CIVIL SOCIETY AND POST-CONFLICT LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE – INSIGHTS FROM DISCOURSE THEORY[1]

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse civil society in the context of post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone through the lens provided by discourse theory as coagulated in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It is our contention that external interventions by donors were guided by a hegemonic articulation which envisaged civil society as a clearly defined moment in a discourse which equated reconstruction with development and good governance. In addition to mapping some of the consequences of the aforementioned hegemonic discursive articulation, we also plan to use the proposed framework to determine whether this articulation has been fully dislocated.
Keywords: discourse theory, post-conflict, civil society, Liberia, Sierra Leone

Introduction

The brutal civil wars which plagued both Liberia (1989-2003) and Sierra Leone (1991-2002) for more than a decade paved the way for the two countries to be globally recognised as post-conflict societies in dire need of multi-sectoral peacebuilding measures. The immediate dilemma that arises out of this situation concerns the nature and characteristics of the peacebuilding process and its elements, including civil society. However, instead of

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attempting to determine the best framework for civil society as an agent of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, the following article asserts that fixed optimal solutions to this issue cannot be identified. It is therefore our contention that tracing the discursive articulation of various post-conflict constructs offers a more accurate image of our subject-matter by depicting various peacebuilding solutions as competing hegemonic articulations rather than static approaches that can be evaluated and implemented in a purely technocratic manner.

Given the mental framework outlined above, the current paper has two intimately interconnected research questions: firstly, we aim to trace the main coordinates of the discursive articulation of post-conflict civil societies in Liberia and Sierra Leone and secondly, we endeavour to determine whether the dominant discursive articulation has been deconstructed and how this purpose may have been achieved.

The methodology employed in achieving this purpose is based on applying the framework of discourse theory as envisioned by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in order to analyse the articulation of post-conflict reconstruction discourses as represented in secondary sources such as institutional documents, development practice and academic literature.

In terms of the actors involved in the aforementioned articulations, the main focus is on donors as the source of the hegemonic discursive construct that emerged immediately after the two civil conflicts, on civil society manifestations that found themselves on different sides of an antagonistic relationship and, last but not least, on national governments. It is noteworthy that the concept of donors is left deliberately vague, generally encompassing multilateral institutions (such as the World Bank, the IMF or the UNDP), bilateral donors embodied by national government agencies and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs).

So as to effectively implement the proposed research method, the first two sections of our paper focus on its theoretical and empirical basis, while the third part traces the main coordinates of the dominant discourse on post-conflict civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone; this tasks followed by a section detailing attempts that have been made towards the deconstruction of the dominant discursive patterns. The paper concludes by pointing out that, despite a concerted effort towards deconstruction, an alternative hegemonic construct is still in its articulation stages.

Discourse theory – conceptual clarifications

As foreshadowed in the introduction, the current section will focus on a few key concepts in discourse theory as explained by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. As a comprehensive description of their theoretical articulation is beyond the scope of the current research effort, the substance of our explanation lies in four key notions that will be essential in our analysis: empty signifiers, nodal points, hegemony and antagonism.

Before tackling these essential coordinates, it is opportune to offer a brief presentation of the approach towards discursive meaning that constitutes the hidden backbone of this paper. An appropriate starting point for this task is represented by Laclau and Mouffe's contention that "no discursive formation is a sutured totality"[2]. In their interpretation, fully fixed, absolute identities are continuously sought after, even as their realisation remains constitutively impossible.

For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse results from an 'articulatory practice' that modifies the identity of its elements. Moments represent "differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse" while an element is "any difference that is not discursively articulated".[3] The impossibility of closure for any identity stems from the fact that "the transformation of elements into moments is never complete"[4]. As a result, any regime of meaning is only a temporary encoding of the social, a false objectivity, whose limits always carry within them the possibility of its subversion since "there is no social identity fully protected from a discursive exterior that deforms it and prevents it becoming fully sutured"[5]. It is consequently impossible for any discourse to become an immutable ordering principle with permanently fixed moments because, no matter how 'objective' or 'fixed' a representation of truth might seem, it is ultimately subject to deconstruction and re-articulation in a continuous search for what Ernesto Laclau very aptly terms 'an absent fullness'.

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[2] Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (Second edition),* London, New York: Verso, 2001, p. 106.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 105.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 107.

[5] Laclau, Mouffe, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

The discursive space of the 'absent fullness' as a constant partially sutured totality is populated by the empty signifier. Simply put, an empty signifier is "a signifier without a signified"[6], which can emerge because every system of signification requires an object whose production is actually impossible[7].

In other words, the 'absent fullness' is an overarching, universal, fully fixed ordering principle that remains forever elusive but also constantly requires articulation. It is as a response to this impossibility that empty signifiers emerge. An elucidating example is formulated by Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac: in a context of absolute disorder, the introduction of *an* order which ensures the continuity of the community is required. But this continuity does not have any actual content of its own as it is an "absent plenitude that could not be exhausted by any of the concrete forms that would attempt to realize it."[8]

Although any attempt to articulate the content of an empty signifier is condemned to failure by default (as it falls short of fulfilling the aforementioned absent fullness), this does not mean that such attempts can simply be arrested. What happens is that the 'absent fullness' embodied by the empty signifier "has to be represented/misrepresented by one of its particular contents"[9]. This way, the unattainable objectivity is expressed by an essentially subjective decision, while the universal is represented by a particular content which can only have a temporary and apparent claim to representing the 'ultimate closure'. As Ernesto Laclau very suitably explains, "what we are dealing with is, *the presence of an absence*, and *the ideological operation par excellence consists of attributing that impossible role of closure to a particular content that is radically incommensurable with it.*"[10]

We have deliberately chosen to start these conceptual clarifications by referring to empty signifiers because it is their presence that enables the

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[6] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation (Second edition)*, London, New York: Verso, 2007, p. 36.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 40.

