
THE LANGUAGE OF DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY: FOREIGN DONOR DISCOURSE ON AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY ¹

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Abstract: In recent decades, foreign (mostly Western) donor agencies have designed their own discourse as a corollary of their view regarding development; the broad strokes of this discourse can be summarised as follows: Africa needs to be developed and this objective hinges upon the ability of foreign actors to plant the seeds of liberal democracy that is, in this simplified chain of events, undeniably bolstered by a vibrant associational life that forms the very backbone of civil society. Our article aims to illustrate exactly how the notions of liberal democracy and civil society have become almost implicitly entangled in the development issue, while at the same time aiming to deconstruct the above-mentioned discursive structure. For this purpose, the tools provided by discourse theory will be used to show how a social antagonism which insulates certain African civil society groups has taken root; moving one step further, we will also aim to demonstrate that the seeds for the dislocation of the hegemonic discourse of foreign donors are already present and gaining momentum in African societies.

Keywords: *discourse theory, foreign donors, development, liberal democracy, civil society*

Introduction and methodological considerations

In recent decades, ideas such as “development” and “liberal democracy” have come to dominate the language concerning Africa of a significant part of foreign/Western donors, understood here as a very loose category of international actors (bilateral/governments, multilateral International Organizations or Non-Governmental actors, to name just a few) who, irrespective of their institutional status or altruistic or opportunistic reasons, share at least a declared interest in the well-being of African states. Within this particular discourse, a certain type of civil society appears with increasing frequency as a corollary of the following logic: Africa needs to be developed and this objective hinges upon the ability of foreign actors to plant the seeds of liberal democracy that is, in this simplified chain of events, undeniably bolstered by a vibrant associational life that forms the very backbone of civil society.

It was precisely the dilemma created by the apparent cohesiveness of this discursive formation which triggered the following set of research questions: Is there an identifiable discursive link between development and liberal democracy in foreign donor discourse on Africa? If the answer is affirmative, how is this link constructed? What particularized view of civil society does this context promote? How does the resulting interpretation of civil society interact with the local context? Are there grounds for the de-structuring of the development-democracy-civil society unit stemming from the field of civil society itself?

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In order to facilitate an informed answer to this set of inquiries, we started our research from a set of hypotheses: firstly, foreign donors perceive development as inextricably linked with the internalization of liberal democracy by African regimes; secondly, the predilection towards liberal democracy automatically implies that only those manifestations of civil society which are deemed compatible with this brand of democracy are recognized; thirdly, a social antagonism arises between “sanctioned” and other versions of civil society; lastly, the resulting overdetermination of civil society subjects may constitute itself as a solid starting point for the dislocation of the hegemonic discourse on development and democracy supported by foreign donors.

In order to test these hypotheses, this article makes use of the intriguing methodological tools provided by discourse theory, specifically the five main points that may be summarised through drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Concretely, we confront foreign donor approaches to the key concepts of development, democracy and civil society with relevant assertions made by Laclau and Mouffeso that we may determine whether the anticipated discursive construction plays out as we have hypothesised.

At this point, a few key observations need to be fleshed out: to begin with, as Laclau and Mouffe point out, we do not differentiate between “linguistic and behavioural aspects of social practice” (Laclau, Mouffe, 2001, p. 107), namely we concern ourselves not only with concrete instances when donors have expressed their positions in a structured and visible manner, but with their broader policies and practices which necessarily represent acts of discursive articulation.

Apart from this, we consider civil society in the West-African states of Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leoneas a ripe field for the empirical illustration of practices understood in this vein, while providing sufficient nuances so as to challenge common notions of development, democracy and civil society.

