Interrogating the "Liberal Peace" paradigm and "fragile" security regimes in Africa

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Biography

Dr Babatunde Afolabi is the Regional Director for Anglophone and Lusophone Africa at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). He was previously Head of Section at the Directorate of Political Affairs of the Economic Community of West African States Commission (ECOWAS). His book, *Politics of peacemaking in Africa: non-state actors' role in the Liberian civil war*, was published by James Currey, Oxford in 2017. He was Ian Taylor's co-supervisee from 2011–2015 at the School of International Relations of the University of St Andrews.

Abstract

Ian Taylor, my PhD co-supervisor, influenced my interrogation of peacebuilding theories and paradigms in many ways. Apart from his lifelong dedication to critical studies and political economy, Ian worked hard to deconstruct the "Liberal Peace" paradigm in some of his writings. During my doctoral studies at the University of St Andrews, Ian and I debated different peace paradigms in terms of their utility, deficiencies and opportunities, especially for post-conflict and so-called "fragile" African states. These discussions influenced my thoughts and lived experiences as a scholar/practitioner. It is, therefore, with a high sense of appreciation for Ian's influential works interrogating peacebuilding paradigms that I write to honour his memory in this special issue of *Contemporary Voices*.

Keywords: Liberal Peace; Peacebuilding: Hegemony; Civil wars in Africa

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Prologue

Ian Taylor, my PhD co-supervisor, influenced my interrogation of peacebuilding theories and paradigms in many ways. Apart from his lifelong dedication to critical studies and political economy, Ian worked hard to deconstruct the "Liberal Peace" paradigm in some of his writings. For me, the most direct critique is found in his article 'The Liberal Peace security regimen: a Gramscian critique of its application in Africa', which was published in *Africa Development* as part of a special issue on security regimes in Africa (Taylor, 2017).

During my doctoral studies at the University of St Andrews, Ian and I debated different peace paradigms in terms of their utility, deficiencies and opportunities, especially for post-conflict and so-called "fragile" African states. These discussions influenced my thoughts

and lived experiences as a scholar/practitioner. While at St Andrews, I narrowed down my PhD research to interrogating the motivations and not-so-apparent rationale behind the involvement of religious actors and diasporas in the thirteen-year-long Liberian civil war.

It is, therefore, with a high sense of appreciation for Ian's influential works interrogating peacebuilding paradigms that I write to honour his memory in this special issue of *Contemporary Voices*.

'The Liberal Peace security regimen: a Gramscian critique of its application in Africa'

In his article, Taylor underscored the hegemonic prominence accorded to Liberal Peace, 'as a security regimen and as an integral part of external attempts at peacebuilding' (Taylor, 2017, p. 26). Here, he leaned upon Gramsci's (1971) conception of "hegemony" as a reflection of the dominance and diffusion of a certain way of life, and the diffusion of a (narrowed) conception of reality throughout society. Further to this, Taylor framed the Liberal Peace as the victor's peace (Richmond, 2005). Specifically, Taylor (2017, p. 28) made bold to assert thus:

The variants of the liberal peace serve as discourses that often silence discussion of other alternatives and place the options elevated by the capitalist core at the heart of any dialogue. In Africa, this has meant that African input into the construction of peace has often been subsumed and/or sidelined and ignored, with the imposition of Western notions of what constitutes 'real peace' – the liberal peace, in other words – achieving unquestioned status.

Taylor (2017) identified three broad constituencies that are culpable for advancing the Liberal Peace agenda in Africa. These are the private sector, African civil society, and the established Western-backed Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and International Financial Institutions (IFIs). He particularly referred to the construction of institutional frameworks that provide the right environment for the private sector to '"deliver" and work its magic in post-conflict spaces' (Taylor, 2017, pp. 38–39).

I have drawn out the key outlines of Taylor's exposition on the subject to examine the manifestation of the Liberal Peace paradigm in fragile and post-conflict societies in Africa, mainly in terms of transitional justice. Before delving into transitional justice issues, I would like to posit that in fragile and post-conflict societies that have experienced Liberal Peace interventions, the hegemonic nature of the dominant paradigm that Taylor (2017, p. 27) describes in his paper, prevents the much-required inclusion and ownership of indigenous people in shaping their societies and shared future. Liberal Peace proponents (or agents) do not actively engage the people of these societies. As a result, the latter are not involved in the various reconstruction efforts, whether it be state-building, security sector reform, democratisation projects, or matters of dealing with the past and/or national reconciliation.

