Rising for whom?

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Biography

Dr Athanasios Stathopoulos is a University Lecturer (Assistant Professor) at the Institute for History at Leiden University. He completed his PhD at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, under the supervision of Professor Ian Taylor (2011–2015).

Abstract

The increase of African per capita growth figures led international organisations, the media and pundits to proclaim that the rise of Africa is inevitable, as the result of novel policies and an improved environment in the continent. Ian Taylor, in his article 'Is Africa rising?', is questioning the arguments on which this narrative is based. The present piece seeks to discuss the main contributions of Taylor's article and show how it has influenced debates on the topic.

Keywords: Africa rising; Economic growth; Commodity dependence; Natural resources; Development; Ian Taylor

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Introduction

The untimely loss of Ian Taylor has undoubtedly left a huge void in the lives of his family and close friends. At the same time, the academic world, and more specifically the fields of African Politics and International Relations, have lost a unique scholar, a brilliant mind and a very kind person.

Ian Taylor was a rare kind of academic. He managed to combine his impressive knowledge, deep love and interest for Africa, with a profound understanding of the inner workings of international relations. Although scholars working on a particular region often become uncritical proponents of that area, Ian Taylor managed to walk a fine line; he combined both a critical stance towards the interventions and contributions of foreign states and international organisations to Africa, as well as a concern about the failures of African elites to improve their countries' quality of governance and overall living standards, with an unabated enthusiasm for the continent.

I had the privilege to write my PhD thesis under his supervision at the University of St Andrews. The discussions that we held have been indelibly stamped on my memory. I remember vividly our conversation about the prospects of Africa, and his criticism of the "Africa rising" narrative. He was eager to see the continent rise and develop. It was also plain to him, however, that the current process of growth would not lead Africa to its desired path. His criticism, which at the time sounded to many as misguided, is now commonplace, and his arguments have influenced, and are being reproduced by, the majority of scholars in the field. As Paul Williams (2021) has noted, 'Ian was way ahead of the game'.

The present piece aims to discuss Ian Taylor's article 'Is Africa rising?', which is widely considered to be a crucial contribution to the debate on Africa's future.

"Africa rising"

Ian Taylor's article is one of the first that questioned the "Africa rising" narrative. At the time of its publication, most of the discussion centred on Africa's impressive growth, its potential to become the next Asia, and its clean break from past "sins" (Rotberg, 2013; Clarke, 2012; Radelet, 2010; French, 2012; Young, 2012). *The Economist* had moved away from its characterisation of Africa as 'hopeless', and was talking about 'the hopeful continent', providing evidence that Africa was rising (2011). In the same vein, *Time Magazine*'s 2012 edition was also certain about the rise of Africa, even though, as Taylor (2016) had astutely remarked, the magazine had run a story with the exact same title fourteen years earlier (pp. 11–12). Thus, the importance of his article lies not only on its thorough and detailed argumentation against the "Africa rising" narrative, but also on its foresight.

Taylor's analysis is, as always, thorough. It questions the "Africa rising" narrative by looking at it from numerous angles. The article is built around the following arguments: the current process of growth is unsustainable, given that it is based on over-dependence on the export of raw materials, which constitutes a process that does not alter Africa's structural profile and its detrimental place in the international division of labour; growth is driven by external demand and rising commodity prices; a real rise of Africa would necessitate changes in the structural features of Africa's economies; current growth is not based on policies within Africa or improved quality of governance; Africa's economies have become less diversified and are now actually more commodity-dependent; past commodity booms have not led to sustainable growth for African economies; and increased focus by economists on GDP presents a skewed picture of growth, as it ignores the fact that it is based on an unsustainable exploitation of finite resources.