Last but not least, it is especially important to offer at least a summarized account of the understanding of discourse promoted throughout this paper: as Laclau and Mouffe point out, a discourse is the result of an articulatory practice which modifies the identity of its constitutive parts. However, no discourse is ever truly an open and shut case, as totality within a completely sutured discursive field is impossible to achieve. The limits of a discourse constitute the very means of its potential subversion, so an identity, once constituted, is never immune to considerations outside of its internal logic. More elegantly stated, the differential positions within a discourse are called moments, whereas differences not captured in the articulatory practice upon which the discourse rests are called elements, with the caveat that it is impossible to reach a point when all elements have been transformed into moments. This is why there is no central transcendental discourse which is fully capable of explaining and containing the social, only multiple nodal points which attempt to achieve this status but are forever doomed to fail, as they are merely subjective instances of the political field posing as social objectivity. (Laclau, Mouffe, 2001).

This being said, the first step undertaken in the opening section of the paper is represented by establishing the presence of development as a discourse and outlining its traits as the background for the articulation of the “civil society as promoter of democracy” mantra;

secondly, we trace the formation of liberal democracy as a nodal point in foreign donor discourse. The next step is to analyse how civil society has developed as a floating signifier tied to this nodal point and to explain the logic of social antagonism created around it as a result. Last but not least, we attempt to sketch the limits and potential sources for subversion of the dominant discourse that are inherent in the characteristics of such an antagonism.

Articulation of the development discourse: the background for civil society debates

A trivialised, yet still accurate expression of the first main point of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is that social actors unwittingly adopt a dual role that turns them into products and artisans of a discursive plane which shapes the historical backdrop of their actions. More correctly stated, "...all forms of social practice take place against a background of historically specific *discourses*, which can be broadly defined as relational systems of signification. Whatever we say, think, or do is conditioned by a more or less sedimented discourse which is constantly modified and transformed by what we are saying, thinking, and doing." (Torfing, 2005, p. 14)

In our case, this inescapable historical backdrop is represented by the increasingly popular development discourse habitually promoted by foreign donors: in most cases, the common denominator shared by the ensuing debates taking place under the vast umbrella of development is that the starting point is generally top-down, looking inward; more specifically, the issue is posed by the aid community in terms such as "what can we do", a query which is "sometimes confused with answering the much broader question 'how can Africa develop?'" (Easterly, 2009, p. 376) Although apparently innocuous, this phrasing in itself creates a suggestion of an existing historical obligation: "we" are responsible for providing a solution; furthermore, it places international donors in a position that enables them not only to become overconfident in their own brand of solutions, but also to impose their views on how development policies should be conducted.

At this point, it becomes opportune to offer a description of an apparently objective and unbiased practice which is actually a discursive construct: that of setting goals for African Nations at an international level and developing tools to assess the achievement of these pre-set standards. For instance, comprehensive reports are published which detail the progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals² of Africa as a whole, as well as of each individual country. Sometimes, the approach is more heavy-handed and intrusive, especially when it comes to well defined policy areas where its supporters feel that Africa cannot manage on its own; one such example is agriculture, a field where potentially useful local forces are constantly overlooked. (Okolie, 2003, p. 431) Perhaps even more tellingly, this discourse is further strengthened by seemingly innocent initiatives that have found an outlet in

²See, for instance, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, African Union, African Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme, *MDG Report 2014: Assessing Progress in Africa toward the Millennium Development Goals*, 2014; ***, *Nigeria Millennium Development Goals 2013 Report*, 2013; ***, *Liberia 2010 MDG Report: Liberia's Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals*, 2010; National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), Government of Ghana, *UNDP Ghana, 2008 Ghana Millennium Development Goals Report*, 2010; Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone, *Millennium Development Goals Progress Report 2010*, 2010, all available online at [<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/mdg/mdg-reports/africa-collection.html>], accessed on 7 November 2014.

social spaces which are apparently neutral when it comes to politics; a good example of this point is represented by “pop” culture manifestations, such as ‘Live 8’ concerts. (Easterly, 2009, p. 374) These examples, while not necessarily comprehensive, reveal a very disquieting trend of providing external ‘crutches’ for African states, without properly assessing local capacities and the situation on the ground first.

However, this short exposition is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg which serves the purpose of setting the stage for a more in-depth analysis. So far, we have only managed to eliminate the artificial gap between development as a seemingly unbiased, universally desirable course of action and discourse, by proving that developmental goals, instruments and actors are actually discursively articulated through an infusion with the pre-defined models of Western foreign donors.

