

# THE TRADE IN ROUGH DIAMONDS AND THE ANGOLAN CIVIL WAR

## 1. Introduction

This lecture is complementary to my lecture on oil and Angola's civil war. Like crude oil, rough diamonds occupy a central position within the structure of disparate exchange, be it that the position of the two raw materials is mutually differentiated, and quite clearly so. Crude oil, from the historical emergence of disparate exchange in the 1970s onwards, has been the principal commodity around which the participation of Southern *states* in the exchange of wealth against social waste has been shaped. Diamonds are not similarly a source for the financing of arms' purchases by Southern states, but rather a preferred source of war-income for *non-state actors*. Thus, rough diamonds have become the principal raw material around which the participation of African rebel movements in disparate exchange has been configured over the last decade. Hence, the below review regarding the exchange of rough diamonds against arms is a first and crucial step towards analyzing and understanding how disparate exchange functions under the specific conditions of civil wars.

Furthermore, - contrary to crude oil the role of diamonds in disparate exchange has not been shaped by a preceding role of this raw material's in the structure of unequal exchange. As stated in my previous lecture, the exchange mechanism whereby oil exports are used by Southern states for the imports of arms and armament systems was consciously conceived by US imperialism, in response to the efforts of Southern states to end imperialist exploitation through unequal exchange (1). This same history does not apply to the exchange of rough diamonds against weaponry. As I will indicate below, this particular raw material has entered the new structure of exploitation 'out of the blue', i.e. without a prehistory as key commodity under unequal exchange. Its pre-eminent position amongst the various minerals that are used by rebel movements to finance their wars, is based on its exceptional qualities as a commodity with a high value, small weight, easy marketability and indestructibility (2). Whereas rough diamonds were largely absent from the past debates on unequal exchange, they figure very prominently in the current discussion on disparate exchange.

Further, the review of Angola's civil war offers us a striking opportunity to highlight the role of rough diamonds *vis-a-vis* that crude oil. In other armed conflicts within the region of central Africa, the dividing lines between the parties-at-war and their modes of functioning either are less clear cut, - or diamonds are traded by rebel movements and their foreign allies alongside other mineral commodities. Thus, in the context of the gruesome civil war that has raged in Sierra Leone, both the government-side and the rebel-side were seen as having relied on the trade in rough diamonds so as to be able to carry on their wars (3). And whereas rough diamonds are a priced commodity for the various rebel movements which have been fighting the Kinshasa-based government of the Congo, - in this country gem stones share their position as currency for

the waging of war with several other raw materials, including cobalt and gold (4). In the case of Angola on the contrary, rough diamonds have held an *exclusive* position, i.e. as the sole type of mineral which UNITA has mined and marketed so as to be able to engage in disparate exchange.

Below then, I will briefly review the nature of the international diamond sector, the role of the South African company *De Beers*, the history of the mining and marketing of Angolan diamonds, and the mining and marketing activities undertaken by UNITA. The primary aim of this review is not primarily to expose the wrongdoings of Angolan warriors and their international allies, for such has already been done quite effectively by international activists and researchers who have campaigned against blood diamonds in recent years. My aim, instead, will be to bring out some of the *structural* features which characterise the position of diamonds within the system of disparate exchange, and to bring out the *continuum* between UNITA's recent trade in diamonds, and Angola's history of the mining and marketing of precious stones. For it is only through a historical-analytical approach, and by placing the given trade within a broader framework, that we can avoid a superficial conceptualization of the problematic, such as is implied by too large an emphasis which some campaigners place on the differentiation between *legal* and *illegal* trade in diamonds.

## **2. Diamonds: A Raw Material with an Exceptional Status**

The first and overwhelmingly important point to be made about the international diamond sector is that it is dominated by one single multinational, i.e. the South-African based company of *De Beers*. For many decades on end, *De Beers* has exerted monopoly power, by controlling both the lion's share of the mining of rough diamonds, and a high percentage of diamond sales. In the early eighties, *De Beers*' share of both was said to be around 85 percent. Over the last decade, the picture of the sector has been gradually changing, and *De Beers* does not exercise the same exclusive economic power as was the case in the past. However, even according to the company's own admissions, the mines which it runs in South Africa, and in partnership with the governments of Botswana, Namibia and Tanzania, still account for some 40 percent of global production of gem stones. Besides, thanks to the marketing deals which it has signed with Russia and Canada, *De Beers* still is reported to control some two-thirds of the world diamond market (5). In short, the diamond sector - contrary to most other sectors for production of raw materials - today continues being dominated by one single multinational.