[8] Ernesto Laclau, Lilian Zac, "Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics", in Ernesto Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities,* London: Verso, 1994, pp. 15-16.

[9] Ernesto Laclau, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony", in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida,Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 61.

[10] Ernesto Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London, New York: Verso 2014, p. 14.

formation of a discursive logic defined by a hegemonic articulation around certain nodal points that only becomes possible through the existence of social antagonism. To clarify, we assert that empty signifiers carry the capacity of becoming nodal points, which "are the privileged signs around which a discourse is organized"[11] A nodal point results through the creation of a chain in which signifiers enter into an equivalential relation with all other elements of the system, thus in effect cancelling their differences as such.[12] However, the links of the chain do not become completely devoid of their own particularity; they are transformations which come to represent different names for the absent fullness[13], different incarnations of the particular content which fills the empty signifier.

This observation enables us to see exactly how a discursive system carries within itself the possibility of its own dislocation: as more moments enter into a chain of equivalence, their differential character is progressively obscured[14], to the point where the chain can only represent itself negatively, through relating to an enemy, a threatening other, which its master 'incarnation' is not.[15] We may note that the excluded elements, as well as obscured differences in the chain of equivalence carry within themselves the possibility of dislocation followed by a hegemonic re-articulation: the frontier which enabled the signifier to express its meaning in the first place is the very source of its potential subversion.

Once we have clarified how an empty signifier coalesces into a nodal point, it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that the "relation by which a particular element assumes the impossible task of a universal representation, is […] a *hegemonic* relation."[16] Therefore, the whole process described above is actually the means through which hegemony is constructed: a particular, concrete meaning determines a partial fixation of the discursive field by presenting itself as a universal nodal point, a complete embodiment of the 'absent fullness' expressed through an empty signifier. In the words of Chantal

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[11] Marianne Jørgensen; Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: SAGE Publications, 2002, p. 28.

[12] Laclau, *Emancipation*, pp. 38-39.

[13] Laclau, *The Rhetorical…*, p. 14.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 15.

[15] Laclau, Mouffe, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

[16] Laclau, *Deconstruction…*, p. 61.

Mouffe, we need to "accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion…"[17]

At this time, we come back to a notion which has already been partially explained through our discussion concerning the creation of a threatening otherness: the exclusion which takes place is the mark of social antagonism, which carries an intrinsic connection to the hegemonic articulation by being its enabler.[18] Indeed, the very process of hegemonic articulation through the creation of equivalential chains is impossible without acts of power which unmask any social objectivity as essentially political and carrying the traces of "the acts of exclusion which govern its constitution"[19]. Because every instance of hegemonic articulation is bound to rule out certain elements, antagonism will inherently accompany it as the concrete form of an 'us *versus* them' relation built on exclusion.

Having reached a point where our four key concepts, as well as the links between them have become as clear as possible, we now express our commitment towards employing them in an analysis of the post-conflict discursive environment of the case studies described in the next section. On a cautionary note, not only actual texts (documents) will be placed under scrutiny, but also practices of peacebuilding actors as, according to Laclau and Mouffe, they are well within the realm of discourse.

Liberia and Sierra Leone – a tenuous background for civil society

After establishing the theoretical underpinnings of our paper in the previous section, we now move on towards briefly outlining the historical conditions for the emergence, functioning and development of civil society up until the post-conflict period in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Even though

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[17] Chantal Mouffe, "Deconstruction, Pragmatism and thePolitics of Democracy" in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida,Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 11.

[18] Jacob Torfing, "Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges" in David Howarth, Jacob Torfing (eds.), *Discourse Theory in European Politics. Identity, Policy and Governance*, Palgrave: Macmillan, 2005, p. 15.

[19] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, New York: Verso, 2000, p. 21.

our case-studies do not share a colonial history, they do share very similar experiences of exclusion which can be paradoxically traced back to the anti-slave movement and continued, as we shall see, for the entire twentieth century period that culminated with the civil wars.

As far as Sierra Leone is concerned, after it became an official crown colony at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British imposed a highly divisive system at all levels of the country. One of the main instruments of this system was the privileging of the anglicized Creole or Krio population.[20] A small minority of the population, they benefited from access to Western education and their influence developed, thus contributing to their belief in their own superiority.[21] The second instrument employed by the British was the creation of a system of hereditary 'ruling' families and lifetime paramount chiefs who enjoyed considerable power ensured by customary law; this way, a further gap was created between these families and the rest of the population.[22]

While this short exposition is far from comprehensive, our purpose was demonstrating that, prior to independence in 1961, the Sierra Leonean society had developed mechanisms that played a strong dissuasive role in terms of participation in the political arena. Even though the first years after independence were marked by tentative hope and an (ethnically biased) opening of the political field, the ascent to power of the All People's Congress (APC) of Siaka Stevens in 1967 steadily brought exclusion to the fore once again and transformed it into the modus operandi of the state.

