Ian Taylor: a critical voice of the Liberal Peace Project in Africa

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Biography

Patrick Tom is a University Teacher in International Relations at the University of Sheffield, an Assistant Editor for the Peacebuilding journal and a Senior Fellow at the Third Generation Project, University of St Andrews. He earned his PhD in International Relations from the University of St Andrews, where he was co-supervised by Professor Ian Taylor (2008–2011). Patrick has conducted consultancy work with international organisations, including UNESCO and Arigatou International, as well Education Scotland on a project building racial literacy. Patrick has published widely in the area of Peace and Conflict Studies, all with a regional focus on Africa.

Abstract

This article discusses the contributions of Ian Taylor in debates over the Liberal Peace Project in Africa showing how this has shaped my understanding of the challenges of its application in the continent. It also highlights my interaction with him during our fieldwork on "Tensions and contradictions of the Liberal Peace Project" in Liberia in 2009. Finally, it briefly looks at how Taylor's wider scholarship on Africa has advanced and will likely continue to influence scholarly debates in the future.

Keywords: Ian Taylor; Liberal Peace; Africa; Sierra Leon

Introduction

I first met Professor Ian Taylor at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews in early January 2008 when I joined as a PhD research student. I was one of the two PhD students from Africa who had been offered a scholarship for 'Tensions and contradictions in the Liberal Peace Project' in the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. Ian and Professor Oliver Richmond had identified a gap in the debates and research on liberal peace in Africa.[1] The gap pertained to the absence of Africa-based/African scholars alongside any significant literature on the Liberal Peace Project in post-conflict societies in Africa. Bringing two African PhD students to be part of this was an attempt to fill this gap. Mac Ginty (2011) observed that leading journals in the study of peace and conflict research are dominated by scholars based in the Global North.[2]

I remember when I joined the University of St Andrews as a PhD student, very little research had been conducted on the practical application and limitations of the Liberal Peace Project in Africa. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, the continent has experienced a disproportionately large number of intrastate conflicts. Furthermore, Africa has witnessed war-torn societies emerging from violent conflict experiencing international peace support operations that promote the Liberal Peace. Taylor's 'What fit the Liberal Peace in Africa' (2007) and 'Earth calling the liberals: locating the political culture of Sierra Leone as the terrain for "reform"' (2009b) are among the few papers I read at the time that offered a 'new perspective' (Newman, Paris and Richmond, 2009) on liberal peacebuilding specifically focusing on the challenges of the Liberal Peace Project in an African context.[3] His work, which is highly cynical about the Liberal Peace Project and examines its implications in Africa has greatly influenced my thinking and academic work on liberal peacebuilding in Africa.

The aim of this article is threefold. First, I discuss the contributions of Taylor's 'What fit the Liberal Peace in Africa' (2007) and 'Earth calling the liberals: locating the political culture of Sierra Leone as the terrain for "reform"' (2009b). Second, I look at how Taylor's two pieces have shaped my understanding of the challenges of the Liberal Peace Project in Africa. Lastly, I reflect on how the selected pieces and Taylor's wider scholarship on Africa is likely to continue to influence scholarly debates in the future.

Contribution to the Liberal Peace debates

African states, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi, as well as the Balkans in Eastern Europe experienced violent conflicts in the 1990s. These wars resulted in the deaths and mass displacement of millions of civilians. Kaldor (1999) called them 'new wars' highlighting the qualitative changes in the nature of violent conflict in the post-Cold War period. For Kaldor, these 'new wars' had a different logic from earlier forms of conflict in terms of methods, actors, finances and goals. For instance, her 'new wars' thesis noted that one of their aims was 'to control the population by getting rid of everyone of a different identity (and indeed of a different opinion)' (1999, p. 8, 2013). Also, states going through civil war tended to experience war economies characterised by rebels either self-financing the war through extraction of domestic resources, such as alluvial diamonds, or receiving external financial support from the diaspora and/or transnational networks (Kaldor, 1999). As such, there was an urgent need to tackle this challenge of complex emergencies in Africa and other parts of the developing world. As states emerged from these conflicts, they became grappled with rebuilding their war-torn societies. Local actors had no capacity to do so, as these entities had become either failed or collapsed states and risked returning to conflict.

In the 1990s, the problem of state failure and collapse became an issue of international concern witnessing an ideological turn in the United Nations (UN) peace support operations. At the same time, an international consensus emerged that weak, failed and collapsed states

posed a serious threat to international peace and security. In response, the UN peace support operations were transformed. They also became reliant upon 'dominant narratives that construct[ed] state-building as a prerequisite to peace' (Olonisakin et al., 2021, p. 401). They drew on a single model – a Western liberal state model – that emphasised the building of strong and effective state institutions, and the promotion of political and economic liberalisation, a model that has become known as the "Liberal Peace" (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2005; Mac Ginty, 2006). The assumption underlying the Liberal Peace agenda is that building strong, effective and legitimate liberal states can create conditions for self-sustaining peace in war-torn societies. Post-conflict societies including East Timor, Mozambique, Namibia, Sierra Leone and El Salvador were widely heralded as 'success' stories of liberal peacebuilding (Paris, 2004).

