

The life and work of Professor Ian Taylor: introduction to a “special” special issue

Author: [Tim Zajontz](#) 

Biography

Tim Zajontz is Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Freiburg, and Research Fellow in the Centre for International and Comparative Politics at Stellenbosch University. He earned his PhD from the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews, where he worked under the supervision of the late Professor Ian Taylor on the political economy and governance of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects in Africa.

Abstract

This article serves as the introduction to a special issue which undertakes a modest attempt at mapping and honouring the life and work of the late Professor Ian Taylor. It sketches Ian Taylor’s personal and professional milestones and outlines some of his main scholarly contributions, before outlining the structure and content of this special issue. With this “special” special issue, we chose to place emphasis not only on Ian’s lasting scholarly legacy but also on the impact he had on his students. The special issue fosters conversation about Ian’s work among some of his former PhD students and leading scholars in the research domains Ian was involved in. We hope to trigger further debate about an inspiring and influential intellectual, scholar and educator.

Keywords: [Ian Taylor](#), [Stellenbosch University](#), [University of St Andrews](#), [African Studies](#), [China-Africa Studies](#), [African Political Economy](#)

Introduction

In February 2021, Professor Ian Taylor passed away after a short struggle with cancer. Ian was professor in International Relations and African Political Economy in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He also held extraordinary and visiting professorships at Renmin University, China, at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, and at Zhejiang Normal University, China. He had established himself as a world-renowned scholar in the fields of African Studies, International Relations and Global Political Economy.

Besides his remarkable academic achievements, Ian was an extremely passionate educator, as well as a kind, humorous and supportive colleague and friend to many people around the

world. Ian's untimely death caused much grief, not least among his colleagues and students at the University of St Andrews, where he had worked since 2004. Some time after his death, Gillian Brunton and Faye Donnelly, and I discussed the idea to compile a special issue on the work of Ian Taylor, who was clearly one of St Andrews' most eminent "contemporary voices" on International Relations.

As editorial team, we quickly agreed that, in order to honour not only the scholarly impact of Ian's work but also his lasting legacy on the life and work of his students, this special issue should not follow the ordinary style and conventions of a special issue. Instead, we decided to compile a rather "special" special issue, which would foster conversation about Ian's work among some of his former PhD students and leading scholars in the research domains with which Ian was concerned. The result is a collection of short essays on a small selection of Ian's numerous publications. Prior to elaborating on the structure and content of this special issue, I outline some of Ian's personal and professional milestones, in order to pay tribute to an inspiring intellectual, educator and scholar with a clear moral compass.

Ian Taylor's journey

Together with his twin brother Eric, Ian grew up on the Isle of Man, before the family relocated to West London, where he spent his teens and would become a die-hard Brentford FC supporter – in his words a '100% local club'. He would have certainly rejoiced to see his team fretting the big Premier League clubs from the 2021/22 season onwards. Whilst there were few points of contact with Africa on the small Crown dependency in the Irish Sea, Ian, early on, developed a keen interest in Africa, as he heard stories from his grandmother, whose parents had lived in South Africa and where a large network of relatives still lives.

Ian first read History and Politics at what was then the Leicester Polytechnic. Supervised by Gurharpal Singh, Ian concluded his Bachelor's with a thesis on Albania, which was inspired by a trip he had undertaken in 1986 when he was only 17. Following his undergraduate studies, Ian used a gap year in 1991/92 for his first travel to southern Africa – obviously at quite a formative time for the region. This trip clearly left a firm impression on him, as he would continuously return to the region throughout his life. First, however, he joined his wife Joanne, whom he met in South Africa, when she took up PhD studies at the University of Hong Kong in 1994. Ian enrolled himself for a Master's there. His 368-page MPhil thesis on China's foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Africa, which was supervised by James Tang, laid the cornerstone for one of his research specialisations and arguably also for a new sub-discipline, China–Africa studies.

In 1996, Ian moved to South Africa (Jo followed several months later) to pursue PhD studies at Stellenbosch University under the supervision of Philip Nel (see Nel, this issue). With his PhD research, Ian delved deeply into South African foreign policy and into the neoliberalisation of the post-*apartheid* African National Congress and, by extension, the South African state

(Taylor, 2001). Ian rapidly became an important representative of the Stellenbosch School of critical global political economy (Vale, 2002). As Professor Extraordinary, he would return to his *alma mater* throughout his life and continue to inspire generations of students there and at other (African) institutions.