In order to ensure that the argument goes one step further, we need to see exactly how the broad strokes outlining this constant preoccupation of the development community tie in with a certain discourse on the inescapable interdependence between democracy and civil society. As a starting point for this discussion, we state our commitment towards the deconstruction of the following statement: “...a dense and vibrant civil society is essentially democratic and crucial to the achievement and consolidation of a democratic state.” (Tar, 2009, p. 90)

The seemingly missing link in this statement becomes apparent if we move beyond the obvious economic dimension of development towards the more comprehensive understanding it has come to acquire in recent decades. More specifically, the optimism and outright enthusiasm concerning democracy in the 1990s have meant that an inescapable link between development and democracy could be forged and, indeed, these two elements are seldom discussed separately, since a democratic political culture, with corresponding social capital and civil society is in and of itself perceived as an inextricable positive part of development. (Hyden, 1997, p. 4)

Therefore, as we may note in the case of Nigeria, demands of political, institutional and social nature have become an inherent characteristic of the *modus operandi* of international aid providers, whose help in debt relief came with a list of structural adjustment conditions aimed at shaping a more liberal, more democratic, more ‘Western’ African landscape with “a dense and vibrant civil society as a precursor to democratisation.” (Tar, 2009, p. 19) In fact, a 1998 report referring to the issue of Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa as a whole formulates this exact type of conclusion in even harsher terms, highlighting the fact that liberal democracy and development did not enter the stage separately, but were intimately acquainted from the very beginning. More specifically, it is argued that there was no actual consideration of the opportunity and effectiveness of the SAP model, but simply an expectation that the political context would adapt through a supportive brand of liberal democracy which embraced free elections, multi-partyism, market competition, privatization, deregulation and liberalization. (Olukoshi, 1998)

This trend of influencing the social and political realms through financial incentives is once again identified as obvious in an article discussing the role of donors in the context of post-conflict situations (the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone come to mind); in addition to postulating that the very articulation of the post-conflict discourse is a means and excuse for

foreign agencies to encourage a neo-liberal track of development even before the conflict actually ends, it claims the following when discussing a World Bank Report: “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.” (Moore, 2000, p. 14)

An apt summary of these observations is provided by Peiffer and Englebert, who make use of the concept of extraversion, understood as exploitation by African elites of their dependency to external elements so that they may appropriate resources and consolidate their power internally. They find empirical proof to validate their hypothesis that, the more dependent a regime is on foreign donors and the fewer options it has regarding its “extraversion portfolio” (those external actors it can establish relations with), the more likely it is to be strongly influenced by political conditionality imposed from the outside in the form of demands for democratization. (Peiffer, Englebert, 2012)

In order to translate these observations in the more structured and complex language of discourse theory, we need to identify a *nodal point* in the sense outlined by Laclau and Mouffe: “Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*.” (Laclau, Mouffe, 2001, p. 112) In our particular case, this role is arguably fulfilled by the notion of *liberal democracy*, whose rise to the status of an ultimate solution can be traced with the help of a small dosage of historical backtracking. Concretely, at certain points in the last two decades, democracy had emerged as an empty signifier when it came to represent everything that the Nigerian, Ghanaian, Sierra Leonean, Liberian and other African societies *were not*. In other words, democracy constituted for these societies what Ernesto Laclau terms an “absent communitarian fullness” or “absent totality” (Laclau, 2007, pp. 36-47), becoming a concept that can essentially “...have different meanings and can thereby serve to unite disparate social movements.” (Crăciun, 2008, p. 40) In other words, democracy subsumed the chains of equivalence created by a staggeringly wide variety of social demands which more or less described the exact opposite of the oppressive and undemocratic societies which were the actual reality at the time. This explanation follows the logic proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that “...if *all* the differential features of an object have become equivalent, it is impossible to express anything *positive* concerning that object; this can only imply that through the equivalence something is expressed which the object *is not*.” (Laclau, Mouffe, 2001, p. 128)