Indeed, some will counter-argue that indigenous civil society is somehow involved in these efforts. The response to that assertion is that there is preference by Liberal Peace agents for a certain type of civil society – the elitist, educated and urbanised civil society, a constituency that is usually largely disconnected from the realities of the vast majority of the citizenry, and whose involvement in the peacebuilding projects is mostly symbolic and tokenistic. This, in a sense, leads to some complicity between the custodians of Liberal Peace, such as the staff of the IGOs and the IFIs, and the "local" elitist civil society, who can speak the lingo of international actors. The latter, therefore, eventually become the new elites and make concerted efforts at trying out the Liberal Peace development models and experiments, for as long as the resources and political backing from outside are available.

The wholesale importation and transplantation of Liberal Peace values from Western societies to war-ravaged ones is neither helpful nor sustainable as a model because of the inorganic nature of the ideas in their new environment. As seen in most post-conflict and fragile state contexts in Africa, such as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Mozambique, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Burkina Faso and elsewhere, these societies are either on the verge of relapsing into conflict or are already experiencing active insurgencies and serious contestation between the state and one form of non-state armed group or another. This is not to put the blame squarely at the door of the Liberal Peace agenda, for there are several other factors for state failure and relapse into conflict in these societies. The point, however, is that Liberal Peace models are hardly the perfect models for reconstruction and long-term peace, as they are widely portrayed to be.

Elsewhere, I had interrogated the Liberal Peace paradigm and had delineated two main identifiable positions. First, there are those scholars who conclude that the paradigm is workable and useful to societies in and emerging from conflict (Paris, 1997; 2004, pp. 7, 44–45; Richmond, 2003; 2005). The second position is populated by those who find the application of the paradigm to conflict societies as rendering little to no value (Bendana, 2003; Heathershaw, 2008), often referring to it as 'state-building' or the manifestation of 'empire' (Afolabi, 2017, p. 26). As Roger Mac Ginty (2008) notes:

[The Liberal Peace] approaches to peace-making and peace-building emphasize state-building and state-reform as their main methodology. This is essentially a 'problem-solving' approach which accepts the parameters or structures within which the conflict occurs and is content to 'fix' the immediate problem without challenging the meta-structures that support the conflict (p. 146).

Sustainable peace through transitional justice?

Apart from the more popular economic reforms, democratisation and good governance projects, other instruments in the Liberal Peace toolkit include transitional justice, Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR), Security Sector Reform (SSR) and social reconciliation. It is believed that the design and implementation of these instruments will likely ensure sustainable peace and stability in fragile or post-war societies. A closer look at transitional justice will be relevant for this article due to its widespread use in post-conflict contexts. In their efforts to deal with the past and start on a clean slate, some countries in post-conflict situations attempt to imbibe the principles of restorative or retributive justice, or a mélange of both, with limited results to show for these expensive experiments.

If one were to undertake an appraisal of the various transitional justice or truth and reconciliation (TRC) processes initiated across Africa from 1995 to the present, the inconclusive nature and inability of these initiatives to tackle historical and structural inequality would warrant further interrogation. Selim and Murithi (2011, p. 58) identify the lack of attention to the structural causes of conflict as one of the challenges that transitional justice initiatives face. Another aspect of transitional justice that requires further interrogation includes the struggle to ensure a balance between the restorative and retributive forms of transitional justice. Additional issues concern local ownership, the participation of victims in war-affected societies in determining the scope and outcome of such processes, as well as the extent to which these processes have been immune from the influence of incumbent governments or the states that initiated them. Processes that qualify under the aforementioned proposed study include the 1995 TRC initiative to address atrocities committed during apartheid rule in South Africa, which breaks from the past. Of equal potential eligibility are the TRC processes established to deal with war-era atrocities in Sierra Leone in 1999 and Liberia in 2005, the TRC process initiated to expose atrocities perpetrated by military and/or authoritarian regimes in Nigeria (1999), and the TRC process initiated in The Gambia in 2018. Determining how far-reaching the recommendations of these processes may be will largely depend upon the indictment and alleged complicity of powerful members of governments or of state structures.

