 1975. One major result of this was that the political parties won independence not through a long war through which they could gain legitimacy and unite the various factions opposing the Portuguese, but rather through the fact of being the dominant parties in the capital cities at the time of independence.

What they inherited was a legal and economic structure that was very Portuguese in nature. Portugal had occupied the coastal areas of Mozambique and Angola for about 500 years prior to independence and in the 20th century actually made them provinces of Portugal itself. Accordingly, the legal structure they inherited was that of Portugal and the structure of ownership of assets was similarly Portuguese (minus of course the settlers themselves). As it turned out, the highly concentrated structure of ownership and governance was typical of all Iberian colonies as well as Iberia itself⁹.

In terms of the government itself, both Angola and Mozambique inherited and confirmed a highly centralized governing structure, with provincial and local officials appointed by and funded by the central apparatus. Though "traditional" authorities continued to exercise some

⁹ We refer here to "Iberia" rather than Portugal only because these patterns extend to almost all of Latin America as well as Lusophone Africa

local power in both countries, this was strictly limited to the most local of issues confined solely to indigenous communities. Any of these traditional authorities could be overruled or replaced at the whim of the central government. Such centralized structures lent themselves well not only to “Marxist” notions of governance but also to a broad spectrum of dictatorial regimes based on cults of personality or party or military control.

It is notable that Mozambique has now progressed to the point where it has one of the few living, voluntarily retired, ex-Presidents on the continent and though FRELIMO has yet to lose an election to the opposition, recent elections have been close enough that it is inevitable that we will see it happen at some point in the future. While an actual handover of power has to be seen to be believed, it is clearly within the realm of feasibility for it to occur.

Angola, on the other hand, remains under the same President elevated early in its independence and the ruling elite remains much the same as well. Confronted with a much less politically adept opponent in UNITA the government has gone to great lengths to coopt leaders from UNITA, giving them a voice in government (though not a decisive one) as well as being able to provide substantial monetary incentives given the immense oil wealth flooding the country. Indeed, the recent discoveries of huge natural gas reserves in Mozambique as well as other minerals will provide a major incentive to hold on to power there as has happened in Angola, making the next few years key in the political development of the country.

Portuguese Land Law and its Reform

Perhaps the most contentious issue debated in either country over the post-independence era is that of the ownership of land and the laws and regulations through which it is formalized.¹⁰ Both Angola and Mozambique have multiple sets of overlapping claims to land which can be mostly categorized as follows:

¹⁰ See Bruce, John & Shem E. Migot-Adholla Eds. 1994.

- Indigenous claims based on traditional occupancy, usually not formalized but widely recognized in the locality where they are located.¹¹
- Colonial era ownership claims, mostly vacated for those settlers who left in 1975 but which survive in cases where settlers remained
- Post-independence grants of land, which can be the result of claims or grants made at various levels of government up to and including the Presidency itself¹²

Of course, “Marxist” doctrine states that all land belongs to the “people” and is managed on their behalf by the state. This idea fits well with two important needs of any extractive regime, whether it be European or indigenous: The first is the need to be able to dispose of land as desired in order to reward supporters in a political sense. The second is the need to be able to monopolize extractive rents for mineral or other natural resource based wealth. This was particularly relevant early on in Angola where oil revenues formed (and still form) the majority of the income of the government. Diamond mines were of secondary importance but are still large in absolute terms in Angola. In Mozambique such extractive goals were manifest in land grants to large farmers but also to foreign extractive companies interested in such things as logging or other extractive activities. It should be noted that many of these land grants simply ignored the fact that there were people already living on the lands involved.

Reform of the inherited Portuguese land law has proceeded in both Angola and Mozambique and has been the subject of extremely contentious debate both within the country and between the government and various donors. Mozambicans and Angolans have taken it as a matter of fixed policy that land belongs to the nation as a whole and cannot be owned by individuals in perpetuity as is the case in most Western industrial countries. Many donors, in contrast, have argued for a land law that would support an active market in land.

