Ian Taylor's legacy for comparative regionalism

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Biography

Fredrik Söderbaum is Professor of peace and development research at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, and an Associate Research Fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), in Bruges, Belgium. For more than two decades, he worked with Ian Taylor on regionalism and politics in Africa, which resulted among many other things in *Regionalism and uneven development in southern Africa. The case of the Maputo Development Corridor* (2003) and *Afro-regions. The dynamics of cross-border regionalism in Africa* (2008).

Abstract

This article reflects on Ian Taylor's legacy for comparative regionalism which has not received as much recognition as it rightfully deserves. Some of Ian's most important contributions to this research field evolve around two themes: firstly, neoliberalism and the relationship between globalisation and regionalisation, and, secondly, regionalisation beyond the rhetoric of regional organisations. This piece reflects on his article of 2003 published in the *Review of International Political Economy*, entitled 'Globalization and regionalization in Africa: reactions to attempts at neo-liberal regionalism'. It also situates Ian's contributions within a broader context and refers to Sarah Whiteford's excellent contribution on Ian's impact on regionalism studies. Finally, the last two sections reflect on Ian's legacy as a field worker, as well as some of his personal traits.

Keywords: Regionalism; Micro-regionalism; Neoliberalism; African politics; Ian Taylor; New regionalism approach

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Introduction

In this short article, I will reflect on Ian Taylor's legacy for comparative regionalism. Although Ian contributed a long list of impressive publications in this field, his research on comparative regionalism has not received as much recognition as it rightfully deserves. Some of Ian's most important contributions to this research field evolve around two themes, which are both elaborated at length in his article published in the *Review of International Political Economy* (*RIPE*) from 2003, entitled 'Globalization and regionalization in Africa: reactions to attempts at neo-liberal regionalism' (Taylor, 2003). The first theme is neoliberalism and the relationship between globalisation and regionalisation, and the second, regionalisation beyond

the rhetoric of regional organisations (ROs). I will reflect on the article itself considering the two themes but also situate Ian's contributions within a broader context. I will also refer to Sarah Whiteford's excellent contribution on Ian's impact on regionalism studies. Finally, in the last two sections, I will reflect on Ian's legacy as a field worker, as well as some of his personal traits.

Neoliberalism and the relationship between globalisation and regionalisation

One of Ian's major achievements as an academic, especially during the first two decades of his career, is related to his analysis of the origins, processes and effects of neoliberal capitalism. By foregrounding 'the hegemony of neo-liberalism' (Taylor, 2003, p. 315), he managed to connect a whole range of diverse regionalisation processes and agencies at various levels of the global system (i.e. continental, macro-regional, national, micro-regional). Since most other scholars focused on a single level or scale (or even on one single RO) at a time, they usually ignored or failed to understand how diverse processes and agencies were interrelated or even part of the same general logic.

Ian's insights on neoliberalism led him to new ways of understanding how globalisation and regionalisation/regionalism were interconnected, which was one of the key debates within International Relations (IR) from the mid-1990s to the mid- or late-2000s. According to one influential approach within the IR community at the time, regionalism could be seen as a political response against economic globalisation. Björn Hettne was a leading proponent of this approach and, drawing inspiration from Karl Polanyi's *The great transformation*, claimed that regionalism could be understood as the 'return of the political' in the context of neoliberal globalisation. As seen in his *RIPE* article, Ian was very sympathetic towards Björn Hettne and the new regionalism approach (NRA). Ian's understanding of the relationship between globalisation and regionalisation, however, differed quite substantially from the perspective advanced by Hettne.

While both Hettne and Ian agreed on the disruptive effects of neoliberal globalisation, they had somewhat different understandings of the role and agency of state elites in the Global South. Hettne basically viewed state elites as victims of hyper-globalisation, hoping that state elites and civil society actors in the Global South (and the Global North) would join forces to protect their regions, countries and societies against the evils of neoliberal globalisation. Ian had a less idealised understanding of state and business elites. As outlined at length in the *RIPE* article, Ian explained how state and business elites were *reinforcing* neoliberal globalisation through a range of policies on different levels (i.e. country level, micro-regional and macro-regional levels). For example, 'African leaders […] have sought to craft a relationship with the North and promote a developmental agenda which is based largely along neo-liberal lines' (Taylor, 2003, p. 311). Ian's case study, the Maputo Development Corridor (MDC), underlined the same general logic. As he notes, '[t]his attempt to (re)construct a micro-region is explicitly connected to perceptions held at the elite level that in an era marked by

globalization, regionalization is a crucial means by which states may come together and tap into this process in order to maximize their pulling power vis-à-vis international capital'. In short, Ian viewed state elites predominantly as neoliberal agents, not as forces that would protect their regions against the evils of neoliberalism, which was what Hettne hoped. By implication, Ian and Hettne's understanding of 'regionalisation from within' also diverged. Their mutual differences are intelligible since Hettne was strongly influenced by Karl Polanyi, whereas Ian drew on Robert Cox and neo-Gramscian approaches, which he had delved into during his PhD studies at Stellenbosch University (see Philip Nel's contribution in this issue).