After a coup that briefly removed him from power, Stevens' rule through the APC was marked by the ruthless elimination of all modes of contestation to the system: freedom of the press, of speech and of association were curtailed, students were prevented from becoming a force of opposition, political patronage became a prevailing practice and the youth was either co-opted by the state, forced to go abroad or became progressively disenchanted. All of these tendencies culminated in 1978, when the APC

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[20] J. Peter Pham, "Lazarus Rising: Civil Society and Sierra Leone's Return from the Grave", *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2004, p. 2, [http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol7iss1/art_2.htm], 8 September 2014.

[21] C. Magbaily Fyle, *Historical Dictionary of Sierra Leone*, Lanham, Toronto, Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. 101.

[22] Myriam Denov, *Child Soldiers Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 52.

constitutionally became the single party.[23]As a result of these evolutions, the space for civil society activism was severely eroded in the pre-war years, due to both regulations and the governmental tactic of co-optation targeted at potentially unpleasant political elements. However, this did not mean that any potential for contestation coming from civil society was annihilated. We may easily notice that civic organisations such as secret societies (Poro), gender, ethnically, religiously and professionally-based organisations have constantly been a part of the local landscape.[24]

In a strikingly familiar scenario, the Liberian state itself was arguably founded on exclusion. Although its roots are far more complicated than what can be conveyed here, the bottom line remains that, from the outset, Liberia was marked by the cleavage between the so-called Americo-Liberians, the descendants of freed slaves, and the indigenous population. In spite of comprising only around five percent of the population, the former fashioned themselves as ruling elites and imposed a structure similar to that which had previously oppressed them or their ancestors in the United States.[25]

The discriminatory policies imposed by the Americo-Liberian settlers became visible as soon as the state assumed independence and a constitution in 1847: the constitutional order, based on the realities of the United States, denied citizenship to indigenous people while enshrining their obligation to pay taxes. While the indigenes were granted citizenship (1904) and, eventually, the right to vote as well, this cornerstone of political participation was designed as constitutionally dependent on possessing property.[26] In 1860, the True Whig Party was formed[27] as a palpable expression of the previously described order; the significance of this moment was that this particular party quickly became the dominant political force, only

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[23] Amadu Sesay, et al., *Post-War Regimes and State Reconstruction in Liberia and Sierra Leone*, Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2009,pp. 28-33.

[24] Vandy Kanyako, "The Check Is *Not* in the Mail: How Local Civil-Society Organizations Cope with Funding Volatility in Postconflict Sierra Leone", *Africa Today*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2011, p. 6.

[25]Abiodun Alao; John Mackinlay, Funmi Olonisakin, *Peacekeepers, Politicians, and Warlords: The Liberian Peace Process*, United Nations University Press, 2000, p. 14.

[26] George Klay Keih, Jr., *The First Liberian Civil War: The Crises of Underdevelopment*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008, pp. 66-67.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

relinquishing its privileged position forcibly in 1980. Under Willian Tubman, Liberia became a de facto one-party system[28], with the view of the president being that the Americo-Liberians had a "heavenly mandate to civilize and Christianize" the Native Liberians.[29]

As the Liberian scenario suggests, participation was an inaccessible means of contestation to a large part of the population during the True Whig supremacy, given the numerous limitations placed on political rights. However, it did not necessarily remain a foreign concept. The initial relaxation under president Tolbert in the early seventies managed to prove that disaffection had become the norm and had festered and coalesced in social movements that flared in April 1979, when a broad national coalition of movements organized a massive demonstration sparked by an increase in the price of rice; this protest was brutally and bloodily silenced by the government security forces,[30] thus signalling a return to authoritarianism.

As a consequence of the pervasive climate of discrimination and oppression, the April 1980 coup led by low-ranking officer Samuel Doe was not a surprizing development. The initial hope brought on by this long-awaited change proved to be misplaced, as Doe's regime, both in its military and civilian tenure was highly violent, swift to deal with any political opponents, corrupt, opportunistic and ethnically biased in favour of Doe's native Krahn group.[31] Therefore, severe repression met widespread disenfranchisement in the years leading up to the civil war but, as in Sierra Leone, the idea of civic participation, although mostly unfeasible, was not completely discarded.

The two protracted civil wars marked the advent of an even more insecure and hostile environment for Liberian and Sierra Leonean citizens who had to contend with violence perpetrated by the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia), RUF (Revolutionary United Front), government forces and several other paramilitary groups. In addition to this, the two countries underwent what can only be termed as state failure, with even the most basic services and order being absent. As a manifestation of the consequences of

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[28] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

[29] Joseph Saye Guannu, "The Political History of Liberia and the Civil War", in Omeje, Kenneth (ed.), *War to peace transition: conflict intervention and peacebuilding in Liberia*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009, p. 27.

[30] Keih, Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

[31] Alao, Mackinlay, Olonisakin, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

this phenomenon, Sierra Leone was further shaken by coups (in 1992, 1996 and1997) and attempts to reach a power-sharing agreement with the RUF.[32] As far as Liberia is concerned, NPFL leader Charles Taylor came to power in 1997 through elections that were marked by fear of retaliation unless he was given the presidency. From our perspective, it is interesting and disheartening to note that Taylor refused to treat civil society organisations as potential partners in peacebuilding, perceiving them as his political opposition or as beholden to the donor community and therefore deserving to be treated with utmost suspicion.[33]

In spite of this highly adverse climate, some civil society groups still attempted to carve out a political space for themselves, by attempting to become mediators or brokers of the peace process. Two very well-known examples can be referenced as proof of this statement, namely the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee in Liberia[34] and the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone[35].

