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After Ian Taylor

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Biography

Philip Nel received a DPhil from Stellenbosch University and lectured in the Department of Political Science until 2002. He was Ian Taylor's PhD supervisor. He moved to the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, in 2003, where he teaches on Global Political Economy, and Ethics and International Relations. He is a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and has acted as visiting professor in Japan and as DAAD visiting professor in Germany.

Abstract

This commemorative piece reviews Ian Taylor's Stellenbosch experience and the lasting influence it has had on his own work, and that of many of his colleagues. It also considers ways in which this influence can be deepened by shifting the focus from macro to micro determinants of the persistence of inequality and deprivation in Africa – issues that deeply troubled Ian throughout his life.

Keywords: Global governance; Post-Cold War era; Global justice; Gramsci; Africa; China

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I.

I met Ian Taylor in 1996, when he decided to join the International Studies programme at Stellenbosch University as a PhD student, under my supervision. Ian turned out to be one of the very best PhD students that any supervisor can ever dream of and, in the process, I learned more from him than he could possibly learn from me. In what follows, I pay tribute to this remarkable scholar by reflecting on the forming experiences that we all went through in the 1990s. I also highlight some of the lasting effects that this had on Ian's own work and his legacy. I conclude by suggesting some ways in which we can honour that legacy by taking up some of the unanswered questions that Ian's work raises.

What an exciting time the 1990s were for students of international politics! The structural change brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet empire created space for global and regional normative and governance innovations on a scale not seen since the end of WWII: The Paris Charter for New Europe (1990) and the formation of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe introduced this decade of promise and hope, followed by important milestones such as the United Nations Framework Convention

on Climate Change (1992), the Chemical Weapons Convention (1993), the activation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS – 1994) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (1996). International humanitarian law received a further huge boost with the Ottawa Treaty that banned the production, stockpiling and trade in anti-personnel landmines (1997), and with the acceptance of the Rome Statute and the formation of the International Criminal Court in 1998. In various conflict zones, including the Middle East (Oslo Accords and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty) and Ireland (Good Friday Agreement), successful conflict-resolving initiatives were launched in seemingly intractable contexts. The end of regional conflicts in southern Africa, with the independence of Namibia and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Angola and Mozambique, heralded a new era of regional cooperation. In South Africa, the release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of the African National Congress and the launch of power-transition talks, meant the end of apartheid and the introduction of full democracy in that 'wide and sorrowful land' (as the Afrikaans poet, N.P. van Wyk Louw, once described the country). The 1990s were indeed reminiscent of another famous 90s decade, and William Wordsworth's words about the decade following the French Revolution could easily be applied: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive' (Wordsworth, 1805).

Not everything was bliss, however, and not everyone was taken in by the signals of a new and promising era of multilateral political cooperation in the 1990s. The then emerging field of critical International Political Economy, inspired by the work of Susan Strange, Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, William Robinson and Craig Murphy, to name a few, highlighted the many contradictions that lurked behind these signs of a political end of history. There were too many signals of brewing trouble in the world economy for these political economists to share the optimism that the end of history had arrived. Recessions and financial crises in Sweden, Mexico, Russia and eventually in Asia, were warning signals of an over-heated financial sector. What ultimately became known as the process of financialisation, in which financial exchanges came to dominate the global economy, was due to a series of political decisions that saw the state deliberately withdrawing from regulating the economy. The resulting 'mad money', as Susan Strange called it in her 1998 eponymous book, increased volatility and undermined many of the social insurance guarantees that were built up during the preceding era of embedded liberalism (1946–1971).

Among heterodox political economists in the 1990s, the alarm was sounded about growing levels of income and wealth inequality both inside and between nations. These alarm bells were not taken seriously by mainstream economists and specialists in international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund though, where the official belief still was that poverty can and should be addressed independently of inequality. In fact, the orthodoxy was that the rich provide the necessary savings required for new investment and economic growth and that the poor would eventually benefit from that. Any attempt to mess with the income/wealth of the rich would, therefore, limit poverty relief and had to be avoided.