In the early 2000s, however, critical voices of Liberal Peace emerged revealing that in many post-conflict situations, it had proven to be partially counterproductive, naive, hard to sustain, disappointing and had produced mixed results (Paris, 2004; Bellamy and Williams, 2005; Duffield, 2001; Fanthorpe, 2006; Mac Ginty, 2006; Richmond, 2005). The critique has also included Liberal Peace's tendency to sideline local knowledge systems, approaches, experiences and expertise, its technocratic and one-size-fits-all approach, its state-centrism and its focus on state elites. Some of these critiques exposed the Eurocentric nature of the international peacebuilding model that draws on the idea of the Liberal Peace. Moreover, Liberal Peace's failure to address adequately the positive aspects of peace, such as welfare and social justice, as well as to achieve a liberal peace for all as per its promise led to the conclusion that it was in crisis (Cooper, 2007).

The emergence of the 'local turn' in peacebuilding (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013) can be seen as a response to the crisis in confidence and the legitimacy of Liberal Peace. The increased emphasis on "the local" is considered to be crucial for improving effectiveness in peacebuilding. Ian made a significant contribution to the critical debates on Liberal Peace, especially in the context of Africa. In his work on this issue, he questioned whether (neo) liberal peacebuilding approaches and strategies are culturally and socially appropriate in African contexts. His 2007 article on 'What fit the Liberal Peace in Africa' noted that the promotion of Liberal Peace as an essential aspect of 'external attempts at peacebuilding reflects the hegemony within the developed world vis-à-vis the best way to organise the polity' (2007, p. 553).

Taylor used Gramsci's concept of hegemony as a starting point to understand the Liberal Peace's application to the peacebuilding context of Africa as a tool to deal with challenges, including violent intrastate conflicts, insecurity, and state failure or fragility. He observed that the concept of the Liberal Peace as a representation of an internationalised neo-liberal hegemony depends in part upon the existence of a domestic hegemony. This, however, is absent in African states. Taylor, thus, argued that in lieu of this form of hegemony with most

leaders using violence, intimidation, personal rule and patronage to control the state and the masses, there exists a disconnect between international prescriptions for peace and the socio-political dynamics on the ground. He highlighted why the 'local turn' matters through his observation that it is difficult for a project such as Liberal Peace to become hegemonic in Africa, as it is based on 'liberalisation, privatisation and representing the dislocating effects of globalisation' (2007, p. 553). This is also reflected in his 2009 piece 'Earth calling the liberals: locating the political culture of Sierra Leone as the terrain for "reform"', which specifically focuses on Sierra Leone (my own research has also largely focused on liberal peacebuilding in Sierra Leone). Using the case of Sierra Leone, Taylor (2009b) provides a profound critique of liberal peacebuilding in the country that offers lessons for international peacebuilding that is Liberal Peace-oriented in other African contexts, and even beyond. His article shows that, in Sierra Leone, the nature of the political culture is a significant threat to the building of a durable and sustainable liberal peace. Furthermore, Taylor contends that the country's political culture does not help create governance institutions acceptable to Sierra Leone's local stakeholders. Moreover, given the neo-patrimonial nature of the political system in Sierra Leone, individuals and groups tend to be excluded from the governing regime and, as a result, are denied access to state resources, generating grievances among them. It is in this sense, according to Taylor and in line with his main argument in his piece 'What fit for Liberal Peace in Africa?', that the ruling elites in the country have historically lacked hegemony (in the Gramscian sense) over society. At the same time, such a political culture has undermined external efforts to build a liberal democratic state in Sierra Leone. As Taylor observes:

An understanding of how politics in Sierra Leone works suggests that the types of stricture on governance advocated by the liberal peace cannot be hurriedly implemented – as the donors demand – without undermining the foundations upon which Sierra Leone's political class bases its rule. In other words, the empirical state in Sierra Leone does not conform to Western liberal (pre)conceptions of the Weberian state, something that the liberal peace assumes as a given. Indeed, it is precisely the rational-bureaucratic state that is taken as the framework and model for what should be constructed in Sierra Leone as part of the liberal peace project (2009b, p. 159).

He considers this to be hugely problematic since 'many of the accepted features of a liberal democratic state are simply not present in Sierra Leone, even though the country's elites have long been adept at appropriating external guarantees for their state – often manipulating the fashionable rhetoric of "democratization"' (2009b, p. 159). At the same time, he contends that '"alternative" formulations of the state in Africa, which may emphasize informal structures and activities outside of the "normal" functions of the state, are also somewhat problematic' (2009b, p. 159). Taylor concludes that an examination of Sierra Leone's political culture suggests that liberal peacebuilding has little chance of success in the country.