The two main contributions of the article can be considered to be the following. On the one hand, the article shows that the notional "rise" of Africa is based on growth, which can be considered at best shaky, as it is not the result of improved internal policies within the continent, but of increased external demand for – and rising prices of – Africa's raw materials by emerging economies, and more specifically China. On the other hand, and closely linked to the previous argument, the article shows that this process of extraction and exportation of natural resources is unsustainable and detrimental for Africa in the long term, as it actually deepens the continent's 'dependent position in the global economy' (Taylor, 2016, p. 9).

Old wine in a new bottle?

Can we argue that 'Africa emerges' (Rotberg, 2013) or that it is moving from 'darkness to destiny' (Clarke, 2012)? That is, have the fundamental characteristics of Africa's political economy changed to such an extent that we can confidently say that 'Africa will rule the twenty-first century' (*African Business*, 2013)? Taylor was adamant that the narrative about Africa's rise is unfounded and undeservingly optimistic, as much of this process is 'overwhelmingly characterised by the deployment and inflow of capital-intensive investment for the extraction and exportation of natural resources' (Taylor, 2016, p. 11) and, thus, not a result of improved policies in the continent.

The "Africa rising" narrative is based on the presumption that political and economic conditions in the continent, both of which account for the growth seen in the past few years, have improved significantly, a fact which constitutes the basis for optimism about Africa's prospects. '[T]he engines of development are still going strong. Democratic governance, political participation and economic management look set to improve further' argued *The Economist* (2013). Taylor provides convincing evidence to show why this is not the case. Governance indexes reveal that 'there is little evidence that the quality of governance in African countries overall is improving' (Taylor, 2014, p. 147). The majority of Africa's population has seen no overall governance improvement since 2010, with the World Bank agreeing that the governance environment has not improved during the period associated with Africa's growth. Moreover, people's perceptions about their countries' performance are diametrically opposed to the "Africa rising" narrative. According to an Afrobarometer survey, the majority of Africans is dissatisfied with their governments on issues relating to economic management, living standards and income inequality (*AfricaFocus Bulletin*, 2013).

Taylor (2014), thus, shows that the growth reported is significantly due, on the one hand, to increased demand for Africa's resources, and on the other, to an increase in commodity prices; consequently, this reality is 'qualitatively different from the picture of a rising Africa whose policies have driven growth' (p. 147). Africa's growth has not only taken place within a favourable international economic environment but can, in fact, be linked directly to the increasing demand of commodities by emerging economies. As Taylor notes, SSA's growth figures can be attributed to the latter, while 'concern over predicted declines in petroleum reserves, apprehensions over the so-called Peak Oil scenario, instability in the Middle East, and oil price speculation placed further upward pressure on prices, peaking in 2008' (2014, p. 147). The role of China, more specifically, is one that cannot be disregarded. Taylor had studied closely the relationship between emerging economies – and in particular BRICS – and Africa, thus recognising the ever-increasing role of the former in the continent. He argued that 'economic relationships with the BRICS nations, particularly China, and rising commodity prices were the main drivers behind the recent economic improvements in SSA, adding nearly 2.5 percentage points to the growth of the typical African economy by the mid-2000s' (Taylor, 2014, pp. 148–149). Taylor was thus convinced – and reality has, so far, corroborated his findings – that Africa's growth was not based on 'spectacularly right' policies, as has been the emphasis from reports by international organisations, but has instead been based on increasing demand by China, India and other emerging economies for Africa's primary commodities. Finally, the "Africa rising" narrative is misguided according to Taylor, not only because there is no evidence to claim that the continent is going through a radically different and better stage in its history, but also because there are signs that history is repeating itself. Commodity booms were initially heralded by commentators as positive for Africa, argues Taylor, and in 1974, 'in the wake of the then-latest commodity boom, a popular assertion was that "trade prospects for the developing world [were] considerably better in 1973 than they were in 1951 or even in 1960". Yet, the following three decades saw widespread economic collapse and much of the continent plunging into instability, debt, and perpetual crises' (2014, p. 149). Africa's structural characteristics and political economy have not changed significantly since then, and Taylor cautioned against us repeating the mistakes of the past.