While our short incursion into Liberian and Sierra Leonean history has only focused on key moments and elements for civil society participation, we now have a clearer image of the climate in which the civil society operating in the post-conflict period evolved.

We may infer that, as a result of all forms of contestation being generally perceived as threats by successive governments which perpetuated the logic of exclusion, civil society organisations articulated themselves by necessity in an antagonistic, counter-hegemonic manner opposite the political establishment perceived as an enemy who was unresponsive to their demands (this conceptualization excludes, of course, groups created as state supporters by the political system)This way, classical democratic forms of political

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[32] Guy Arnold, *Historical Dictionary of Civil Wars in Africa*, Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2008, pp. 317-322.

[33] Samuel Atuobi, "State-Civil Society Interface in Liberia's Post-Conflict Peacebuilding", *KAIPTC Occasional Paper No. 30*, 2010, p. 3.

[34] David E. Kode, "Civil Society, Conflict Resolution and Post-conflict Reconstruction in Kosovo and Liberia", in Regina List, Wolfgang Dorner (eds.), *Civil Society, Conflict and Violence: Insights from the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Project*, 2012,

[http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/Civil-Society-Conflict-Violence/chapter-ba-9781780931036-chapter-005.xml], 17 November 2013.

[35] Pham, *op. cit.*

participation were precluded, a fact which had significant consequences for civil society in the peacebuilding process. As a continuation, the next part of our paper traces the nature of these consequences by sketching the dominant discursive constructs that initially populated the post-conflict field.

The dominant discourse on post-conflict civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone

As prefaced repeatedly throughout this paper, the following section will engage with the dominant discursive constructs of the initial post-conflict period by unravelling their mechanisms of articulation. Also included in this analysis are conceptualizations that, since the aforementioned initial moments, have strengthened this discursive paradigm. Our insistence on this categorization stems from the fact that, as we shall see in the last part of this paper, there have been significant evolutions within the post-conflict discursive field which need to be observed on their own merit.

To begin with, an important observation needs to be brought to the fore: the emergence of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding as autonomous concepts opened up a new discursive field (between that of conflict and that of peace) which was ripe for hegemonic struggles. An empty signifier such as 'peacebuilding' naturally required a particular content to express its overarching goal.

For several key donors, the development-good governance couple emerged as the leading construct in a hegemonic relation which equated peacebuilding with a return to the temporarily derailed track of development. As we shall witness throughout the rest of the paper, development itself is an empty signifier and was therefore subjected to a process of temporary closure. Since it was an empty signifier, development could only be articulated through an antagonistic relation, which is well illustrated in the approach and documents of a key multilateral donor, namely the World Bank: in a 2003 report, the World Bank explicitly termed civil war as "development in reverse"[36]; more accurately, civil war constitutes a deviation from the path

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[36] Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, A World Bank Policy Research Report, World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 11-32.

of development which diverts resources towards destructive activities and stymies economic growth.[37] Paul Collier even goes as far as to substantiate the 'civil war as development in reverse' thesis by calculating the costs of civil conflicts and arguing that low-income, developing countries are statistically prone to conflict.[38] Taking everything into account, we have summarized evidence of how a vital actor in the donor community contrasts the notion of development with a previous constitutive lack. Furthermore, the emphasis on a certain type of economic growth suggests a neoliberal initial slant to this concept of development.

However, the 'couple' we identified also proposed "good governance" as a second key construct, which makes it imperative to see exactly how it comes into play. In the nineties, the World Bank articulated this concept as a floating signifier in the development discourse. A floating signifier "…can assimilate different meanings depending on the nature or topic of the discourse"[39] and, in our current case, that meaning was an essentially technocratic one, with good governance as central to creating and sustaining an environment which fosters strong and equitable development.[40] Expectedly, this concept has since graduated to a more politically inclined signification in the development community, so a few key observations are essential for a better understanding.

Firstly, as a concept which was generally devoid of meaning, it also articulated itself in opposition to a threatening previous lack, constituted as bad governance[41] or, even worse, as a shadow state/failed

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[37] For a more detailed explanation see *ibidem*, pp. 13-14, WORLD BANK, *POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION: THE ROLE OF THE WORLD BANK*, Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 1998, p. 17.

[38] Paul Collier, *Development and Conflict*, 2004, pp. 1-4,
[http://www.un.org/esa/documents/Development.and.Conflict2.pdf], 3 June 2015.

[39] Oana-Raluca Crăciun, "The New Populism. An analysis of the Political Discourse of Front National and LijstPim Fortuyn", in Sergiu Mişcoiu, Oana-Raluca Crăciun, Nicoleta Colopelnic, *Radicalism, Populism, Interventionism. Three Approaches Based on Discourse Theory*, Cluj-Napoca: EFES, 2008, p. 41.

[40] WORLD BANK, *GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT*, Washington, D. C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 1992, p. 1.