Liberia fieldwork

In 2009, Taylor made similar observations during our fieldwork in Monrovia, Liberia on the Liberal Peace Project in the country as part of the 'Tensions and contradictions in the Liberal Peace Project in Africa' research project mentioned above.[4] We conducted interviews with a wide range of local and external actors, including traditional leaders, ordinary people, the Chinese ambassador, the media, and local and international organisations such as the UNDP, USAID and the Carter Centre, as well as the IMF. We often reflected on the interviews when we were back at our hotel accommodation. Taylor's analysis of the situation in the country at the time mainly focused on the nature of the political culture in Liberia. In one of our discussions, he observed that a major challenge in the country related to exclusion, as the country continued to be dominated by a few elites, mostly Americo-Liberians who constituted 5% of the population. He further pointed out that the fundamental political structures had not been addressed. As such, the tension between the indigenous Liberians and the Americo-Liberians continued to exist and it appeared that no one was willing to address it. As international actors, including the UN and its agencies, however, failed to understand the nature of the local political culture in Liberia, these structures were reinforced.

In addition, Taylor made interesting observations about Liberia's middle class. He pointed out that Liberia's economy was dominated by Lebanese and Indians, who were tied to the elite structures. Since the Liberian constitution excludes non-blacks from becoming citizens, the Lebanese and Indian businesspersons in the country do not qualify for citizenship status; however, they are able to control the economy through patronage.[5] As such, the absence of a middle class in the country has been to the advantage of the elites. Even if one were to exist, however, it is most likely that the elites would have co-opted it due to the strong neo-patrimonial system in the country.

Influence

Taylor's work on the Liberal Peace Project in Africa and our discussions during our fieldwork in Liberia, offered me a source of critical understanding concerning liberal peacebuilding in Africa. In my fieldwork in Sierra Leone, I paid attention to the issues that Taylor raised in his work on the liberal peace in Africa. This saw me conducting interviews with Sierra Leone's political class, ordinary citizens, including citizens on the "margins of the state", local traders, rural elites, including traditional leaders, and external actors, all in an effort to understand the country's local context and its peacebuilding outcomes. Several of my publications (e.g. Tom 2013, 2014, 2017) have been partly influenced by Taylor's work on the Liberal Peace Project in Africa. For instance, my 2014 article in *Children's Geographies*, which examines the power relations between traditional authorities and youths in the context of liberal peacebuilding in post-war Sierra Leone highlights the political culture there. It shows that while young people drawing on liberal peace tenets such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights and transparency have created spaces for exercising 'resisting power' and negotiating with chiefdom authorities, given the nature of political culture, this has not

been successful.

Furthermore, the selected pieces and Taylor's wider scholarship on African Studies, Global Political Economy and International Relations have had a huge influence on scholarly debates. For instance, his monographs and articles on emerging powers, such as the ones on whether Africa is rising (2014, 2016), China's role in Africa (2009a) and China's oil diplomacy in Africa (2006) have generated a lot of academic attention as, for example, reflected by the number of citations on Google Scholar and similar metrics, and will likely continue to influence scholarly debates in the future, especially in trying to understand Africa and its relations with emerging powers.

Conclusion

Ian Taylor was indeed a great scholar in International Relations, Global Political Economy and African Studies. His work on Africa, especially that which critiques the Liberal Peace Project in Africa, has had a lot of influence in my own work on international peacebuilding and the "local" in Africa, as reflected in several of my publications on the Liberal Peace Project. Ian's work has provided us with a better understanding of why liberal peacebuilding has failed to produce durable and sustainable peace in Africa, as well as of some of the blockages to enduring peace on the continent. His wider scholarship has had great impact, and his work on emerging powers in Africa will continue to influence scholarly debates in the future, as emerging powers continue to compete with traditional ones for influence on the continent.

Endnotes

[1] Proponents of the Liberal Peace assume that political and economic liberalisation promote lasting peace in societies emerging from violent conflict.

[2] Five years after completing my PhD at the University of St Andrews, the University of Dundee's Africa Research Network invited me to give a talk on an issue of interest to me. I decided to give a talk on the absence of Africa-based scholars in the critical debates about (post)liberal peace. Prior to the talk, I emailed Ian Taylor to check with him what he thought about the absence of Africa-based scholars in these debates. Taylor (2017) replied that '[i]n general, African voices are excluded from the academic circuit at the international level unless they are employed at universities in the North. It is relatively rare to attend conferences on something like peace where large numbers of African (or other non-Northern) scholars are in attendance. This obviously will have an impact on knowledge production and dissemination.'

[3] A few other works critical of the Liberal Peace Project in Africa that I was reading at the time include Willett (2005), Jackson (2005) and Fanthorpe (2006). Taylor has written

several papers that offer a critique to the Liberal Peace Project (e.g. 2010, 2017).

[4] Professors Ian Taylor and Oliver Richmond and three PhD candidates, including myself, were part of the team that conducted research in Liberia in 2009.

[5] Article 13 of Liberia's 1847 Constitution provides that '[t]he great object of forming these Colonies, being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted continent, none but persons of color shall be admitted to citizenship in this Republic.' Also, under the "Negro clause" of Liberia's Aliens and Nationality Law, only people of black African descent can be Liberian citizens. In 2022, the Aliens and Nationality Law was amended to allow for dual citizenship, which had been banned in 1973, but the negro clause was left untouched (see Bondo, 2022).

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