Certain parts of Ian's *RIPE* article were, thus, informed by his earlier research. His understanding of South Africa's neoliberal foreign policy was based, among other things, on his pathbreaking PhD thesis, *Stuck in middle GEAR: South Africa's post-apartheid foreign relations* (Taylor, 2001). Parts of the analysis of the MDC drew on an article we co-authored, which was published in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2001). In this piece, we made use of Robert Cox's famous distinction between the state as a facilitator for development versus the state as a transmission belt for transnational capital, and applied this framework to the Maputo Development Corridor. Apart from the analysis of South African foreign policy and the MDC, the article in *RIPE* adds yet another layer by contextualising it all within the broader context of the NEPAD framework. Ian managed to tie the different levels together. His interest in the MDC was motivated, among other things, by the analytical quest to demonstrate that what occurs at the micro-regional level is invariably reflective of what is happening at higher levels or "scales". Informed by his sophisticated understanding of the multi-scalarity of neoliberal restructuring, Ian subsequently developed the analysis of NEPAD in his excellent book, *NEPAD – Towards Africa's development or another false start?* (Taylor, 2005).

As illustrated by the subtitle of the *RIPE* article, Ian's analysis was not limited to how state elites reinforced neoliberal capitalism through regionalist projects at various levels or scales. Rather, he also explored the 'reactions to attempts at neoliberalism', which was a similar ambition to Hettne's and the NRA. Whereas Hettne, however, mainly concentrated on politics and society in general, Ian managed to uncover very diverse sets of reactions, both detrimental (smuggling networks, armed rebel groups) and development-oriented (informal traders and civil society agents) ones. In this sense, regionalism was multifaceted and heterogeneous. This multidimensionality is eloquently described in Sarah Whiteford's review of Ian's work, and will be further commented upon below. In this context, it is relevant to point out that what may be missing from Ian's own publications is that his analysis was in important ways more multifaceted compared to that of Hettne, whose investigations were rather structural in nature. I immensely benefited myself from working closely with Ian. As far as my research on regionalism in Africa is concerned, Ian was a much greater source of inspiration compared to Björn Hettne and other NRA proponents. Ian contributed insights and a framework that had not been appropriately acknowledged in the literature, either on new and critical regionalism

or in mainstream and problem-solving studies. This legacy is just as relevant today as it was two decades ago.

Beyond the rhetoric of regional organisations

Ian's research transcended the conventional obsession with states as the main actors, and the unduly emphasis on the formality of ROs and regionalist policies, in order to bridge the artificial, dichotomous divide between formal and informal regionalisation. In line with the NRA research agenda, ROs were seen as second-order phenomena compared to the deeper, more comprehensive and diverse processes of regionalisation (which could be top-down and bottom-up, formal and informal). This perspective advanced the research agenda of the NRA and is still highly relevant, not only in Africa but in a wide range of other contexts as well.

Ian had several overlapping motivations for transcending the official policies and rhetoric of ROs and other top-down and formal regionalist strategies. Ian was strongly driven by a general interest to look at African regions *as they actually were* and how they *really* were constructed, as opposed to how preconceived ideas portrayed them or how elite actors would have us believe they were. His interest for micro-regions – the main focus in the *RIPE* article – could be explained by two more specific motivations: (i) 'these were new and potentially enormously influential frameworks for governance' (Taylor, 2003, p. 319); and (ii) this type of regionalism was most beholden to "real" processes on the ground. Hence, micro-regions provided a concrete way to assess the interface between elite-derived agendas and popular reactions. Sarah Whiteford eloquently summarises Ian's views on the elite-driven agendas: 'Taylor demonstrates that the structures of globalisation lead to a contradiction in regionalist projects like the MDC, namely that integration into the global economy further marginalises the people it ostensibly intends to integrate, and that the formalisation of an economic region may in fact undermine the deep penetration of regionness through the destabilisation of community'. As far as the bottom-up reactions are concerned, these were diverse and carried out by a range of actors. As noted above, some were detrimental whereas others were development-oriented. One of Ian's main contributions was to explain how top-down and state-steered micro-regionalist processes were directly related to the diverse bottom-up reactions, and that the different processes were played out under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Given that contemporary research on comparative regionalism is so heavily dominated by mainstream and problem-solving scholarship, this type of critical analysis is arguably even more relevant today compared to two decades ago. Comparative regionalism as a research field would benefit immensely if a new generation of scholars would further the type of critical analysis developed by Ian Taylor.

Ian Taylor's legacy as a field researcher

Ian undertook an incredible number of field trips and travels to conferences, workshops and other universities. Ian's track record as field worker will be very difficult for anyone to match. Travelling, however, was only a means and not an end in itself. One main driver for Ian

can be found in his extreme reluctance to carry out research without first-hand experience about what was happening "on the ground". This attitude was an integral part of his identity as a scholar, and he was openly critical of colleagues who had poor understanding of local dynamics on the ground or conducted research on Africa or IR without undertaking "proper" fieldwork. With his rather harsh jargon, he could refer to such scholars as "clowns" or sometimes even as a "disgrace" to the academic community. Ian had set high standards for his own work, which was characterised by a tireless perusal of a wide array of literatures and frequent fieldwork. Meeting his own high standards for about 25 years of his academic career deservedly earned Ian immense scholarly authority in his fields of study.