The contradictions of a so-called liberal rule-based world trade system were also emerging in the 1990s. While the launch of the World Trade Organization in 1995 was welcomed as an important step in the fight against beggar-thy-neighbour protectionism, critics warned that the final agreements in the Uruguay Round were only formally equitable. Agreements such as TRIPS (Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights) favoured the already industrialised participants, and imposed unfair implementation costs on the industrialising nations of the world. In addition, continued practices of production and export subsidisation perpetrated by many industrialised states, made it extremely difficult for producers in the developing world to compete.

II.

It was amid these conflicting world trends that Ian Taylor decided to apply to Stellenbosch University to do a PhD in the Department of Political Science. As was the case with many of us in the 1990s, the heady mixtures of the successes of global political liberalism and the contradictions of the liberal world economy were the forming intellectual experiences of Ian's early academic career. The contrast between political hope, on the one hand, and economic deprivation and injustice on the other, was particularly acute in the South Africa of the 1990s. What Ian did – something that inspired many – was to develop a critical political economy that could make sense of these contrasts and contradictions.

Ian completed his MPhil on the African policy of the PRC at the University of Hong Kong in the mid-1990s and published his first peer-reviewed academic paper on that work (Taylor, 1997). Painstakingly researched and very clearly written, the MPhil thesis heralded Ian's critical assessment of the economic bases of foreign policy. The distrust of Chinese foreign policy that he developed in the MPhil, served him well in later years and he matured into one of the world's leading experts on Chinese foreign policy and Africa. The distinctive Coxian and Gramscian theoretical approach that characterised much of his later work, however, only developed while he was at Stellenbosch. We were, of course, very flattered that he chose Stellenbosch, of all places, as he would easily have been accepted at high-profile South African English-speaking universities, such as Cape Town and Witwatersrand. Stellenbosch, where the language of instruction then was still predominantly Afrikaans, was just emerging from its long association with leading apartheid thinkers and politicians. Up until B.J. Vorster, all South African Prime Ministers had studied at Stellenbosch, which in 1918 changed its name from Victoria College to the Universiteit van Stellenbosch and became an Afrikaans-speaking institution. In the public mind, Stellenbosch was associated with white-exclusivity, conservative theological thinking and the scholarly justification of apartheid.

It is, thus, a bit of a mystery why a promising young scholar such as Ian Taylor would choose to come to such a place. I have never discussed this with Ian in detail, but it became obvious that he looked beyond this public image and saw something of a more complicated and contradictory, and therefore exciting and enticing, reality. Stellenbosch was, since the 1970s,

also the seat of explicit critical thinking about South African politics and economics. Critical voices included the philosophers Johannes Degenaar, Andre du Toit and Willie Esterhuyse, the historian Hermann Giliomee, the economist Sampie Terreblanché (one of Ian's eventual PhD examiners), and the political scientists Hennie Kotze, Pierre du Toit and Jannie Gagiano (the fact that they were all white males also tells a story, but let us leave that for another day).

By the early 1990s, the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch also launched a robust International Studies programme, eventually strongly influenced by critical global political economists such as Robert W. Cox and William Robinson, and critical Africanists such as Timothy Shaw, Patrick McGowan and Craig Murphy. One of the early results of this programme was the publication of studies critical of mainstream international multilateralism, and the propagation of the idea of a bottom-up, people-oriented multilateralism that would address global inequalities systematically. Those of us who participated in this programme, which Ian Taylor joined enthusiastically, originally had high expectations that post-apartheid South Africa would exploit its achieved moral capital and would play a leading role in establishing an inclusive and just multilateralism in a world no longer racked with the divisions caused by the Cold War.