In this context, we may note that Western donors demonstrated a commendable proficiency in seizing the opportunity of the wider global historical context and the emergence of this empty signifier in order to fill the void with their own interpretation construed as *liberal democracy*, which became the complete opposite of a previous “lack of development” encountered during Africa’s authoritarian past; indeed, these actors appear to have been particularly eager to extol the virtues of the neoliberal model as a trigger of reforms and regime overhaul in Africa, while downplaying domestic contributions and capacities (Adetula, 2011, p. 10). As far as its actual substance is concerned, the concept of liberal democracy arguably carries a significant discursive baggage that, through its particularized interpretation of keen African desires for democracy, suggests the belief there is little room

for nascent regimes to adjust to this notion outside of a pre-established checklist of characteristics, such as “free elections” or “freedom of speech”.(Jørgensen, Phillips, 2002, p. 50)To summarize, we may state that liberal democracy has assumed a hegemonic position, understood in Laclau’s words, as “a relationship by which a particular content assumes, in a certain context, the function of incarnating an absent fullness.” (Laclau, 2014, p. 32)

In order to further strengthen our point of view, we may circle back to the issue of practices as building blocks of discourse, a step that would enable us to notice that, just like development, liberal democracy is the subject of assessment reports which implicitly assign it certain attributes, such as government effectiveness, anti-corruption, rule of law, elections, constitution, parliament, human rights or women’s representation, as seen in a paper discussing UNDP options in Western Africa. (Cooper, 2009, p. 5) In the same vein, the issue of elections is often awarded special consideration as a pillar of democracy, with Ghana presented as an example of progress and innovation in electoral policies (Frempong, 2008); in contrast, Nigeria is generally treated as a resounding example of a lack of due process in this regard, with non-independent electoral bodies, corruption, stolen results and patrimonial tendencies. (Ogbonnaya et. al., 2012; Yagboyaju, 2011)

The next section of this article answers the dilemmas relating to the position carved for civil society within the liberal-democratic universe by discourses which construct this concept as an intrinsic condition of the dominant political trend, thereby forcibly assuming that its characteristics are subsumed by the essential role it plays on the stage of liberal democracy.

An antagonistic view of civil society

The previous section has already made important strides towards exposing the ideological totalization that manages to coagulate all required steps towards development into a platform shaped by liberal democratic principles. As a result, we may now safely turn to our more individualized analysis of the construction of meaning as it relates to the concept of civil society. Seeing as “...discourse is constructed in and through *hegemonic struggles* that aim to establish a political and moral-intellectual leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity” (Torfing, 2005, p. 15), it was to be expected that, considering its well-established role in the realm of democracy, civil society would be one of the crucial elements which needed to be transformed into a moment of the liberal democratic discourse and also a keypoint of contention in the anticipated “battle of meanings”.

If we were to consider civil society as a *floating signifier*, which “...can assimilate different meanings depending on the nature or topic of the discourse” (Crăciun, 2008, p. 41), we would observe that “civil society” is generally filled with meaning in a biased manner, taking into account who and for what purposes defines it, an assumption which is easily confirmed when we turn to the generalized ambiguity and even confusion that is stirred by the mere mention of this concept. “To see civil society as ‘associational life’ continually requires one to ask what are its boundaries: which associations, when, and under what conditions act in the ways supposedly characteristic of civil society?” (Allen, 1997, p. 334) It is by no means a surprise that the African landscape, in keeping with this undefined view of civil society, is the bearer of an impressive diversity, from NGOs and advocacy groups to “labour unions, churches, women’s and student organizations, professional and trade associations, business

groups, ethnic and community associations, clan affiliations, secret societies, cultural groups and various economic networks...". (Lewis, 1992, p. 33)

The purpose of this short exposition was to cast civil society more firmly into the role of a floating signifier in preparation for the next step, which traces the way in which, in true hegemonic fashion, the concept of civil society has been filled by international donors with a meaning that is completely in accordance with the characteristics and requirements of liberal democracy (the victor of the so-called "battle of meanings"). As a matter of fact, we may note that the liberal definition of civil society as the independent sphere situated at the confluence of state, market and family dominates the discursive field, with the notion of 'development NGOs' sometimes seen as a valid placeholder for civil society (Obadare, 2011, p. 429). Proponents of such a construct have therefore transformed civil society into a familiar concept informed by liberal-democratic theory, which identifies civic organizations such as advocacy groups in Europe and the United States of America as the main elements of civil society (Orji, 2009, p. 77); thus, the meaning of civil society as a floating signifier is fixed by elevating particular moments (e. g. advocacy groups, civility, internal democracy, democratic socialization) to nodal points which claim to represent its objectivity.

