Doctoral Thesis Summary:
The Role of Civil Society in the Political Evolution of Liberia and Sierra Leone – Insights from Discourse Theory

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Contents of Thesis

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The aim of our doctoral thesis is to provide a rigorous analysis of the way in which civil society evolved during the transition of the political regimes from Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1980s-2010s time bracket, with special focus being afforded to the two countries' post-conflict periods. In order to achieve this, we chiefly employ the post-structuralist, third generation discourse analysis framework designed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, with a view towards identifying and outlining the discursive trends describing the evolution of civil society – in connection with other key concepts such as development and democracy – in the targeted period.

The ultimate goal of our research is to combine the theoretical and empirical data regarding the two countries in order to construct a discursive model that should enable an innovative approach to local civil society and a dynamic engagement with the concept itself by all actors identified in this thesis as being involved. The model is envisioned to use the data regarding the discursive trends which best describe civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone, subsequently putting their potential evolution through the filter of Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonism coupled with Ernesto Laclau's cautious observations that convey the dangers of overextending the agonistic approach. It is our belief that such a model, once developed, could have broader applications that would impact not only our two case-study countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone, but also other civil society sectors operating in a political transition environment.

Arguably, the novelty of our approach is embodied precisely in the brand of discursive analysis which enables us to translate events and key notions into the language of discourse theory in order to pinpoint major articulation trends regarding the constantly lively realm of civil society in the two selected countries. As is extensively explained throughout our thesis, the employment of this method has led us to hypothesise the existence of two main trends – the donor/Western/democratic/liberal/ civilized/professional etc. strand of civil society articulation *versus* a strand focused on the negation of the first trend coupled with an insistence on the diversity of civil society outside of the confines of the 'Western' view – with an antagonistic dynamic that tends to blur their nuances (or, in discursive terms, their 'logic of difference'). As a result, the innovative content of our thesis was constructed as an attempt to provide a model that would overcome such rigid dynamics.

Ultimately, the most important reason why we have remained focused on this realm of study was the gradual unveiling of its somewhat unexplored potential for the relevant insights concerning civil society which can be obtained by studying this concept's articulation in two African societies that are weighed down by a history of antagonistic exclusions, while also being entrenched in a period of democratic transition.

More concretely, the four sets of research questions which have guided the endeavour materialised in our thesis are listed below in a schematic manner so that we may ensure clarity and outline the steps of our thought process at the same time:

I. How can the evolution of civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone be understood discursively?

II. Can a dominant discursive articulation of civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone be identified? – Auxiliary questions: 1) What is/was the historical/ discursive context in which such an articulation has emerged? 2) What are the main coordinates of this articulation? 3) How stable is/was this temporary closure of the discursive system?

III. Has the dominant discursive articulation been dislocated? – Auxiliary questions: 1) What is the historical/ discursive context in which such an articulation has emerged? 2) What are the main coordinates of the attempts at deconstruction which have already been made? 3) Are these attempts sufficiently strong to generate a dislocation and subsequent re-articulation of a partial fixation of the discursive field?

IV. How can a framework for the understanding of Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society through discourse theory be developed and implemented? – Auxiliary questions: 1) What are the discursive trends – regarding civil society – which render such a framework necessary? 2) Which points from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory can be employed in developing this framework? 3) What are the main coordinates of the discursive closure offered by such analytical underpinnings? 4) Can such a framework be employed for African civil society as a general category? 5) Can it be adapted to other types of societies in a process of so-called transition?