The exceeding high esteem that Nelson Mandela enjoyed internationally, and the exemplary largely peaceful process that led to the end of apartheid, created a unique opportunity, we believed, for South Africa to become an ethical broker, bringing both industrialising and industrialised countries together in giving effect to a new normative order – already heralded by all the multilateral political innovations of the 1990s listed above. This was not pure wishful thinking on our part. Many prominent decision-makers and officials in the new Government of National Unity in South Africa, signalled the desire of South Africa to become a proponent of an ethical multilateralism that would serve the interests of the poor and the underprivileged of the world. This signalling reached its apex when Thabo Mbeki took over from Nelson Mandela and became the second President of the new South Africa. On numerous occasions, Mbeki underlined South Africa's desire to become a champion of forms of global governance that would protect the developing world against and compensate it for the negative impacts of rampant globalisation.

Critical scholars – Ian included – did, however, point out the glaring contradiction between these lofty global ideals and the reality of a domestic economy in South Africa that continued to serve only the interests of an elite, and left a large segment of the population as poorly off as they were under apartheid. While the ranks of the elite were now swelled by an increasing number of Black South Africans, the country continued to be one of the most unequal economies in the world, with a large dependence on natural resource exports, a shrinking manufacturing sector, large indebtedness, a shortage of FDI and huge resulting unemployment. Many of these problems were obscured by the flashy features of a highly sophisticated financial sector, a booming export programme, and the growth of post-apartheid

international tourism.

While it was indeed, politically speaking, bliss to be alive in that foreign-policy dawn of the new South Africa, the more astute among us developed grave doubts about the economic underpinnings of South Africa's "reformist" foreign policy goals. In his PhD, Ian Taylor set out to understand and evaluate South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy. It soon became clear, though, that this project necessitated a thorough appreciation of the South African political economy. With his typical thoroughness and enthusiasm, Ian started to read widely on the nexus between foreign policy and political economy. Inevitably, that exposed him to the critical thinking of Robert W. Cox and Stephen Gill, and via them, to the thought of the "idealist" Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. There is an irony involved in the fact that it was only after he arrived at Stellenbosch that Ian really got exposed to Marxist thinking. This was the same university where, just ten years previously, library users still had to apply to consult Marxist texts, due to strict national censorship practices. Be that as it may, Ian soon became engrossed in Marxist texts, and the "contradictions" of the 1990s all of a sudden began to make sense to him. The emerging post-Cold War global political order served the interests of elites, largely because of the constraining influence of a global economic order that institutionalises and legitimises privilege and inequality. A set of economic beliefs and prescriptions, increasingly becoming known as neo-liberalism in the 1990s, served to legitimate these patterns of privilege and deprivation in the name of economic common sense, based on a narrow utilitarian understanding of efficiency.

The task that Ian set himself, and which he pulled off with aplomb, was to make this critical political economy relevant for the understanding of South African foreign policy. Developments on the ground made his task somewhat easier. Surprisingly, if only at first, the new South African Government of National Unity (GNU) seemed to be moving away from a redistributionist interpretation of the Freedom Charter, the national liberation's vision for a free and equitable South Africa. In 1996, the GNU created a five-year plan – the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan – that focused less on redistribution as such and more on privatisation and the removal of exchange controls. In what could be described as a "bargain on investment", GEAR's main purpose was to make the South African economy attractive again for foreign direct investment, and to stimulate the outward investment of South African firms into the rest of Africa. GEAR sent shockwaves through the national liberation movement in South Africa and its supporters internationally. How could it be possible that the highly respected ANC turned its back on its poor and land-starved supporters and became part of a government that promoted and implemented most of the macroeconomic proscriptions and prescriptions of neoliberalism?

Many studies have tried to answer this question, with various levels of success. Ian Taylor's PhD thesis was the first systematic attempt to explain not only the intricacies of the transition politics in South Africa that gradually emasculated the leftist orientation of the ANC –