[41] For this perspective applied to Liberia, see Edward Banka Gariba, "Post-conflict development in Liberia: Governance, security, capacity building and a developmental approach", *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2011, pp. 105-132; USAID Liberia,
[http://www.usaid.gov/Liberia], 25 July 2015.

state cycle.[42] From this point forward the concept also needed to be filled with meaning and it is our contention that the result pointed towards a democratically inclined political project. For example, Casaburi et al. claim that, in the early 2000s, the World Bank perceived good governance along three key dimensions: *political and bureaucratic accountability, the rule of law and freedom of association and participation*, which, although intended as technical, could not escape a political bias towards more honest, transparent and representative governments.[43] The organization that further developed the concept of good governance was the United Nations Development Programme, which, in 1997, defined good governance

> "as promoting widespread participation by all citizens, making decisions by rule of law, ensuring transparency in the actions of governance institutions, being responsive to the needs and desires of citizens, and assuring equity in the treatment of citizens, effectiveness and efficiency in the use of public resources, public accountability, and the exercise of strategic vision in planning for development."[44]

Taking these observations into account, we may safely infer that the notion of governance which is seen as conducive to development also contains elements such as rule of law, transparency, representation, civic participation and accountability, all of which point towards a political approach based on democracy. Moreover, no matter how conceptually neutral the premises of good governance might seem, power is inextricable from such a hegemonic articulation, so a political project attached to good governance does not represent an anomaly, but the norm.

As further evidence of the democratic twist assumed by this key signifier, we can submit the fact that countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone are evaluated on governance indicators that suggest the desirability of a democratic political system (elections, Parliament, rule of law, women's

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[42] International Crisis Group, *Liberia and Sierra Leone: Rebuilding Failed States (Crisis Group Africa Report No. 87)*, Dakar/Brussels, 2004, pp. 4-9.

[43] Gabriel Casaburi et al., "Multilateral Development Banks, Governments and Civil Society: Chiaroscuros in a Triangular Relationship, *Global Governance,* vol. 6, no. 4, 2000, pp. 497-498.

[44] UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, *THE CHALLENGES OF RESTORING GOVERNANCE IN CRISISAND POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES*, New York: United Nations, 2007, pp. 9-10.

representation).[45] Moreover, there is evidence that the international aid community active in Liberia and Sierra Leone after the 1997 and 1996 elections respectively took into account whether the president had been democratically elected (Kabbah) or not (Taylor) when deciding to engage.[46] Last but not least, typical efforts of the peacebuilding process can also be subsumed under this very broad notion of good governance as conducive to development, represented by moments such as rule of law (rebuilding of the security and justice sectors) or development in itself (poverty reduction strategies).

At this point, it is reasonable to ask where civil society fits into this post-conflict picture dominated by development and good governance. In a 1997 article tracing the dominant discourse of the time, Goran Hyden makes the following observation: it is under the 'democracy is good for development' mantra that civil society gains its relevance as a necessary ingredient with an inextricable link to forging democracy and, inherently, development.[47] These claims are substantiated by our findings up until this point: civil society is itself a floating signifier in the sense that, as civic participation is seen as a crucial part of good governance, it is implicitly expected that civil society will conceptualize its role and meaning in connection to this goal since its 'livelihood' (participation) is already subsumed under democratic governance.

In the following pages, we will focus on a few concrete examples which highlight how the articulation of civil society has been shaped by such perceptions of the donor community. The general nature of these examples can be prefaced by referring to the USAID approach to Sierra Leone, which traces opportunities for economic growth and targets sectors such as service provision, democracy, good governance, human rights and gender equality.[48] While the different approaches described in our paper are not particular to USAID, its general categories for action were or are still adopted by a large variety of donors.

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[45] Adam Cooper, *Recommendation for strengthening democratic governance in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, and Benin: Options for the UNDP West Africa Regional Service Centre*, 2009, p. 5.
[46] Sesay et al., *op. cit.*
[47] Goran Hyden, "Civil society, social capital, and development: Dissection of a complex discourse", *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1997, p. 4.
[48] USAID Sierra Leone, [http://www.usaid.gov/sierra-leone], 18 June 2015.

One of the most important roles attributed to civil society is that of a service provider which is seen as more reliable than fragile or failed states. This was the case in Liberia, where civil society gained attention by providing essential services to the population when the state was incapacitated by the conflict.[49] In such contexts and in the post-conflict period, "civil society groups are perceived to be part of the crucial machinery that implements development goals because they are able to ensure that aid money is implemented effectively."[50]

The aspect outlined above draws attention to another important position of post-conflict Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society, which is that of a partner in donor-driven projects that serve the purpose of development. Indeed, in concert with the expectation that civil society as the concrete embodiment of participation will serve certain purposes, dependency on external funding also serves as a reinforcement of the 'civil society as partner' approach. An estimate places Liberian civil society organisations (CSOs) dependent on donor funding at around 95 percent.[51] Since donors are the main source of financing, it is reasonable to expect that they will wish to control how their money is spent. One further clue of the top-down approach delineated here is a formulation according to which one antidote for dependency would be for donors "to *allow* NGOs to use some of the funding they receive from donors to build an investment capacity" included in a 2002 International Peace Academy Report.[52]

One author even suggests that a 'consensus without adversaries' regarding the solutions for peacebuilding has already been reached and that politically motivated groups should be evaded in favour of groups such as NGOs, human rights groups and leisure associations which transcend

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[49] Kode, *op. cit.*

[50] Peter Uvin, "Fostering Citizens Collective Actions in Post-Conflict Societies" in Building Civil Society in Post-Conflict Environment: From the Micro to the Macro, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Occasional Paper Series, no.1, 2006, p. 6.