I had the privilege of undertaking several field trips with Ian, including the fieldwork for the *RIPE* article discussed here. I will, therefore, use my space to share some experiences from "the ground" with Ian. During our joint fieldwork, we nearly always conducted interviews together. Ian was a great collaborator, always prepared, knowledgeable and creative. Many of my best interviews were conducted with Ian. I share three examples of our most remarkable interviews. One was with the former highest representative of the MDC project. In sharp contrast to the official history of the MDC, the respondent claimed that the MDC was never intended as a development corridor; rather, its main goal was limited to attracting 'bankable investment projects'. This implied that the MDC was best understood as an investment corridor, which led us to our claim that the state had been reduced to an 'investment promotion agency'. In another interview during fieldwork carried out in eastern DRC in 2010, the representative of one of the EU's civilian peace missions stated: 'I don't know what I am doing here'. Given the EU's high profile as a peacemaker in the DRC at the time, this was totally unexpected for us. Yet, it allowed us to make sense of many of our subsequent interviews, as well as the EU's failure and disjointed role as a peacemaker. My third example is provided by the French Ambassador to Rwanda at the time, who claimed that the only way to end the conflict in eastern DRC was 'by bombing the area and sending in the French Legion'. That powerful actors would think in these terms was even more unexpected, as it was shocking. I am convinced that it was not least Ian's presence and his unconventional, yet at the same time professional and extremely well-informed, way of engaging with research participants which made them speak to us so openly.

A typical pattern when travelling and doing fieldwork together with Ian was that his DNA would not allow him to pass by a book store without entering. If we did not have enough time to enter, he would nearly always say: 'Fred, we must come back'. Once into the book store, he would usually buy a considerable number of books, many of which I had never heard of, and he would always explain to me that these were 'very important books'. He had a never-ending enthusiasm for gaining new knowledge, which should serve as an inspiration to any scholar. Shaun Breslin stated in a speech at Ian's funeral that Ian knew incredibly much about incredibly many things. In fact, I have never met anyone with so much knowledge about the politics of Africa, ranging from history and philosophy to political, economic and cultural

processes in specific countries, regions or the continent as a whole. Ian's knowledge, however, went far beyond Africa, and experts in other fields are likely to praise his understanding of their areas of specialisation.

Compassionate friend and scholar

I will round up with a few reflections on Ian's personality because it very much shaped the way he conducted his academic life. I first met Ian Taylor at an academic conference in 1999, and I was fortunate to have him both as a friend and co-author. Ian was the type of friend and collaborator that everyone would want. He was extremely generous and compassionate as a person. Our discussions on issues such as Mugabe, new regionalism, neoliberalism or neopatrimonialism would nearly always involve engagements in each other's families and lives more broadly. Ian, however, was always the more engaged one between us and the one who managed to combine compassion with work. For example, apart from the usual interest in the core family, Ian showed great concern for my parents and even for my parents-in-law (whom he had met during one of his many trips).

His compassion, however, did not end there. Beyond our private lives, Ian also showed a genuine concern for some of my colleagues and PhD students. In particular, Ian always sought the latest update on Björn Hettne, whose health had deteriorated since the late 2000s. Ian would always ask me to forward his greetings to Björn. Sometimes he would also send greetings to other colleagues at my department, whom he had met at various conferences or visits to Sweden. He also kept track of those of my doctoral students who carried out research on Africa. Sometimes he would even send them e-mails with clever comments or references that were relevant to their research and PhD projects. For me, and I know for many others too, Ian was absolutely a source of inspiration.

Finally, humour was an essential part of Ian's character. I round up my text with yet another anecdote. During our joint trip to Rwanda/DRC in 2010, I organised a policy dialogue seminar with representatives of foreign ministries from Rwanda, DRC and Burundi, and a handful of western diplomats (EU Commission, Nordics, UK etc.). The meeting was part of a larger EU-funded research project, in which I participated. Although Ian co-authored one of the sub-studies together with me, he was not really part of the broader research project. While I had done my best to prepare the diplomats and policy experts in advance, at least the first half of the meeting was a complete disaster. The moderator and I tried in vain to make the diplomats and national representatives speak to us or to each other. For what seemed like an eternity, almost no-one, except for the moderator and myself, had anything to say to anyone else. During yet another period of complete silence in the room, Ian (who sat next to me) whispered in my ear: 'I am so glad this is not my project'. Ian kept his "poker face" but I could not stop laughing. Some of the participants stared, as it was impossible to understand what was so funny about this bizarre meeting. This was Ian "in action" and this is how I will remember him. He often had a smile on his face and the fine ability to make other people

laugh with him.

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