In the past, rough diamonds were exempted from the effects of unequal exchange, and such largely as an off-spin of the existence of the Central Selling Organisation (CSO), a London-based marketing company through which *De Beers* used to manipulate the international price of diamonds. Through the CSO, diamond parcels were distributed to a select group of 160 intermediaries, called 'sight holders', who were at the back and call of the *De Beers* company. At the same time, *De Beers* maintained a large diamond buffer stock, which indeed allowed it exert a controlling influence over the price of diamonds. It is common knowledge that through the manipulation of supply and demand, *De Beers* for long has been able to support 'artificially high prices' (6). In view of these

exceptional conditions, Southern countries exporting diamonds - contrary to the oil exporting countries - could never aspire to transform power relations within the diamond sector and develop the kind of regulatory power over production and prices that OPEC has been able to develop. For *De Beers*' power in the sector was extremely well entrenched.

A few years back, however, *De Beers* announced dramatic changes in its mode of operation, - changing which led some to prematurely declare the end of *De Beers*' monopoly (7). In response to widespread criticisms over its purchasing policies, more particularly the buying of diamonds hailing from civil war-infected regions in Africa, - the company now indicated it would henceforth restrict itself to moral leadership over the sector, and would faithfully help to eliminate blood diamonds from the international trade. The CSO was renamed the Diamond Trading Company, and *De Beers*' shareholders were instructed to refrain from any commercial involvements with blood diamonds. Whereas earlier, *De Beers* had been the prime target of campaign groups targeting the smuggling of 'illegal' diamonds and their sale via African countries possessing no diamond mines or alluvial deposits of their own, - the company now proclaimed it would fully comply and actively cooperate with international efforts to establish a system of certificates of origin. Apparently, the *De Beers* company staged a major turn-about in its policy.

However, critics were quick to point out that *De Beers*' changed orientation was largely inspired by its desire to *strengthen* its hold over the international diamond sector. The company's monopoly power by the late 1990s had been weakened by the entry of new actors. Moreover, amongst the sector's various actors, it could with comparative ease take its distance from 'blood diamonds', since these represent only a small proportion of the total diamond trade (8). Moreover, experienced observers have expressed doubts as to whether the certificate system finally agreed on in 2002 can be fully effective (9). Two things stand out for sure. One is that a relative reduction in the impact of blood diamonds on international trade, can in no way be equated with forcing an end to the system of disparate exchange, since the latter operates both at a *non-state* and at a *state-level* in countries of the South. The second is that illegal diamond trade, and more broadly diamond trade as a part of disparate exchange, should not just be questioned because the stones help finance cruel wars. A complete overhaul of *De Beers*' power and the very overthrow of the imperialist system of disparate exchange only seem likely, once Africa's position within the ongoing process of globalisation be radically changed.

### **3. De Beers' History in Angola**

Diamond mining in Angola has a long history, dating as far back as the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first rough diamonds were discovered in 1912. Five years later DIAMANG was set up, the *Companhia de Diamantes de Angola*, which initially focused mainly on the exploitation of alluvial deposits in river beds, rather than on detecting underground deposits, known as 'kimberlite pipes'. The success of DIAMANG, which up to the year 1970/71 is reported to have held a countrywide concession, stating the right to

prospect and mine diamonds throughout the territory of the Angolan colony, was considerable. According to Tony Hodges, for almost three decades until the post World War II boom in coffee exports, diamonds were Angola's principal export item (10). Diamonds remained the country's second main export item, when coffee displaced diamonds as the colony's principal export commodity. Meanwhile, DIAMANG grew into the largest commercial enterprise in Portugal's African empire. The company's activities helped ensure that Angola's diamond exports, measured in quantitative terms, continued to expand until 1974.

