

Africa rising? Ian Taylor's legacy in the study of African underdevelopment

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Biography

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Abstract

African Studies lost one of its brightest stars in 2021. Though his life was cruelly cut short, Professor Ian Taylor has left a remarkable legacy to the field, not just in terms of his publications but for the impact he has had on students, colleagues and the community more generally. His work was, and is, marked by both intellectual rigour and generosity. His insights, impact and spirit will continue to live on through these and other contributions.

Keywords: [Africa](#); [Ian Taylor](#); [Africa rising](#); [Underdevelopment](#)

Introduction

I first met Ian in 2005 at the African Studies conference in Ireland, where he had come to give the keynote lecture a few years out of his PhD. We had corresponded previously but hit it off when we met. He had a restless intellectual curiosity about, and commitment to, Africa and its study that motivated him. This was not work for him, despite the seriousness and dedication with which he approached it. His work was both a challenge and a joy, and he radiated that enthusiasm for his subject through conversations, debates, presentations and other channels. There was, however, a serious moral dimension to his studies; his desire bears witness and tells truth to power. He always spoke his mind but always in a measured way. He would guide students through his use of carefully worded, pedagogic but penetrating questions. He did not take himself too seriously, but he was serious about what he did and his commitments. Keeping that balance is one of the things that made him remarkable and widely admired, along with the volume, quality and insights of his work. The remarkable outpouring of grief in the African Studies community on the news of his death bore testimony to that.

I was asked to review a piece that Ian published in 2014 on ‘Is Africa rising?’ and the response by one of his former students, Dr Athanasios Stathopoulos. Stathopoulos captures the themes, argument and content of the paper well. This is a difficult task for me as Ian, and also Stathopoulos, are preaching to the converted.

Ian’s paper, as always, is scrupulously researched and tightly argued. He is realistic about the nature of “Africa’s rise”. He is not a complete rejectionist, noting that there has been progress in some social and economic indicators. The overall structure of dependence in and on the continent, however, remains. This is empirically supported, sometimes by using quotes and data from organisations and people promoting the discourse he critiques. He was always conversant, cognisant and engaged with the work of those with whom he disagreed. He eschewed dogma, while being theoretically grounded and informed.

Where he got the time to read all the sources used in his writing was always a mystery to me. A visit to his “bat cave” of an office, full of books, gave some indication of his erudition. He always swore to me he worked nine to five but having him stay with me disabused me of that to some extent. His mind was always on. When he visited with me, he bought a book about the Irish Left which included reference to my father, who was a trade unionist. He asked me about it. Where he found the time to read, not only the mass of work in African studies that he did, but more widely, was very impressive, if also a little unsettling.

Writing something with Ian was also an education. Where I often struggle with writing, his turnaround was seemingly near instantaneous, bespeaking a highly unusual clarity of mind and thought which he also brought to his reading, teaching and other academic activities. His intellectual curiosity also led him to volunteer to be on many PhD committees around the world. He relished education, and helping early career scholars in particular, as one of his greatest joys. He lived life at speed and focus, including relaxing, packing more in than most in his too short time, visiting most of Africa for example. Once he emailed me to try and source some papers, as he had been drafted in to help write Uganda’s new national development strategy. All of this was delivered with his usual self-deprecation.

Ian’s paper seems prescient in the context of COVID-19, where the “Africa rising” discourse has been revealed to be, largely, unsupported. The distinction between the superficial and the structural was key to his analysis, as Athanasios notes in his response. In African development studies, there is an ongoing debate between internalist and externalist explanations for the continent’s underdevelopment. Ian, with his usual clarity, rejected this binary, noting the structural context and how it shaped “internal” patterns of often neopatrimonial governance on the continent. This nuanced understanding gave him access to multiple networks of scholars, thought and challenges.

As Ian notes in his paper, the “shallow” growth of most African economies did not lead to fundamental changes to extant patterns of governance, which were and are transnationally constructed. He ends his article by asking who the continent is rising for, showing deep appreciation, as always, to the importance of supposedly outdated categories of analysis, such as class. This is one of Ian’s main intellectual legacies. He reinterpreted, reinterrogated, updated and expanded Marxian theories of underdevelopment in Africa. One of what I thought was among his last papers in the Russian *RUDN* journal is particularly notable in its contribution in this regard, although several papers have subsequently come out posthumously. His work is alive in insight and will continue to be.

Athanasios notes that Ian’s paper has a deep grounding in, and appreciation of the importance of history, not only because of its impact on the structures and ideas of the present, but also for its lessons. Previous commodity booms in Africa and other parts of the world have proven to be false dawns, even if they offer some potentialities to do things differently. The breadth of his reading and topics of analysis contributed immensely to the quality of his writing. He was simultaneously an expert on African development, underdevelopment and international relations theory, regionalism, UNCTAD, African politics, China, China’s role in Africa and the emerging powers more broadly, neoliberalism, foreign policy analysis, special economic zones, European relations with Africa and many more. I also learned recently that he had also published on Europe. Few scholars make such wide, deep and impactful contributions while wearing it so lightly.

Ian is perhaps best known for his contributions on Chinese-African relations. This interest partly arose out of his experience studying in Hong Kong in the 1990s, but he was a forerunner in the field sensing the importance of his topic of study before others. In time, this led him to study the rise of the emerging powers in Africa more generally and the “Africa rising” phenomenon. Through this and other papers and books, he was the best-known critic of this discourse. With clinical precision, he unpicks the discourses’ theoretical “foundations” through analysis and use of empirical details and data. In his paper in the *Brown Journal*, he does this in a way, which is nonetheless highly accessible to university students across all levels – a gift. The headings in the paper serve as hooks to engage the audience by intriguing them and building the argument. The simplicity of a heading such as the ‘Natural resource corner’ is telling, analytical, indicative and evocative. The paper reads as a piece of literature, rather than just an academic paper given the skill with which it is crafted and delivered. He had mastered his trade.

The problem of “African” underdevelopment is really a problem of globally combined and uneven development. Ian appreciated the importance of that type of relational place-making, in which China’s role has loomed increasingly large. He was clear-eyed about the nature of the governing regime in China, while also being sceptical of arguments that the government there was in command of Africa–China engagements. He was also a critic of the

fallacies and ethno-centrism of “China-bashing”. In many ways, Ian laid the infrastructural architecture for the analysis of “China in Africa” into the future. In the same way that he always reflected back in his work on what previous scholars had said decades ago, in order to inform his current analysis, I am sure his work will be referred to in the future to examine what analogies might be drawn between future rounds of Africa–China engagement, and the more and less intensive periods of these that he studied.

Ian leaves a lasting intellectual legacy as a brilliant theorist, analyst, colleague and educator. He inspired a generation of students and scholars of Africa–China relations but his work extended far beyond this in terms of reach, breadth and impact. His energy, time management, acuity, collegiality and humour were an inspiration to those who knew and mourn him. Ian was born in the Isle of Man, where Gaelic used to be widely spoken, so I often teased him that by rights he should be Irish. As we say in Irish, *ní fheicimid a leithéid arís* [we will not see his like again].

Bibliography

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