[51] Thomas Doe Nah, *Issues and Challenges facing the Civil Society Sector in Liberia (working paper)*, CENTAL, p. 2,
[http://www.cental.org/CSO%20Issues%20and%20Challenge%20-%20Liberia.pdf],
25 February 2015.

[52] Augustine Toure, "The Role of Civil Society inNational Reconciliation and Peacebuilding in Liberia", International Peace Academy, 2002, p. 14.

traditional identities and work towards the fulfilment of 'felt needs', i. e. needs that relate to development.[53]

Apart from this type of approach, an observation that can be made is that so-called "western" donors expected CSOs to have certain structures, characteristics, purposes and modes of operation. One facet of this expectation has already been tackled by pointing out their expected democratic character (as they are an instrument for fostering participation) and good governance-related goals. On top of this, the donor community expected that these organisations would have a familiar structure, such as the one defined in the previously cited IPA study which subsumed the diversity of Liberian civil society under familiar categories such as human rights, pro-democracy, women's groups and development NGOs.[54] As a further example – coming this time from a bilateral agent– a scheme proposing the sequencing of measures for good governance specifically mentions advocacy NGOs instead of civil society in general.[55]

A further facet of civil society discourse relates to its expected mode of operation which involves 'Western' values such as rationality, professionalization and engagement in a competitive funding market. As an example, a CIVICUS assessment report for civil society in West Africa identified as one of its main challenges the fact that it has very poor expertise in submitting projects likely to receive funding.[56] In a similar vein, one of the criticisms brought against the IMF is that it carries a knowledge bias, i. e. it engages primarily CSOs that think in rationalist terms and speak its technocratic economic language.[57] The World Bank itself can also be accused of a similar bias towards 'rational policies'.[58]

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[53] T. Debey Sayndee, "The Role of Civil Society in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Liberia: A Policy Approach", in in Omeje, Kenneth (ed.), *War to peace transition: conflict intervention and peacebuilding in Liberia*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009, pp. 174-175.

[54] Toure, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[55] Tobias Deibel, Ulf Terlinden, Promoting Good Governance in Post-Conflict Societies: Discussion Paper, Eschborn: Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005, pp. 39-41, [http://www2.gtz.de/dokumente/bib/05-0032.pdf], 5 May 2015.

[56] CIVICUS, *CIVICUS Civil Society Index – Rapid Assessment: West Africa Regional Report*, 2014, p. 3, [http://civicus.org/images/stories/CSI_RA_West%20AFrica%20Regional%20report_Final.pdf], 7 January 2015.

[57] Ian Aart Scholte, "A More Inclusive Global Governance? The IMF and Civil Society in Africa", *Global Governance*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 195-196.

[58] World Bank, *Post-Conflict…*, p. 26.

Apart from the international community, the two states involved are also important actors who engage CSOs. In their case, a few key trends can be isolated and described. Firstly, the two governments are especially preoccupied with registration requirements for CSOs, which suggests a desire to closely monitor their activities. In Sierra Leone, the registration process is complicated by the fact that numerous government agencies (at least four ministries) which differentiate between NGOs and CBOs (Community Based Organisations) are involved and the process has to be repeated annually.[59] In Liberia, there are very detailed requirements for registering as an NGO pertaining to staff, mission statement, a bank account, office space and the board of directors; at least two ministries are involved and the registration has to be renewed every three years.[60]

Secondly, in terms of good governance and civil society, the state generally attempts to appropriate the language of donors. For instance, the government of Sierra Leone knew how to frame results for local elections taking place in the mid-2000s in the manner preferred by the international community.[61] An additional case can be made by referencing a 1999 letter of intention of the government of Sierra Leone to the IMF[62]. In this letter, NGOs were mentioned six times (civil society only once), each time as partners of the state and not as potential sources of policy contestation, thus hinting that the state also adopts a top-down approach to civil society.

In conclusion, the way in which the discourse presented here has been constructed posed a serious challenge to the antagonistically constructed civil society of Liberia and Sierra Leone, which could no longer engage the 'establishment' as an enemy, but had to contend with a new hegemonic order elevating donors (and governments) as the main drivers of the projects in which it engaged. Predictably, this situation created a new type of antagonism, in which CSOs who could not adapt became the other of the

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[59] AFRICA REGION EXTERNAL AFFAIRS UNIT, *THE CIVIL SOCIETY LANDSCAPE IN SIERRA LEONE:UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT, MOTIVES AND CHALLENGES*, WORLD BANK, 2007, pp. 19-20.

[60] Republic of Liberia, *National Policy on Non-Governmental Organizations in Liberia*, 2011.

[61] International Crisis Group, *op. cit.,* p. 11.

[62] Government of Sierra Leone, Letter of intention to the IMF, 1999, [https://www.imf.org/external/country/sle/index.htm?pn=0], 6 May 2015.

discursive field. The last section of this paper will attempt to see whether the civil society articulation detailed here is as solid as it seems, or whether its deconstruction attempts have managed to dislocate it.

Deconstructing the dominant discourse

A widely debated result of the discursive articulation detailed up to this point is the fact that CSOs have largely come to operate on a project by project basis. While this appears to be decisive criticism, it is an aspect which is broadly acknowledged even by practitioners, whose concept of participation is not well served by this technocratic mode of operation. Taking this observation into account, we note that the seeds for the dislocation of the hegemonic project have already been sown, and their content and effectiveness is placed under scrutiny here.