Against this background of many decades of experience in diamond exploration and mining in Angola, the South African company *De Beers* entered the field in 1971, when the Portuguese government granted a diamond concession to a consortium which included *De Beers* as shareholder, with the aim of extending mineral development in the then colony. Further, although diamond mining was largely nationalised after Angola had gained independence in 1975, a *De Beers* subsidiary reportedly continued to hold main responsibility for the sale of Angolan diamonds via the monopoly company's marketing organization, the CSO. Again, when diamond production fell subsequent to independence, the government according to a World Bank study signed a management agreement with MATS, a services company controlled by *De Beers*. Meanwhile, Angolan diamonds continued being sold through the CSO. It is only by the mid-1980s that *De Beers*' presence in government-held territory was apparently ended, partly in consequence of deteriorating security in areas where the *De Beers* subsidiary MATS had functioned, and partly because the Angolan government radically restructured its marketing policy around diamonds (11).

*De Beers* has, however, continued to show a keen interest in buying Angolan diamonds ever since, and has been present in Angola up to the later part of the 1990s. Research reports exposing UNITA's exchange of diamonds against arms have identified *De Beers* as a key buyer of diamonds smuggled by UNITA-officials to Zaire and other neighbouring countries, and sold at border posts to diamond intermediaries. Thus, reports published by the international human rights' group Human Rights Watch, and by the London-based research group Global Witness, out of concern over war crimes committed by UNITA, have described *De Beers* as a crucial accomplice of the Angolan rebel movement (12). The academic researcher Tony Hodges concurs with this assessment, citing statements made by the South African multinational company itself. According to Hodges, up to 1998 when the United Nations imposed a ban on the sale of blood diamonds by UNITA, *De Beers* had been *systematically* buying up diamonds illegally exported from Angola, including diamonds mined in UNITA-held territory (13).

Having been in league with Angola's socialist-leaning government for some 10 years, and having subsequently switched over to and sided with the Angolan government's sworn enemy UNITA for much of the 1990s, *De Beers*, was ultimately forced to withdraw from Angola under the influence of the effective international campaign around 'blood diamonds'. A part of the pressure against *De Beers* was built up via the United Nations. Thus, in June 1998, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution, prohibiting the direct or indirect import from Angolan territory of all

diamonds which do not bear a certificate of origin furnished by the Angolan government (14). No less significant was the pressure exerted by international campaign groups, such as the Fatal Transactions Campaign, which have severely criticised *De Beers* for being a buyer of blood diamonds. And although the monopoly company, as mentioned, has subsequently tried to clear its image, by giving its backing to the formation of a worldwide system of certificates, its history of collusion in UNITA's commission of war crimes cannot so easily be erased.

#### 4. UNITA's Participation in Disparate Exchange

We now need to review UNITA's mode of participating in disparate exchange. First, the rebel's movement's singular reliance on diamond production, as the basis for its war efforts, appears to have developed later than the MPLA-government's reliance on oil exports. Whereas during much of the decade of the 1980s, UNITA's war continued to be financed by US imperialism and by the *apartheid* regime of South Africa, - after the end of the Cold War the rebel movement was left to fend for its own. Meanwhile, in the late 1980s, the movement had conquered important mining areas in Lunda North and Lunda Sul, Angola's main diamond producing provinces locating in the Northeastern part of the country. Here, UNITA built an elaborate structure for the extraction and marketing of precious stones. Some mines reportedly were exploited directly, by civilian labourers recruited to work under the movement's own troops. However, UNITA also taxed many of the independent diggers, *garimpeiros*, who flooded the provinces and in the 1990s carried on open mining activities in alluvial sites (15).

The income which UNITA harnessed from the operation of the mines, from the taxation of diggers, as well as from the issuing of licences to diamond buyers, was undoubtedly huge. Estimates for the total revenue which it gathered through the period from 1992 up until 1998 when revenue dropped, vary - from a figure of around \$ 2 Billion stipulated by diamond industry sources, to the figure of \$ 3.7 Billion estimated by UN experts (16). According to the author Tony Hodges, even if one presumes that the lower figure is closest to reality, this still would imply that UNITA's income from diamond extraction during the 1990s was far higher than the financial support it previously used to receive from the US and South Africa. And although the revenue continued to be smaller than the income which the Angolan government reaped from foreign sales of crude oil, - UNITA in the 1990s nevertheless held the status of an extraordinarily rich rebel movement. The illegal sales of diamonds hailing from Angolan territory through most of the 1990s are known to have dwarfed official sales.