The verdict on transitional justice efforts is that they have hardly succeeded in achieving the lofty goal of restoring societal cohesion, forgiveness and harmony. For some of those initiatives, especially the ones that have been inconclusive, such as in Liberia, societal fragility and the threat of a mass uprising over unresolved atrocities perpetually hang over the head of the respective political leaders. This is likely to be due to the imported nature of these processes in terms of their design and execution. Sooka (2006, p. 314), who had played an active role in both the South African and Sierra Leonean transitional justice initiatives, referred to the 'spaceship' phenomenon, in which external actors parachute in to prescribe and dictate the agenda for truth and reconciliation commissions, with little or no input from the citizenry. According to her, this leads to an ownership challenge (Sooka, 2006, p. 314).

Again, underscoring the helplessness and inability of post-war societies to resist enforced policies

by the international system, Taylor (2017, p. 28) asserts that '[…] what is presented to the IFIs and the UN system is a *tabula rasa* upon which the promoters of neoliberal capitalism believe their programmes can be implemented with minimal resistance'.

Conclusions and alternative approaches

Taylor's critique of the Liberal Peace is surely not the only definitive work on this topic. Moving the discussion forward, the scholars referenced below have proposed alternative peacebuilding paradigms that include 'hybrid peace', 'peace formation' and 'local peace'.

Mac Ginty and Richmond are among the leading proponents of the 'hybrid peace' paradigm. They postulate that this emerges when an inevitable clash occurs between the local and the international, between the internal and the external. These dynamics create an unanticipated new hybrid form of peace, which will be expressed or manifested in forms neither accepted nor expected by dominant powers (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). Richard Jackson (2018) justifies bringing back pacifist political theory into mainstream International Relations. Again, along the lines espoused by Taylor (2017), he advocates for a peacebuilding model in which 'a radically pacifist, locally organised, agonistic politics replaces the Western-oriented, top-down state-building blueprint which is currently central to peacebuilding theory and practice. From this perspective […] pacifism can offer important theoretical and empirical resources for thinking through the challenges of peacebuilding theory and practice' (Jackson, 2018, pp. 1–2).

One, however, cannot overstate the importance of revisiting certain "truths" on African political discourse, including the wide acceptance of liberal democracy as the solution to all of Africa's problems. This solution remains the model upon which democracies must be benchmarked and evaluated (Taylor, 2017, p. 29). It also encapsulates the 'naïve belief that civil society is in itself a "good thing", which mechanically enhances democracy and accountability' (Taylor, 2017, p. 32). Buttigieg (2005) helps us to understand Gramsci's thoughts on civil society by asserting that, as '[…] Gramsci explains, civil society in the modern liberal State is the arena wherein the prevailing hegemony is constantly being reinforced, not just contested' (p. 38). This is an indication that civil society, a key pillar of the liberal state in Africa, is not necessarily intrinsically good. Taylor's exposition of this fundamental assumption further beams the searchlight on the role that civil society has played in shaping and implementing Liberal Peace action.

Whatever stance one adopts – whether it be the exuberant propositions of Jackson (2018) or the more measured, people-focused and gradualist approach propounded by Mac Ginty and Richmond – there is an urgent need to re-examine critically the utility of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. It may be the case that current shifts in the international system provide the justification and opportunity for such wholesale reappraisal. The emergent, so-called post-American world, where Middle Powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and others, are making concerted efforts to exert their influence in Africa and to propagate the elusive reform of the UN Security Council, may have inadvertently presented us with an opportunity to rethink and rework.

Taylor's (2017) fascinating critique of the Liberal Peace paradigm remains relevant. It draws the attention of national and international peacebuilding actors to the inherent weaknesses of their actions. It also highlights the lack of local ownership or agency, and the fact that some transplanted ideas for either economic or political reforms are unsuitable in some local contexts. Taylor (2017) stressed that the entire enterprise, as a transnational project, was designed to subjugate Africa and place it in a position where it can continue to be susceptible to foreign exploitation and penetration (p. 25).

Endnotes

[1] The inconclusive nature of the transitional justice process in Liberia has been attributed to the reluctance of the then President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to implement the recommendations contained in the TRC report, especially the components which called for a thirty-year political ban for Sirleaf and other influential Liberian politicians.

[2] I have interrogated this role of civil society in my doctoral thesis (Afolabi, 2015, pp. 46–75). For more on this, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1998), Makumbe (1998), Paffenholz (2010) and Kieh (2012).

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