Tit-for-tat, after finishing his PhD, it was again Ian's turn to "follow" his wife. The two moved on to the University of Botswana, where Jo had been offered a teaching position and where their first child, Blythe, was born in 2004 (their second-born Archie would follow two years later). Ian took up a lectureship in Gaborone and was soon promoted to senior lecturer. Among his students was Kennedy Kamoli, who would, in 2014, stage a coup d'état in Lesotho – an occurrence that Ian, with his typical humour, often referred to as his only "claim to fame". It was during his time in Gaborone that Ian, together with his close friend Fredrik Söderbaum, launched a "second wave" of critical research on African regionalisms in the tradition of the New Regionalism Approach (see Taylor, 2003b; Taylor and Söderbaum, 2003; Whiteford, this issue; Söderbaum, this issue). Concurrently, Ian published a rigorous critique of the neoliberal underpinnings of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (see Taylor, 2002; 2005), as well as several influential contributions on Africa's international relations and conflict dynamics (see, for instance, Taylor and Williams, 2002; Taylor, 2003a).

In 2004, Ian was appointed to a faculty position in the School of International Relations at St Andrews where he, thanks to his enormous productivity, quickly climbed the tenure track to full professorship. Ian's office was legendary, among both students and faculty in St Andrews, for the colourful book walls he had erected around his desk. No doubt, his office hosted one of the biggest private Africana libraries in Scotland. There were also, however, thousands of books on China, political economy, history, political thought etc.

Ian was not only a prolific, highly respected scholar and passionate educator. I have been told by many of his colleagues (from several institutions at which Ian worked) that he was also the ideal colleague and co-worker. While his enthusiasm for institutional "house-keeping", as well as for the usual admin and politics that come with a university job, had definite limits, his colleagues commonly remember how genuinely interested and supportive he was of their work, sharing generously with them his contacts, knowledge and advice. Even more importantly, Ian never differentiated according to the "rank" of the people with whom he engaged. He treated everyone respectfully (usually combined with a good amount of humour) regardless of one's societal or professional role. He would remember the birthdays of co-workers and would happily join the Christmas functions of the administrative staff at the School of International Relations.

Once established, Ian published an immense body of works which includes, among others, monographs on China–Africa relations (Taylor, 2006; 2009; 2011), the United Nations

Conference on Trade and Development (Taylor and Smith, 2007) and the international relations of Africa (Taylor, 2010), as well as Oxford's *African politics: a very short introduction* (Taylor, 2018). He offered a much-needed discursive corrective to the overenthusiastic narrative about the transformative impact of so-called emerging powers in global governance (Taylor, 2017) and famously argued that the BRICS countries were diversifying Africa's dependency instead of diminishing it (Taylor, 2014a). Numerous critical interventions in article form, such as the ones on state capitalism and Africa's oil sector (Taylor, 2014b), the (neo-)coloniality of the *Communauté Financière Africaine* (Taylor, 2019) and China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa (Carmody, Taylor and Zajontz, 2022), have attracted much attention in scholarly circles and beyond. Ian had become 'one of the most authoritative academics' on sub-Saharan Africa international relations, as he was once called in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (Anesi, 2012, p. 171).

Throughout his career, Ian remained steadfast and loyal to his political ideals of a more equitable and just world. He was a radical, a very gentle radical. He never compromised on his convictions of what is right and what is wrong. What he most certainly considered wrong was the enduring systematic exploitation of Africa by external actors and economic interests. At the same time, he would never let African political and economic elites escape from their responsibility for the fate of their people. His neo-Gramscian training and his appreciation of the complexity of state-society relations, as well as his familiarity with the political thought of theorists like Claude Ake, Samir Amin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney and others, prevented him from making reductionist and Eurocentric assumptions about Africa's role in the international system and global political economy.