In the decade of the 1990s, celebrated by policymakers in the North as the decade of globalization, then, the country of Angola turned into a country, where *both* parties entangled in civil war relied equally heavily on the mechanism of disparate exchange as method of war financing. Again, like the government's methods for the exchange of oil against arms, the methods which UNITA has used to exchange diamonds against arms too have been recorded relatively well. According to the UN panel of experts which carried out an investigation for the Security Council, UNITA mainly employed the method of *barter*, meaning the direct exchange of diamond parcels against arms, without

the mediation of money. Thus, UNITA's mode of application of disparate exchange was direct, and differentiated from the largely *indirect* forms of exchange used by the MPLA-government. Only secondarily is the movement stated to have relied on the sale of diamonds for cash, which it did require for operational expenses, such as for travel of UNITA-officials and for payment of UNITA-staff (17).

Lastly, it cannot be stressed sufficiently that UNITA's participation in disparate exchange, like that of the MPLA-government, too constituted a continuation of the export-oriented policies which had been instituted in Angola by its former colonial masters. In fact, although diamonds were ultimately to be overtaken by coffee-exports as principal export commodity, through a whole three decade period diamonds extracted by the colonial DIAMANG company, were, as has been mentioned above, the colony's number one export commodity. Also, all through the decades leading up to Angola's independence in 1975, diamonds remained high on the list of the colony's export goods (18). Here again, then, one is justified in drawing a line running from the export-dependence promoted by Angola's former rulers, to the export-dependence of UNITA under the system of disparate exchange. Since the movement has so exclusively relied on diamond exports as its preferred method of war financing in the 1990s, one is justified in concluding that UNITA through its singular dependence on illegal diamond sales for war-financing, has carried the economic policy of colonial rulers *to its very extreme*.

### **5. The MPLA-Government: Erasing Blood Diamonds via a State-Monopoly on Diamond Marketing?**

Let's now analyse the meaning of the recent formation of a diamond exporting monopoly by the Angolan government. This exercise will help us develop yet further insights into the role of diamonds in Angola's civil war. First, the given monopoly agency, called the Angola Selling Corporation (*Ascorp*), was officially formed in February, 2000, presumably in order to reduce smuggling, and to increase government revenue from the sale of diamonds. *Ascorp*, according to the diamond research specialist Christian Dietrich, is composed of the Angolan state, which via a state commercial agency holds 51% of *Ascorp*'s shares, and of several foreign shareholders, including Sylvian Goldberg and Lev Leviev (19). In bringing all the buying and selling activities in the diamond sector under one single institution, the Angolan government, amongst others, hoped to reduce UNITA-smuggling of diamonds. It is wellknown that up until the late 1990s, diamonds produced in UNITA-held areas were finding their way into official export channels via those holding buying licenses of the Angolese government.

Now, the point to be underlined here is the very fact of the flow of illegal diamonds via official channels towards export markets. Independent researchers have, for instance, discovered that it has been easy to forge Angolan certificates of origin, and bribe Angolan officials. Again, since the buyers licensed in the past operated on a commission basis, they had a vested interest in not asking questions about the origin of the goods (20). Again, it has been questioned whether the monopoly company formed in 2000 would be effective in identifying UNITA diamonds mined in close proximity to government-friendly *garimpeiros* (21). Thus, whereas the formation of *Ascorp* is

intended to counter smuggling of rough diamonds by rebels - as is the purpose of a similar state-monopoly for the centralization of diamond-buying formed in the Congo – scepticism has been expressed as to whether the given step would be effective. In any case, the formation of the monopoly companies exposes the fact that rebel movements in the past have been able to participate in disparate exchange via their very opponents in the internal war!

A second objective of the formation of *Ascorp* was to enhance government revenues from the trade in diamonds. Here again, a critical comment is called for. It is true, as Tony Hodges has stressed, that the Angolan government over a prolonged period of time has earned very little from the country's diamond industry. Fiscal revenue between 1992 and 1996 is stated to have amounted to a paltry minus one percent of the government's gross fiscal income (22)! Here, *Ascorp* according to independent researchers, has indeed brought a major change. Whereas the volume of diamonds mined by UNITA for a variety of reasons has declined drastically in the later part of the 1990s – exports reportedly amounted to \$ 100 million in 2000 -, state revenue in the given year was reported to have risen significantly. It, according to *Ascorp*'s own sources, increased from \$ 31 million in 1998 and 1999 combined, to \$ 66 million in the year 2000 (23). Thus, the measure, to an extent at least, appears to have been effective in countering corruption and fraud in the country's diamond sector, and therefore has been evaluated as a success.