something that he did with exceptional focus on detail. He painstakingly traces the ways in which the agents of neoliberal ideology came to persuade decision-makers in the new regime that there is no alternative in an integrated world economy for a developing country like South Africa to become investor-friendly and fiscally "responsible". Ian analyses the politics and economics of the process that makes neoliberal policy beliefs plausible in minute detail, guided by some of the core insights of Antonio Gramsci on how social forces and leadership can conspire to be a force either for good or for exploitation, as it turns out in post-apartheid South Africa. He also managed to explain how the "domestic" political processes of the transition in South Africa fed into, and were legitimated by the "reformist" multilateral approaches pursued by South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy. By attempting to become a bridge-builder between North and South, and by pursuing humanitarian global goals, South Africa could simultaneously live up to the credentials of the ANC as a national liberation movement, and not alienate the potential sources of foreign direct investment in the process. The veneer of this reformism is too thin, though, to obscure the degree to which the South African GNU had come to embrace the most important tenets of neoliberal macroeconomic orthodoxy and, thus, distance itself from the daily material concerns of the South African population. The result was a tragic mismatch between the material needs of the majority of South Africans and the self-enrichment mission of a newly empowered Black elite. This mismatch continues to this day, and thanks to Ian's original research, we understand the why and how of this mismatch much better.

III.

It is impossible for me to do full justice to Ian's exceptional PhD here, eventually published in 2001 with the telling title *Stuck in middle GEAR: South Africa's post-apartheid foreign relations.* It is understandable that he wanted to move on from South Africa to a broader focus on Africa, after he received his PhD with flying colours. The increasing role of the PRC globally, also took him back to the focus of his Hong Kong MPhil. In the spirit of celebrating the work of this young scholar who was taken away from us far too early, however, I would like to make some comments on the legacy of the work that he undertook at Stellenbosch.

Ian's critical "Stellenbosch" experience continued to be an inspiration in his subsequent writings on important multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (Taylor and Smith, 2007), Africa's relations with the world, and the specific policies of developing countries to encourage South–South cooperation. It also influenced his realistic assessment of China's African policy and its limits. He never lost the ability to look beyond the political façades and to highlight the ways in which local, regional and global forces manipulate economic practice and beliefs to sustain hegemony, that is, their self-anointed privilege to lead. Ian's reading of Gramsci, and Robert Cox's interpretation of the Italian Marxist, allowed him to link the dynamics of ideational factors with the material interests of actors – an ideology critique in the original sense of the phrase (Taylor, 2004; 2016). Together in an edited volume with his good friends

Donna Lee and Paul Williams, Ian published an updated version of his Gramscian critique of neoliberalism and South Africa's multilateralism (Taylor, Lee and Williams, 2006). His enthusiasm for a Gramscian understanding of the nexus of political order, economic dynamics and macroeconomic beliefs inspired many of the fellow students he encountered at Stellenbosch, and his own students once he was appointed into academic positions. His Gramscian influence is still very much felt at Stellenbosch, where he was appointed a visiting professor. Together with the Stellenbosch academic, Anthony Leysens, who became a leading Cox specialist in South Africa, and the Dalhousie-taught Janis van der Westhuizen, who is a professor at Stellenbosch today, Ian played a very important role in establishing Stellenbosch's reputation as a seat of critical Global Political Economy.

One can only hope that this legacy of critical political economy will continue to grow and that Ian's legacy will, thus, be kept alive by his many friends, like-minded colleagues and the students who found him such an inspiring teacher. What comes after Ian Taylor is an important question. I believe that his legacy will be best honoured if we not only continue with his focus on the nexus of politics–economics–beliefs, but also strive to sharpen it, perhaps by introducing some micro-level dimensions that could complement the necessary focus on macroeconomic and political forces that Ian analysed so well. It is in that spirit that I suggest two ways in which I believe Ian's legacy can be given additional sharpness and longevity.