Ian was an extremely hard-working academic, who was marked by his humility and pride in his working-class background. In contrast to some other leading scholars, he really listened when others spoke. He incorporated silenced voices, not least from Africa, into his work and actively engaged in diversifying thought at the institutions he taught by embracing previously unheard or ignored ideas. Throughout his life, he remained a keen "student of Africa". He visited 44 African countries. Whenever he found himself guest lecturing at Addis Ababa University, he would check Ethiopian Airlines' vast route network and book a flight to one of the few African destinations he had not been to. Wanderlust and curiosity were innate to Ian. His untimely death prevented him from completing his personal "Africa journey". Yet, he fully accepted his fate and was immensely grateful for the help he received from medical staff, as well as for the love of family and friends. It was obvious that his firm belief in God gave him faith, no matter what might be.

The elusive attempt at honouring the intellectual legacy of a polymath

This special issue is a very humble attempt at fostering discussion on the body of work of an outstanding scholar. Such an attempt will remain elusive simply due to the sheer volume

and diversity of scholarship Ian had produced. Shaun Breslin of the University of Warwick, another one of Ian's close companions, in a televised address at a thanksgiving service for Ian's life in St Salvator's Chapel at St Andrews argued pointedly that:

I don't think I've ever met anybody who knew so much about so many places and issues. And he didn't just know about them – he published on them too. What this means is that if you asked five people to say what they thought of Ian's work and asked them to sum up his contribution, they could easily focus on five different dimensions of it; indeed, you might end up thinking that they were talking about different people or that there were multiple Ian Taylors out there.

Shaun Breslin is right. In my own conversations with Ian (and I am sure in those of many others), I regularly encountered different Ian Taylors. The most remarkable aspect of his intellectual personality was that the multiple Ian Taylors spoke to one another in a coherent and intellectually stimulating manner. Thereby, Ian never thought in disciplinary categories and boundaries. He was actually a post-disciplinary scholar long before this became fashionable.

As Breslin pointed out, it was simply impressive with how many thematic (and disciplinary) discourses Ian kept up, and how diverse his research and body of work is. Ian was a polymath. His personal library of about 8,000 titles (not counting the books in his Scottish home in St Monans) that we recently transferred to the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) at Addis Ababa University, is proof of how widely Ian read and how knowledgeable he was.

With this in mind, one short special issue can obviously not do justice to the many Ian Taylors out there – this is not our ambition. Nonetheless, the contributors to this special issue highlight some facets of Ian's personal research agenda over the two and a half decades of his successful academic career. They do so from the vantage point of their respective positions – some of them being Ian's own disciples, others themselves renowned scholars who knew Ian and his work well and walked parts of his career besides him.

How did we end up with the valued group of scholars who contributed to this special issue? We approached Ian's former PhD supervisees with a call for papers. Committed contributors chose a piece of scholarship from Ian's immense body of work themselves, based on their expertise or because they considered that Ian's thoughts and ideas on the specific topic were particularly influential for their own thinking and work. Ian's students were also given the liberty to choose which senior scholar we should approach for a "response" to their article and to the topic they had selected. We are extremely grateful for both the contributions from Ian's former PhD students and the dialogic responses from leading academics who knew Ian well. We also cordially thank three colleagues from the School of International Relations at St Andrews, who acted as anonymous reviewers for this special issue.

Structure of the special issue

This “special” special issue opens with a contribution by a person who knew the scholar Ian Taylor probably the longest. Philip Nel, who acted as Ian’s PhD supervisor at Stellenbosch University, details the intellectual development of the “early” Ian Taylor in an essay that reflects on Ian’s time as a PhD student at Stellenbosch and how it impacted his political thought and later work. As Nel elaborates, at the time, Stellenbosch’s Political Science department gathered a group of scholars who had become rather disillusioned about remaining inequities in the post-Cold War global order, and who were inspired by the work of critical political economists like Susan Strange, Robert Cox, Stephen Gill and William Robinson, as well as by critical Africanists such as Timothy Shaw, Patrick McGowan and Craig Murphy. It was within this particular intellectual environment that Ian developed a ‘distinctive Coxian and Gramscian theoretical approach’, which ‘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’ (Nel, this issue). Nel shows how Ian’s work rapidly spiralled beyond his PhD research on South African foreign policy. There are few scholars with a similar research output so early in their career. As Janis van der Westhuizen from Stellenbosch University expressed humorously in an email conversation, ‘when we shared an office as PhD students, he would churn out one article for every two pages I was able to write!’.