Since we have engaged extensively with the language and practice of the World Bank, it is logical for this central practitioner's deconstructive tendencies to be addressed as well. As a starting point, it is noteworthy that, in the Bank's discourse, CSOs that do not fit the mould outlined in the previous section are no longer excluded. While one of the main criticisms against donor agencies is that they privilege NGOs and other familiar organisations, the Bank's documents no longer show this bias. As an example, a study dedicated to civil society in Sierra Leone includes traditional (secret societies, lending schemes, labour associations), neo-traditional (with ascriptive identities) and formal organisations[63], with one of its key recommendations being "to ensure authentic community participation and input into good governance and development programmes."[64] A different report of the World Bank on the topic of civil society and peacebuilding is critical of the donor's tendency to reduce civil society to narrow categories such as NGOs and draws attention to the fact that comprehensive engagement of civil society should be undertaken, an engagement which should not be limited to formal, registered CSOs.[65] On the other hand, the definition of peacebuilding fleshed

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[63] Africa Region External Affairs Unit, *The Civil…*
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 5.
[65] Africa Region External Affairs Unit, *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: Potential, Limitations and Critical Factors*, World Bank, 2006.

out in the same report still presupposes a democracy/good governance political framework and "socio-economic and political pre-conditions for sustainable development and peace."[66]

 In essence, these two documents convey an ambiguous attitude towards civil society, whose previous articulation is only partially deconstructed; most categories of CSOs are no longer a subject of antagonistic exclusion, but part of a 'politics without adversaries' in which all types of organisations are expected to adapt to serve the purpose of development and good governance. The UK, the largest bilateral donor in Sierra Leone, reinforces this view through the profile page dedicated to this country by its Department for International Development, where it is stated that "DFID plays a leading role in shaping donor aid policy and strategies around transitioning Sierra Leone towards a developmental path of prosperity and growth."[67]

 Broadly speaking, civil society remains "a political space, where governance and development (including peacebuilding) goals are contested."[68] In other words, CSOs can contest policy-making within the field arrested by governance and development, but they cannot contest these two nodal points as optimal solutions to peacebuilding.

 One way in which this chain of equivalence can be substantiated is by employing the tried and tested capacity building approach: nowadays, when lack of professionalization or democratic know-how is criticized, the implicit expectation is not that the targeted organisations will face exclusion, but that they will strive to remedy this shortcoming in order to engage with development agencies and good governance measures. As an example, the West Africa Civil Society Institute[69] centres its approach around capacity building and its Facebook page reports on creative efforts undertaken towards reaching this goal. Additionally, the World Bank itself has developed a whole broad-based framework for 'capacity development' in which civil society is identified as a potential 'agent of change'.[70]

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[66] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

[67] DFID Sierra Leone [https://www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations/dfid-sierra-leone], 25 July 2015.

[68] Africa Region External Affairs Unit, *Civil Society...*, p. 3.

[69] West Africa Civil Society Institute, [www.wacsi.org], 29 July 2015.

[70] Samuel Otoo, Natalia Agapitova, Joy Behrens, *The Capacity Development Results Framework: A strategic and results-oriented approach to learning for capacity-development*, World Bank, 2009.

While this approach seems more inclusive and likely to generate local ownership, we can turn back to Ernesto Laclau to point out its drawbacks. As we have pointed out previously, the more a chain of equivalence expands, the stronger the suppression of its particularities becomes. If all diverse manifestations of civil society were reduced to one dimension (their role in promoting development and good governance), then the chain of equivalence that temporarily fixes the meaning of civil society would collapse into simple identity[71] and be condemned to resume the empty signifier cycle. Given this conclusion, we contend that the deconstruction of civil society by practitioners in the development community is only partial at this point in time, but not as absent as critics assume.

As far as the academic community is concerned, an honest description of its attempts at the deconstruction of peacebuilding can reasonably start from developmentalism discourse as a broad model of change: "Universalizing from western experiences, developmentalism created an ahistorical model of change which created a 'Third World' that was but an historical construct and constructed 'the west' which had no basis in historical reality either."[72] It is a temporary closure of this discursive field that is very often addressed in academic literature: the liberal/neo-liberal, western track of development with the notions of liberal democracy and civil society that it entails. The manner in which this closure is addressed is often an antagonistic one, based on pure deconstruction without proposing alternatives and therefore expressing itself through negativity (a good model would implicitly be a non-liberal one). Although the critiques referenced here do not strictly refer to civil society, a liberal assumption automatically prescribes a certain type of behaviour for civil society, which is why engaging these critiques will be useful.

In the late nineties and early 2000s, the dominant discourse on peacebuilding was consolidating itself and Liberia and Sierra Leone were about to enter the post-conflict period. Parallel with these trends, stark criticism started to emerge as a logical and necessary deconstructive trend. A 1998 report on structural adjustment in Africa criticized the World Bank

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[71] See Laclau, *The Rhetorical…*, p. 24.
[72] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions (Second Edition)*, London: Sage Publications, 2010, p. 29.

and donors their assumption that a liberal-democratic political model with civil society engagement would be an enabler for the free market and structural adjustment.[73] The broader good governance model was criticized as having been an imposition of the West when there was a lack of political alternatives after the Cold War.[74] With specific reference to peacebuilding, David Moore made the following statement: "It is as if the World Bank political scientists' revolutionary fervour sees the terrain of 'post-conflict' situations as ripe for the implementation of their kind of state, economy and society."[75]

According to this enumeration, deconstruction entered the stage early and, as we have seen, practitioners partially assumed it. What is interesting to note is that this type of deconstruction has still been preferred in recent years. Moore for instance restated his criticism in a 2007 revised version of his earlier article.[76] The idea of a 'liberal' peace based on Western values, democracy and neo-liberal economics is still strongly criticized.[77]

Broader criticism of a Western model of civil society echoes the conceptualization inherent in 'liberal peace and development' critique. Western donors are seen as having brought about a model of civil society which favours narrow manifestations that are familiar to them such as NGOs, without taking into account that these expressions are mostly foreign

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[73] Adebayo O. Olukoshi, *The Elusive Prince of Denmark: Structural Adjustment and the Crisis of Governance in Africa*, Uppsala: NordiskaAfrikainstitutet, 1998.