One of the disappointments shared by both critical and mainstream scholars of political economy is that people do not always behave as our theoretical models expect them to behave. This disappointment, acutely suffered and expressed by the so-called Narodniki in pre-revolutionary Russia, and by many intellectual reformists since, also confronts the critical student of inequality and poverty in Africa and elsewhere today. Why is it that so many of the poor, and not only in Africa, sanguinely accept the high levels of interpersonal and inter-group inequalities that continue to plague their daily lives? Why is there so little congruence between what one can call their objective interests and their subjective responses? One answer would be to fall back exclusively on a notion of "false consciousness" that is inculcated and normalised by the agents and institutions of hegemony, which in our time has become closely associated with a globalised neoliberalism that has been quite successful in popularising its macroeconomic beliefs. Ian's PhD and some subsequent publications made it clear that he valued this as one possible answer. He was also, however, an astute observer of Africa, and had too much appreciation for the irrepressible agency of African people, to attribute everything to the ideological power of an alien ideology that duped people into forgetting their own best interests. In one of our last exchanges before his illness, Ian made it clear that he appreciated the potential effect of traditional patterns of cultural responses as at least co-determinants of what the outside observer may perceive as irrational quiescence in the face of adversity. Ian was fond of citing the anthropological research of Peter Lloyd, who in the 1960s and 1970s identified dominant patterns of social conservatism and acceptance of inequality among young urban Yoruba males. Lloyd's research (Lloyd, 1974) shows that such

social conservatism is the rational outcome of, among others, the trust placed in the necessity of concentrating resources in the hands of a few "big men" as a precondition for benefitting, eventually, from the largesse that could flow from the ensuing patron-client relationship with the favoured "Big Man".

Ian would, of course, warn against generalising from these research observations from urban Nigeria to Africa as a whole. He did, however, suggest that this could provide one line of research that would lead to a richer understanding of what rational expectations concerning income and wealth inequality in sub-Saharan Africa are all about. This richer understanding could do worse than also (re-)turning to the work of another astute observer of socio-economic patterns in developing countries in the 1970s: Albert O. Hirschman. Although there is no evidence that Hirschman was aware of Lloyd's Yoruba research, the former did also suggest reasons why actors may accept relative inequalities in times of economic modernisation, in the expectation that their own time will come to benefit from the economic 'movement' brought about by economic modernisation (Hirschman, 1973). Combined with the insights of Lloyd, these ideas could help us fill out Ian's explanation of why thorough-going economic redistribution in South Africa has not been achieved, 38 years after the end of apartheid. The exceptional tolerance showed by the large majority of poor South Africans in view of increasing unemployment and deprivation, among ostentatious displays of wealth, must be a central part of that explanation.

There is one further dimension in which we can attempt to expand this understanding of the dynamics of the political economy in sub-Saharan Africa even further. It is well known that Ian was a devoted Christian with strong social beliefs that he inherited in part from his father's involvement with the Salvation Army. As for many Africans, Christian beliefs provided inspiration for Ian in his pursuit of a more equitable/fair world. Christianity also played a major role in the political transition in South Africa. The fact that more than three quarters of the South African population were Christian at the time of the 1990s transition from apartheid, provided a common normative basis without which the end of apartheid could have been more brutal and violent than it already was. The recent death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021) reminded observers of South Africa of how important Christian leadership was in the whole process (Weisse et al., 1998).

Nevertheless, we should not forget that religious belief is very much a Janus-faced phenomenon when it comes to questions of political-economic equity. All mainstream religions, including Islam, profess a normative commitment to the display of compassion with the poor. Conversely, as empirical research in Africa and elsewhere has shown, religion also serves to justify and normalise existing patterns of inequality as the will of an all-determining, merciful god whose plans for the world are not always transparent to mere mortals (Scheve and Stasavage, 2006; Nel, 2021). Social psychologists have identified a common "status quo bias" among respondents worldwide in terms of which people commonly believe that the world as it is, is

actually also how it should be (Trump, 2013). Religion provides it with a metaphysical and normative grounding. To what extent does this contribute to the exceptional forbearance displayed by generations of the poor in a country like South Africa, with its extreme levels of inequality? And to what extent has this provided generations of political leaders with the excuse of not addressing inequality systematically and vigorously? Throughout his life, Ian Taylor displayed a deep concern about issues related to social inequality, and this inspired him to explore macroeconomic and political explanations for its persistence. I am sure, though, that as an academic he would have been keen to explore the effects of the micro-factors that I raised in this and the previous paragraphs. Herein lies fruitful ways in which to honour his legacy.

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