While in theory the new land laws (allowing for varying periods of tenure for the purpose of using the land for farming, mining, habitation, etc.) are quite specific in how tenancy is

¹¹ See Goody, 1969 and Gluckman 1969 for a discussion of these types of tenure

¹² See Kloock-Jenson 1997 and 1998; MA/MSU Research Team 1994; McGregor 1995; Myers 1993 and Jayne et. al. 2001

granted and held, in fact the resources to actually conduct a cadastral survey with the associated bureaucratic costs has been lacking in either country. Added to this is the problem that in some areas traditional farmers use shifting cultivation methods and so are not always farming the same plot. The result is a hodgepodge in which competing interests in any particular area vie for actual control over land. Peasants are routinely dispossessed in the interest of extractive interests promoted by the central or provincial governments, while large farmers also try to gain direct control over favored parcels.

None of this really resembles an actual “Marxist” system of land tenure either in theory or in terms of its application in existing Marxist countries anywhere in the world. Rather, we are witnessing an ongoing “land grab” in which moneyed or connected players have an advantage over the less well off.

*Mineral Wealth and Marx – Is there any detectable difference?*¹³

The short answer to the question posed above is “no”. Both the Angolan and now the Mozambican governments have asserted unambiguously that the right to subsurface mineral wealth belongs to the government. In fact, the Angolan government has demonstrated quite clearly that they are willing to wage war in whatever manner and for however long it is necessary for them to exert control over the entirety of the national area and its offshore economic zones. This includes not only oil production areas but also diamond mines in the northeast part of the country. Long a source of UNITA financing, these were a major target of government military efforts in the long struggle to win the civil war.

Extraction of the oil has been done almost exclusively by foreign contractors, including US, European and other firms experienced in oil exploration and extraction. This might seem rather “un-Marxist” but was in reality part of a situation so confused that at one point Cuban

¹³ See Kyle 2005, 2006a and 2006b for a discussion of the effects of mineral revenue on the economy of Angola

soldiers were protecting US oil companies from South African mercenaries funded by the US and its allies.

But the question remains – Is this Marxist? In support of our negative answer above we have to recognize that using foreign contractors for extraction is no more a hallmark of a particular ideology than is assertion of control over subsurface mineral rights – In short, everyone does it. The centralizing tendencies that go along with the economics of the Resource Curse may appear at first glance to have some resemblance to Marxist governing philosophy but in reality are simply a manifestation of the fact that power follows money – and in a resource revenue rich country that money is located in the capital city.

Marketing, Distribution, Agricultural Extension and Marx

It is in the area of marketing and distribution that Marxist thought has had the most pervasive, and arguably the most damaging effects on the economies of Angola and Mozambique. The Marxist glorification of the production worker and the vilification of commercial traders and marketers as “parasites” who produce nothing of value has had a clear deleterious effect on the rural economy of both Angola and Mozambique.¹⁴

First, it is important to bear in mind that as discussed above the pre-independence marketing system almost completely disappeared with the departure of the Portuguese settlers who had virtually monopolized these activities.¹⁵ This was particularly important in rural areas where small stores provided a broad spectrum of services including informal rural credit. Lack of capital together with the widespread destruction and chaos of civil war prevented reactivation of these rural markets and many remain unserved by marketers to this day.

¹⁴ See FRELIMO 1968 and various Frelimo Party documents from 1977 and 1978 for a statement of government policies in these areas.

¹⁵ See Azzam & Faucher 1988; Hilmarrsson 1995; Strachan 1997; Arndt et.al. 2000; Ministerio da Industria 2001; Bumb 2002; Kyle 2006

The problem is that wholesalers and traders were regarded as profiting from the “honest” work of peasants by selling their produce for a far higher price than they paid. The real services they provided – liquidity to peasants, willingness to bear market risk if prices changed, storage and most important, transportation services – were ignored or discounted in this view of the world. All that mattered was that these traders were earning what appeared to be a healthy profit, though even huge margins could be illusory in a highly inflationary economy.¹⁶

Some districts in Angola for example, went a five years or more without once seeing a trader willing to purchase output from farmers. Any attempt to service these markets had first to overcome physical constraints of poor roads, land mines, destroyed bridges, etc. Even if these were surmounted, government regulations limited the profits that could legally be earned to a mere 25%, far below inflation rates during much of the 30 years following independence.