The Civil Society Index Rapid Assessment Regional Report for West Africa (CIVICUS, 2014, pp. 3-6) sheds further light on the situation of civil society, by revealing a set of concerning trends regarding the way in which the apparently economic issue of financing reveals a discursive bias towards liberal principles. First of all, emphasis is placed on the fact that civil society organisations (CSOs) have weak fundraising capacities, are not aware of project assessment criteria put forth by donors and do not have the necessary skills to write sufficiently competitive proposals; posing the issue in these terms betrays the emphasis placed on values such as free market, competition, individuality and professionalization of civil society. Moreover, CSOs are reported to have barely tapped local funding alternatives, while remaining largely dependent on money from a limited number of donors, which comes and goes on a project-by-project basis and carries the burden of political conditionality.

To conclude, we may emphasise that the marriage between civil society and liberal democracy has managed to gain a very firm footing by permeating virtually all layers of socio-political activity related to the development of African countries; moreover, this link has become so stabilized that, as the Nigerian climate indicates, "reports of activities carried out by CSOs have become the barometer through which international organizations and governments assess the democratic temperature of the country." (Mercy, 2012, p. 61)

Before going any further, it is imperative to keep in mind the fact that "...the hegemonic articulation of meaning and identity is intrinsically linked to the construction of *social antagonism*, which involves the exclusion of a threatening Otherness that stabilizes the discursive system while, at the same time, preventing its ultimate closure." (Torfing, 2005, p. 15) In our case, the "threatening Otherness" which looms on the horizon, paradoxically giving substance to the discourse outlined above is represented by everything that fails to fit the bill of liberal democracy; in the particular instance of civil society, it is represented by forms of activism that are not necessarily civilized and democratic and fail to assume the professionalized character envisioned by the fervent international proponents of a vibrant civil

society sphere. However, it must be noted that these marginalized forms are not in contradiction with officially sanctioned organisations, as the existence of the liberal democratic brand of civil society does not automatically close this field for any other type of association. In other words, the articulation of “unorthodox” organisations as instances of civic action is not impossible; it is merely the limit of the liberal democratic discourse on civil society, which prevents it from enshrining its own conceptualisation as a static objectivity. (Laclau, Mouffe, 2001, pp. 125-127)

More specifically, the types of association we are referring to here may be the “uncivilized” reflection of certain social tensions such as ethnic and religious ones, or may simply be more firmly rooted in the local realities, thus only reluctantly abiding by the ‘rules of the game’ set by ‘outsiders’. Thus, we may be talking about “ascriptive” groups, organisations with state ties, ethnic tensions (Orji, 2009, p. 79), or traditional allegiances unchanged by state penetration such as “clan, age-set, or brotherhood.” (Bratton, 1989, p. 411) In addition to this, the traditional advocacy role and pro-democracy agenda of voluntary civic associations characterized by a firm respect for the rule of law is undertaken by groups that sometimes have an ambiguous relation with the state and may be professional, labour, women’s or students’ associations, which may or may not act in the capacity of liberal democracy promoters.

The common denominator subsuming this staggering variety of organisations is that, when they fail to fit in the constricting straightjacket of what civil society *should be/should advocate*, they become “the other” which, through a totalizing procedure is eventually reduced to its failure to conform to a set of criteria underlying the elusive concepts of “civil”, “democratic” or “voluntary”. For instance, religious organisations are one branch of African civil society that is regarded with an arguably healthy dose of caution in connection with democratic ideals; however, when suspicion turns into outright rejection, these types of groups become part of the generic ‘other’ and their mobilizing potential is unfairly disregarded. A good example in support of this argument would be that of religious organisations such as the Interfaith Mediation Committee/Inter-Religious Council (Liberia) and the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone), both organisations that cut across religious boundaries and strived for peace by assuming roles as mediators in their countries’ respective civil conflicts. (Kode, 2012; Pham, 2004).