However, the question is whether the parameters of the discussion have been defined sufficiently broadly by investigators on the diamond trade in order to unravel and help *transform* the very structure of disparate exchange. Surely, the enhanced state-income from diamonds, now that civil war in Angola has come to an end, *may* finally accrue to social sectors such as education and health, - sectors which have been badly neglected during Angola's prolonged civil war. However, when the first assessments were made regarding *Ascorp* the end of the civil war had not yet been announced. Therefore, in the context of the then ongoing civil war, enhanced state-revenue from diamond sales could not be equated with the elimination of disparate exchange, but heralded a *shift* in access to disparate exchange, from one warring party to the other. No matter how significant the enlarged state-income from diamonds may have been for the MPLA-government, the formation of *Ascorp* in itself did not necessarily affect Angola's macabre participation in globalization.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this lecture I have briefly reviewed the role of diamond exports in the Angolan civil war. To conclude, I once again wish to emphasize that whereas gem stones or industrial diamonds, to my knowledge, have never figured prominently in the debate on unequal exchange, the trade in diamond stones has very prominently entered the discussion on disparate exchange. Whereas rough diamonds, in consequence, of the monopoly structure of the given sector, were largely exempted from the effects of the changing terms of international trade, the artificially high valuation of rough diamonds has ensured that the trade in this raw material has turned into the preferred mode of

financing military campaigns for rebel movements throughout central Africa. Precisely because diamonds are light and carry a high price, and because they can be transported easily, rebel movements in Angola, Sierra Leone and the Congo have all taken to illegal diamond trading as method to gather financial resources. Meanwhile, UNITA's trading success has not been equalled by any other rebel movement in Africa.

Further, although diamonds did not figure in the discussion on unequal exchange, this does not mean that UNITA's export policies are a new given in Angolan history. Historically, mining activities geared towards the extraction of rough diamonds were developed in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when as stated, the mining company DIAMANG was set up. In a way, the techniques used by DIAMANG and its successor company according to observers paved the way for the extraction of rough diamonds by independent diggers, *garimpeiros*, in the 1990s, since the latter benefited from the river diversions and river drainings carried out by mining companies in the past. In any case, in relying on the exchange of rough diamonds against arms, UNITA has instituted a policy which should be assessed as the continuation and *extreme* implementation of a policy-trend which was set way back in colonial times. For whereas earlier the list of (official) exports from the colony included several top-items, UNITA's exports of primary products in the period reviewed were restricted to merely one item.

Further, in comparing the mode of operation of UNITA and that of the Angolan government, one may note several major differences. Surely, from a legal perspective, there is reason to differentiate between exports carried out via official channels, and exports organized as illegal trade. This differentiation has been crucial to the discussion on blood diamonds, which has targeted the elimination of diamonds heralding from rebel-held areas in central Africa, and which has meanwhile resulted in the adoption of a system of certificates of origin, which, if effective, would help eliminate illegal trade. However, as my review of the formation of a state-monopoly for the centralization of buying operations has brought out, there is a serious risk that the differentiation between so called *bona fide* trade and illegal trade will serve to narrow down the discussion on disparate exchange. Any full assessment of the consequences of disparate exchange for Africa, in fact, needs to take account of the full range of *direct and indirect* methods for the transfer of income from the sale of raw materials to the purchasing of arms.

The Angolan civil war, after having brought untold hardship for the country's people, now appears to be over. Yet this case will undoubtedly continue to serve as a standard case of disparate exchange. Here, the trading mechanism has been applied with equal blindness by both sides in the conflict. Whatever the earlier nature of the armed conflict between the MPLA-government and UNITA may have been, - in the decade of the 1990s neither side has to any measurable degree relied on people's convictions to carry on their military campaigns; both to an equal extent have depended on the export of one single type of raw material as source for the financing of war. Neither of the given raw materials – crude oil and rough diamonds – are raw materials which as of 2002 are subject to *unequal* exchange; both on the contrary figure very prominently in the debate on disparate exchange. Moreover, in view of the exclusive dependence by both the MPLA-government and UNITA on the proceeds of one single exported commodity,

disparate exchange in the case of Angola has been a straight *continuum* with Africa's history of colonialism.

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