In order to provide a reliable, well-informed answer to these dilemmas, discourse analysis has become the most important methodological procedure in our thesis, as it is the means through which all relevant hypotheses concerning Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society are tested. A supplemental observation needs to be made: although the term 'discourse' may seem misleading by suggesting that our prerogative is to interpret documents and the language of official statements, we adopt the view of Laclau and Mouffe that practices themselves are also a discursive manifestation, and therefore need to be dissected as well. As a consequence, what donors, governments and CSOs *do* and how they do it is also a highly relevant aspect which is repeatedly engaged throughout the thesis. In order for such an undertaking to be logical several elements needed to be covered:

1. Literature review
   ➤ Basic elements of the three generations of discourse theory
   ➤ Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and connected viewpoints

- ➢ Key concepts – civil society, democratic transition and development – discursive deconstruction
- ➢ Aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical considerations that can be used to construct a model for approaching civil society
- ➢ Historical overview – Liberia and Sierra Leone (traces of exclusion)
- ➢ Quantitative approach – reports and statistics concerning local civil society (traces of discursive articulation)
- ➢ Qualitative approach – consulting studies concerning local civil society as secondary sources, when available

2. Relevant actors producing discursive articulations
- ➢ Civil Society Organisations – CSOs – multitude of perspectives (NGOs, advocacy groups, leisure associations, professional organisations, students' groups, women's groups, religious organisations, ethnic organisations, community-based organisations, secret societies etc.)
- ➢ Local governments – how do they engage civil society?
- ➢ Donor community:
  - International Financial Institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund etc.)
  - International/Regional Governmental Organisations (United Nations, European Union, African Union etc.)
  - Bilateral governmental actors (national governments, agencies – USAID, DfID etc.)
  - Non-governmental actors – INGOs

3. Sources for discourse analysis – documents, language, practice
- ➢ Donors:
  - Documents – mission statements, official documents taking position on certain issues, broad or targeted/country strategies, working papers, country papers, official correspondence, reports etc.
  - Practice – how do donors engage civil society in terms of financing, project-by-project funding, programmes, rigid/flexible agendas, conditionality, policy-making, strategies and profile?
- ➢ Government:
  - Documents – laws, rules, regulations, registration procedures, programmes, projects, strategies
  - Practice – does the government adopt the language of donors?; is this a superficial or substantial effort?; how does government perceive the role of civil society?; how

permissive/restrictive is the legal framework for civil society?; how does government engage civil society? (arena of contestation, partner, subordinate?)

➤ Civil society:

- INGOs – public documentation similar to that of donors; visible practices
- Local CSOs – generally scarce documentation and less visible practices, biased position favouring those organisations which have established an on-line presence, limited social capital of author – research strategies:
  - Citing secondary sources
  - On-line search of CSOs (including unconventional sources such as news outlets, Facebook pages, websites and other means of reporting on their activity that can be accessed from a distance)
  - It might be difficult for these types of CSOs to enter the same discursive field as donors and thus their acquiescence to and/or challenges of the discursive frontier will take time to gain the same visibility as that enjoyed by donors, at least at a 'macro' level
  - Explaining the discursive impact of this lack of access - a certain distance from local actors and daily happenings offers us the possibility to survey our two case studies from a more rarely employed research perspective focused on general trends rather than the observation of particulars

4. Case study selection – characteristics of Liberia and Sierra Leone

➤ Rich discursive field for civil society

➤ Rich comparative potential:

- Traces of historical exclusion (Americo-Liberians; British colonialism)
- Repressive pre-war regimes
- Violent and protracted civil conflicts
- Post-conflict status, important aid recipients
- Ebola epidemic

An additional observation that shows the broadened scope of our thesis is that both countries represent societies entrenched in a lengthy process of (democratic) transition, which indicates that the insights they provide might be especially useful for other countries in similar situations, not just in Africa but also worldwide. As a consequence, it is to be expected that the model of engaging civil society constructed in this thesis may have a broader audience and more international implications, which becomes possible not only due to the discursive potential resulting from the employment of our chosen theoretical framework, but also due to the rich material provided by the two case studies we have selected.

In order to materialize the framework constructed through the research questions and methodological considerations explored in this summary, we provide an account of the somewhat conservative, yet efficient and edifying structure of our thesis. It is our belief that such an account best illustrates the steps taken in our research, as well as the logical connections between its different stages; the chosen outline for our thesis was necessary so as to implement a coherent discursive analysis geared towards supplying the scaffolding for the model presented in the sixth chapter of our thesis.