This being said, the last section of our paper focuses on the shortcomings that have caused an extremely tenuous position for the discourse outlined up to this point.

A revised concept of civil society: looking beyond the discourse of Africa’s “saviours”

As anticipated, the argument constructed in this section derives from the firm conviction that “...a stable hegemonic discourse becomes *dislocated* when it is confronted by new events that it cannot explain, represent, or in other ways domesticate.” (Torfing, 2005, p. 16) In the particular circumstances discussed throughout our short exposition, grounds for the dislocation of the dominant discourse can be identified within the heavily disputed, yet extremely significant, flank of civil society. Therefore, we are now tasked with detecting the elements which fail to yield to the pressure of becoming moments in the liberal democratic discourse on civil society proposed by foreign donors.

Our first observation is that the stubborn insistence of international donors on certain types of groups accounts for a wide range of untapped local capacities, a fact which serves to weaken the credibility of development efforts supported by ardent advocates of liberal-democracy. For instance, the Sierra Leonean example is set to demonstrate how foreign donors tend to emphasise needs and downplay local agency in a post-conflict society (Kanyako, 2011, p. 4) What may be inferred is that such top-down initiatives on the part of donors are actually self-defeating in terms of liberal democracy, seeing as participation by all relevant social forces should undisputedly constitute one of the key elements, if not the very foundation, of such an ambitious political project (as a case in point, we may revisit the role played by religious organisations in the resolution of the Liberia and Sierra Leone conflicts). Furthermore, this somewhat conceited attitude leads to a rather shallow understanding of local needs, which causes the exclusion of significant issues that touch the daily lives of local populations from an agenda that fails to acknowledge their actual weight. Consequently, transplanted “legitimate” CSOs may lack compatibility with local culture and may gloss over actual community interests. (Chaplowe, Engo-Tjéga, 2007, p. 259)

Another salient aspect that needs to be touched upon is that, in the rush to build a solid discursive fortress for liberal democracy as a corollary of development, many enthusiastic actors have failed to notice that the results have sometimes been undemocratic, even amongst favoured organisations who, other than paying lip service to certain norms and values, carry on in a manner that is decidedly “uncivilised” or ethically ambivalent (Obadare, 2005, p. 269) However, this trend also seems to be losing ground, as the wilful blindness of those who perceive civil society as a necessary pillar of democracy gives way to a more healthy cautious ambivalence that acknowledges the fact that the role of civil society organisations remains undecided. (Obadare, 2005, p. 270)

Up to this point, we have focused on highlighting the inconsistencies of the hegemonic discourse wherein civil society is a key democratic contributor, while, at the same time, strongly suggesting that the often excluded “other” is in fact comprised of groups that mainly draw their support from the grassroots found within local communities; as a result, the model deconstructed throughout this paper simply excludes too many elements of potential civic action and the imminent reconceptualization of civil society is a threat to the whole discursive articulation which presupposes a liberal version of this floating signifier as self-explanatory.

This is not to say that liberal democracy as a signifier is completely untenable with regards to the local landscape; our contention is simply that its recent hegemonic articulation has caused the emergence of a *split subject* who, as a result of his/her failure to achieve a completely sutured identity, “is always in a process of search for an identification that offers the illusion of the complete integration.” (Mişcoiu, 2008, p. 27) When we analyse this statement in the context outlined throughout this paper, we are hard pressed not to notice that, in light of the alarming number of cracks in the armour of the development community’s discourse, many civically engaged subjects find themselves in this unstable and insecure position, trapped between the hegemonic discourse and their more traditional allegiances. For example, a conflict might be generated between the identities of “member of a civil society organisation” and “clan member” if the latter allegiances form the basis of participation and

civil society is strictly defined in Western donor language, thus excluding membership stemming from such loyalties.