Philip Nel’s intellectual biography of the “early” Ian Taylor is followed by a second batch of “conversational” essays, whereby one of Ian’s former PhD students analyses a self-chosen piece of research by Ian, followed by a “response” from a senior scholar and expert in the respective field. Sarah Whiteford opens this section with an article that reflects on an ‘unfinished conversation with Ian Taylor’ on regionalism and regionalisation, a field of study Ian heavily influenced in the 2000s. Whiteford chose an article by Ian titled ‘Globalization and regionalization in Africa: reactions to attempts at neo-liberal regionalism’, which was published in the *Review of International Political Economy*. Fredrik Söderbaum, a close friend to Ian and a leading contemporary voice on regionalism, comments on the same piece and discusses Ian’s lasting legacy on the field of (comparative) regionalism studies, emphasising how immersed Ian was in ‘on-the-ground research’. Whiteford and Söderbaum’s contributions demonstrate Ian’s nuanced and critical understanding of the dialectical interplay between neoliberal globalisation and regionalisation, as well as between official regional integration schemes and actual developments on the ground.

The second pair of essays is concerned with a topic that probably became the “signature” project of Ian’s academic career: his extremely influential work on Africa–China relations. Ian’s former PhD student Steven Kuo chose one of Ian’s first academic articles on ‘China’s foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s’ (1998). In fact, the article was an outcome of his MPhil research at the University of Hong Kong and was published in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, in which Ian would become co-editor-in-chief, together with Ebenezer Obadare, eighteen years later. Zhengyu Wu from the School of International Studies at

Renmin University of China where Ian was a chair professor, the highest professorial rank foreigners can attain in China, responds to Kuo's essay. Kuo and Wu describe how formative Ian's work on Africa–China relations was for what is now a burgeoning sub-field, both in Area Studies and International Relations. Ian continued to work on the topic throughout his career and became a respected Africa expert in China. He remained largely critical of the detrimental social, political and economic repercussions of China's "rise" in Africa, without falling for the hypocritical China bashing that has become popular among Western commentators.

A third conversation between Athanasios Stathopoulos and Pádraig Carmody evolves around Ian's scepticism about the "Africa rising" narrative that emerged in neoliberal media outlets, consultancies and investment banks during Africa's apparently remarkable growth trajectory amidst the so-called commodity "super cycle" of the 2000s. Discussing Ian's article 'Is Africa rising?', published in the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, both Stathopoulos and Carmody agree with Ian's analysis that Africa's supposed "rise", while boasting impressive growth figures, failed to bring about the structural transformation of African economies. As Ian argued elsewhere (see Taylor, 2014a), Africa's "boom" of the 2000s, which was not least driven by growing demand for African raw materials from so-called emerging economies, led to a 'diversification of Africa's dependency'.

The final pair of essays departs from the conversational systematics of the previous three. Patrick Tom and Babatunde Afolabi, both former PhD supervisees of Ian's, opted for two articles by Ian that develop a critique of the "liberal peace" paradigm – one published in 2007 in *Global Society*, the other in 2017 in *Africa Development*. Due to the thematic overlap, we decided to pair the two contributions from Ian's former PhD students, instead of reaching out to someone to respond to either of the two. Tom and Afolabi focus on a facet of Ian's work that is most under-acknowledged, *videlicet* his research on conflict and security dynamics. As both authors show, Ian was deeply sceptical about Western interventionism in (post-) conflict settings across the African continent. This scepticism was, as Tom shows, informed by research experience from the ground – for instance, from Liberia. Simultaneously, as Afolabi discusses, Ian's neo-Gramscian leanings allowed him to expose the contradictions in the institutional, normative and materialist organisation of the so-called "liberal peace".

As noted before, this special issue is a very modest attempt at mapping and honouring Ian Taylor's intellectual legacy, one that hopefully triggers further debate. The multifaceted nature of Ian's work, to which the following contributions point, does not lend itself easily for a conclusion. This is probably the main reason why we, as editors, opted against a concluding essay. A second reason is more symbolic: to us a conclusion appeared *de trop*, simply because we hope (and are optimistic) that Ian's work will live on for generations of students and scholars to come.



*Professor Ian Taylor at the Murambi Genocide Memorial in Rwanda's Southern Province in March 2015
(Photo: courtesy of István Tarrósy).*

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