[74] Rita Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*, London, New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2000, p. 3.

[75] David Moore, "Levelling the playing fields & embedding illusions: 'Post-conflict' Discourse & Neo-liberal 'Development' in War-torn Africa", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 27, no. 83, 2000, p. 14.

[76] *Ibidem*, in David Moore (ed.), *The World Bank: Development, Poverty, Hegemony*, Scotsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007, p. 393.

[77] See, for instance, Kirsten Howarth, "Connecting the dots: Liberal peace and post-conflict violence and crime", *Progress in Development Studies,* vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, pp. 261-273; Olawale Ismail, *The Dynamics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Peace Building in West Africa Between Change and Stability*, Uppsala: NordiskaAfrikainstitutet, 2008; Victor AO Adetula, "Measuring democracy and 'good governance' in Africa: A critique of assumptions and methods", in Kondlo, Kwandiwe, Ejiogu, Chinenyengozi (eds.) *Governance in the 21st Century: Africa in Focus*, Human Sciences Research Council, 2011, pp. 10-25.

to local cultures.[78] This critique however is problematic, seeing as donors have largely renewed their conceptualizations of civil society specifically to make them more inclusive, at least in their policy documents and reports, if not on the field.

Another problem with a large segment of critical academic positions is that, while the censure attached to the liberal conceptualization of peacebuilding as embedded in development and good governance is not wrong and is still useful, it does not manage to overcome the stage of deconstruction. More specifically, it makes no actual move to dislocate the hegemonic articulation because it stops itself at pointing out the growing number of loopholes in the dominant discourse without building on them. This way, civil society is trapped in a position where its conceptualizations diversify, yet the expectations related to it stagnate.

Some promising initiatives regarding how this impasse could be overcome have already entered the stage. One point of erosion for the dominant discourse and its subsequent re-articulation is the concept of development itself. Alternatives such as sustainable development or human development are not exactly new, but critics must bear in mind that development can have a diversity of meanings[79] that can take civil society on different tracks. Means for contesting development in itself are also suggested: for example, Briony Jones proposes Mouffe's agonistic model which postulates that conflictual, opposing views related to an existing consensus should be treated as legitimate[80]; this way, alternatives to development can be acknowledged and engaged.[81]

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[78] See, for instance, Scott G. Chaplowe; Ruth BamelaEngo-Tjéga, "Civil Society Organizations and Evaluation: Lessons from Africa", *Evaluation*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 257-274; Ebenezer Obadare, "Revalorizing the Political: Towards a New Intellectual Agenda for African Civil Society Discourse", *Journal of Civil Society*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2011, pp. 427-442; NkwachukwuOrji, "Civil society, democracy and good governance in Africa", *CEU Political Science Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 76-101.

[79] See Pieterse, *op. cit.*

[80] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism", *Social Research*, vol. 66, no. 3, 1999, pp. 745-758.

[81] Brionyjones, "Ensuring a Political Space for Conflict by applying Chantal Mouffe to Postwar Reconstruction and Development", *Progress in Development Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2014, pp. 249-259.

When it comes to civil society itself, in addition to engaging with practitioner documents and evaluating whether a more inclusive approach of civil society has been reached, a more specific approach should be employed rather than simply stating that certain CSOs are excluded. For instance, diverging opinions of CSOs, governments and donors regarding the effectiveness of reconstruction models can be documented[82]; such an analysis suggests potential areas where civil society input may be lacking. Another very instructive article by Hannah Neumann and Joel Gwyn Winkler[83] lists and analyses the forms of resistance of civil society against intervention and the way in which the international community responds, mainly by discrediting opposition. This way, the critical discourse would gain more practical evidence by showing concretely how donors fail in engaging civil society and not simply stating that they do so.

The weak point of such propositions is the fact that they remain largely tentative or fairly isolated and disparate, in the sense that they do not actually belong to broader trends in the literature. Therefore, the next step would be for alternatives to the dominant discourse to become articulated by integrating such approaches and building on them.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have fleshed out the dominant discursive articulation regarding civil society in post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, concluding that it integrates into the development-good governance model. While both practitioners (in certain areas) and academics (more strongly) have made strides towards deconstruction, dislocation is still a goal to be achieved; this happens mostly because the discourse of renewed practice and academic critique fails to take the final step and articulate itself as a coherent antagonistic counter-part which could begin to suture the discursive field of peacebuilding in a novel manner, starting from different nodal points.

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[82] Sesay et al., *op. cit.*, p. 88.

[83] Hannah Neumann, Joel Gwyn Winckler, "When Critique is Framed as Resistance: How the International Intervention in Liberia Fails to Integrate Alternative Concepts and Constructive Criticism", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2013, pp. 1-18.

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