A further source of cracks in the identity of more high-profile civic actors is represented by the numerous centrifugal forces that they need to contend with on a regular basis: the trappings of donor dependency which may threaten the survival and capacities of CSOs (Atuobi, 2010, p. 17) are counterbalanced by a dearth of alternative funding, thus creating a struggle which leaves many CSO representatives ripe for co-optation by more financially and politically secure environments such as state structures.

At this juncture, it is advisable to point out that, should the hegemonic discourse attempt to persist in its present form, its many sources of contestation bear the risk of coagulating into a radicalized discourse which becomes increasingly disenchanted with the modes of democratic expression it cannot access. The regular individual as a *split subject* may well decide to choose a militant ethnicity over a civic participation that fails to address his or her key concerns. One cannot help but wonder whether this was not, to at least some extent, the case in the violent oil clashes of the Niger Delta. (Ojakorotu, Okeke-Uzodike, 2006) A further example in the same vein may also be associated with the Nigerian realities: it can be argued that an authoritarian climate, coupled with economic struggles and social inequalities has led to the emergence of radicalized groups who sometimes use tactics that escalate into violence. (Adekson, 2004, pp. 13-23) Taking into consideration the conditions for the emergence of such groups, it is to be expected that they will have significant difficulties in speaking the language of democracy, but the outright exclusion of these population segments from the public sphere would also deviate from democratic norms and ideals which extol the virtues of participation.

Another pattern encompassing most of the points discussed in this last section is represented by the proliferation of Islamic civil society groups who have managed to seize the opportunities provided by a more open civic arena (Kelley, 2011) This particular situation demonstrates not only the strength of such forms of identification, but also their capacity to undermine the “civil society as bedrock of democracy” discourse, in light of the fact that the very process implemented in the hopes of more democracy paradoxically bolstered organisations that pushed forward decidedly undemocratic agendas. This particular phenomenon also poses an unsavoury and destabilizing dilemma: to stymie the growth and influence of such organisations would go against the very fibre of democratic values, yet not to do so would mean that this same set of values is under constant rigorous scrutiny.

In answer to such dilemmas, our last few examples demonstrate that, should the persistence to allow only certain actors access to the public sphere continue, the delayed dislocation of the hegemonic discourse would probably result in a radicalized identity of the split-subject, which is even more undesirable from a democratic point of view than allowing the voices of elements such as militant ethnic or Islamic groups to be heard.

Conclusion

Our main findings resulting from the confrontation of discourse theory with the actions and language of foreign donors are not surprising, in the sense that they arguably confirm our hypotheses: the liberal democracy-development couple is discursively articulated so that liberal democracy as a nodal point incorporates donor views on development and

prescribes an exclusive way forward; in this context, civil society only has one acceptable version, presupposed by its adherence to and bolstering of the liberal democratic discourse. As a consequence, antagonism is created between sanctioned and alternative versions of civil society, thus preventing the creation an ultimate uncontested conceptualization of the latter.

On top of all this, civil society is a ripe ground for the emergence of numerous elements which the prevailing discourse fails to grasp and integrate as moments explained within its internal logic. Examples of such elements are the untapped local capacities, the unaddressed local issues and the partially undemocratic results of efforts to implement the development-liberal democracy articulation in the realm of civil society. Moreover, the unstable (and even potentially radical) identity of the split subject suggests that the flow of differences has not even temporarily been arrested in the field of civil society, a fact which is likely to reverberate within the wider discursive formation. In other words, the insistence on liberal democracy as a corollary of development fails to grasp the complexity of civil society, whose antagonistic construction exhibits a strong potential of subverting the coherence of the dominant donor discourse from within.

To conclude, the current article has followed a newly prevalent trend in the academic world, which focuses on the deconstruction of the development-liberal democracy-civil society discursive construct. The next logical step in this type of research would be to go one step beyond this exercise in order to properly trace the coordinates of the emerging discursive struggle surrounding African civil society.

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