Structural dependence

Africa's growth, then, can hardly be attributed to new economic policies within the continent or improved governance, but is mostly due to increased external demand for Africa's resources by emerging economies, and a boom in commodity prices. Even if this is the case, however, can it still be argued that Africa will "rise" taking advantage of these favourable conditions? Taylor argued that, not only is the current process unlikely to lead to Africa's rise but will, instead, be detrimental to its development.

The main reason for these negative prospects relates to Africa's subordinate position within the global political economy, and the nature of the current model of growth. As Taylor noted, '[d]ue to the colonial experience, Africa was inserted into the global division of labour in a particular fashion' and 'African economies remain integrated in the global economy in ways that are generally unfavorable to the continent and ensure structural dependence' (2020, p. 33; 2014, p. 144). What is important to note is that the current process of growth risks entrenching underdevelopment by trapping Africa in the 'natural resource corner', while it does nothing to alter the 'external dominance and socially damaging and extraverted forms of accumulation' that characterise Africa's position in the global political economy (Bracking and Harrison, in Taylor, 2014, pp. 143–144).

The current growth on which the "Africa rising" narrative is based can be considered damaging for the prospects of the continent, as it contributes to an increase in commodity dependence and a decrease in the economy's diversification. Africa, which constitutes the continent most dependent on primary commodity exports, has seen its dependence increase during the period associated with the "Africa rising" narrative. More specifically, 'dependence on external markets, as measured by the export-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio […] doubled from 26 per cent in 1995 to 51 per cent in 2007' (Dembele, in Taylor, 2014, p. 148). This rapid rise in the share of primary commodities is rightly judged as a negative development by Taylor, since the evidence is clear that countries rich in natural resources often suffer from a resource curse, whereby resources undermine development (Sachs and Warner, 1999). Indeed, '[t]he figures demonstrate that Africa continues to be much less diversified than the rest of the world', trapping the continent in the 'natural resource corner' and increasing its de-industrialisation (Taylor, 2014, p. 149).

Moreover, central to Taylor's argument about the unsustainability of the current process of growth is the fact that the characteristics of this growth do not alter the structural features of Africa's economies. He distinguished between superficial features, which include, among others, GDP figures, and structural features, which 'are less obvious but more critical, chief among them being Africa's place in the international division of labor' (Taylor, 2014, p. 144). As he argued a few years later, this process essentially perpetuates and reproduces the damaging conditions within which African economies operate, and it 'is clear that the idea of "Africa Rising" has gone hand in hand with no serious structural change in the continent's economies; indeed, they are linked with de-industrialisation, alongside the entrenchment of dependency on primary products' (Taylor, 2020, p. 18). Taylor was clear that unless natural resources and high commodity prices are converted into structural change, no sustainable development will occur in Africa.

Finally, Taylor noted that the negative features of this structural dependence and the current model of growth promotion are concealed by the fixation on GDP figures. The transition from GNP (Gross National Product) to GDP has resulted in the notional economic boom of a number of countries, which incorporate the earnings of multinational corporations operating within their borders in their calculations, even though the effect on the economy might be minimal or non-existent, as the profits may not remain in the country. Moreover, and of high import for the development of the continent, is the fact that the trade of non-renewable resources is not accounted for and is considered as a positive process. As Taylor argued, 'a country can have very high growth rates, calculated using GDP indicators, while also embarking on unsustainable exploitation of its finite resources' (2014, p. 151).

Conclusion

Ian Taylor's analysis leaves us with valuable advice and lessons for the future. It asks us to contemplate the conditions under which a true rise of Africa would occur. What are the necessary changes on both the domestic and international levels that would allow Africa to witness long-term, equitable progress? Can resource extraction lead to sustainable development, whose benefits can be reaped by the vast majority of the people? Finally, how can Africa move up the global production chain and alter its place in the international division of labour? These are questions that remain to be answered; Ian Taylor's work though, has already provided us with important lessons and invaluable insights.

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