Indeed, this antipathy to traders extended to urban areas as well, leading to a situation where officially sanctioned retail outlets in the old city centers were virtually deserted, with no stock on their shelves, while bustling open air markets thrived on the outskirts of town. The well known “Roque Santeiro” market outside Luanda was one of the largest and most diverse markets on the continent and though it has now been shut down with the reactivation of retail activity in more permanent facilities it was for many years the go-to place for a wide variety of products from food to consumer durables and even weapons.

This repression of the marketing system helped lead to a disconnection between the producers in the countryside and the urban demand centers on the coast. Here, however, there were two big differences between Angola and Mozambique. In Angola, the pre-existing market links between city and hinterland were ruptured by the independence-associated evacuation of Portuguese and further stifled by war and banditry. Official repression prevented any real economic incentive from arising and this was exacerbated by exchange rate overvaluation which made competing food imports cheap on the coast. Indeed, this situation persists to the present day, with command economy adherents in the government reactivating entities such as MECANAGRO, a state run agricultural machinery service provider which is very clearly similar

¹⁶ Pitcher 2002 has an excellent discussion of the transition from government control to the private sector in various parts of the economy.

to machinery brigades in the old USSR but which in the Angolan context serves mainly large and well connected plantations rather than small farmers.

In Mozambique there is domestic capacity to meet urban demand on the coast, principally in Maputo. However, it is important to note that these market links, unlike the Angolan case, were NOT pre-existing. Rather, the southern part of the country imported food from abroad and paid for it with revenue from exporting labor to South African mines. Building market links for grain between the North and the South is therefore a question of development rather than rehabilitation.

Finally, we must address whether repression of marketing is truly a “marker” for Marxist economic management. Clearly, it is a characteristic common to many (indeed virtually all) Marxist economies. However, it is not exclusive to these countries – distrust of middlemen runs deep in rural areas and is a routine feature of the rural worldview in many different countries – not just those with an avowedly Marxist government. Indeed, the antipathy to profiteering middlemen owes as much to the fact that they were Portuguese colonists in the pre-independence era as it does to any governing economic philosophy.

Agricultural extension services played an important role in promoting the state view of marketing and were also a mechanism for controlling information and political participation in rural areas. Clearly inspired by political goals, rural extension meetings were in some cases run by political appointees with little agricultural knowledge. Suspicion of the motives and/or expertise of such personnel grew to be a problem in some areas, though general underfunding of extension limited the role it could actually play in many areas.¹⁷

Conclusion

What are we to make of all of this? It appears that even in areas where “Marxist” economic philosophy appears to have good explanatory power, there are also equally good

¹⁷ See Gemo and Rivera 2001 and Eicher 2002 for an in-depth discussion of the history and role of agricultural extension

alternatives to explain what happened in Angolan and Mozambican economic policy. To declare one's party to be "Marxist" may well have been more of an artifact of shifting alliances and supporters than it was of any real ideological convictions. Another indicator that this might well be the case is the fact that both the MPLA in Angola and FRELIMO in Mozambique have by now stated that they no longer consider themselves bound by the tenets of Marxist thought and are pursuing market based approaches to economic development.¹⁸ This is no doubt at least partly due to the fact that major potential donors wanted them to make such a change – But this is yet another indicator that professions of adherence to a particular economic orthodoxy are more situational than ideological in origin.

¹⁸ See, e.g. World Bank 1996 or Republic of Mozambique 1997 and 1998 for a clear statement of this. In Angola the development was somewhat later – See for example MINPLAN 2006

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