The first chapter is focused on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, tracing its constellation of concepts and showing how these concepts are linked into a coherent theoretical construction that forms the basis for the analysis undertaken in chapters four and five. For the purposes of our current endeavour, we offer a very brief summary of how the key main points of interest pertaining to the theoretical section interact: while an empty signifier (best illustrated by overarching notions such as order, democracy or development) is devoid of meaning in itself (a signifier without a signified), it is generally the case that a particular, subjective content (such as liberal democracy or neo-liberal development) temporarily assumes the mission of representing something that is universal and objective (the empty signifier), termed by Laclau 'an absent fullness'. But, this absent fullness is actually impossible to reach, and is substituted by certain chains of equivalence which offer a partial fulfilment of an elusive plenitude through the creation of nodal points, wherein the particularity of the links in the chain becomes diluted in an abortive attempt to reduce them to the essence of the partial fixation created by the previously mentioned subjective and particular content.

This process is one of hegemonic articulation that occurs through the assertion of power and the exclusion of certain elements, thus leading to a scenario of social antagonism between the dominant moments and the excluded elements. Once this hegemonic fixation occurs, the meaning of floating signifiers aligns with the dominant articulation, thus completing the temporary suture of the discursive field. On the other hand, the undecidability of the discursive field can never be eliminated through such a process; the frontier of exclusion bears the possibility of being penetrated by elements that the dominant discourse will not be able to transform into moments (notions that are fully embedded in an articulation), thus leading to a situation where the identity of subjects becomes overdetermined. As a result of the illusion of final identification being shattered, a split subject emerges, which is the point where deconstruction and dislocation enter the stage and trigger a new hegemonic struggle, wherein particularities once again compete to express the inexpressible universal identity of the empty signs, while floating signifiers can be re-appropriated by emerging nodal points.

While the first chapter may seem a bit abstract at first, the second chapter comes to remedy this aspect by showing how Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory will be used in order to approach the key notions of democracy, civil society and development. Additionally, the theoretical underpinnings of the aforementioned notions (and the evolution of said underpinnings) are also tackled, thus enriching our initial discourse theory layer. Through this process we become familiarised with some key dynamics, such as the evolution and interaction of multiple rival articulations of democracy, the interplay between governance and democracy, the articulation of civil society as a floating signifier and the evolution of the concept of development to the broad framework which serves as its current manifestation. The last section of the second chapter is dedicated to the design of the theoretical part of our anticipated model, focusing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonism – the idea that seemingly antagonistic articulations can move beyond the status of enemies to that of rivals, who are in turn capable of operating within the same discursive field on the basis of a minimal set of democratic rules – and on Ernesto Laclau's observations regarding empty signifiers, chains of equivalence and the logics of equivalence and difference

The third chapter of our thesis moves on to the empirical portion of constructing a solid foundation for the forthcoming discourse analysis (undertaken in the next two chapters) through providing historical details pertaining to the evolution of Liberia and Sierra Leone meant to complement the theoretical side developed in the first two chapters. Our account focuses on the two countries' historical traces of social exclusion, their evolution in the nineteenth and twentieth century, their authoritarian past and, last but not least, concludes with an account of the two civil wars which plagued both countries in the early 1990s – early 2000s period. We have chosen not to offer a similar account of the post-conflict period, given that the historical aspects relevant to our research are intrinsically linked with their corresponding discursive observations and are addressed closely in the fifth chapter of our thesis.

The fourth chapter represents the debut of our discourse analysis, with the first period viewed through this lens being that of the 1980s marked by SAPs. This undertaking offers valuable clues as to how one of the most important categories of donors, namely that of IFIs like the World Bank and the IMF constructed their development discourse wherein governance was perceived as a means to ensure the implementation of sound (liberal) economic policies. It also sheds light on how African civil society was mostly seen as a cog in the mechanism of structural adjustment whose input was sought after, but restricted to the discursive confines envisioned by the aforementioned donors. The second historical bracket tackled in this chapter is that of the two civil wars, with the focus being, as expected, on their challenging discursive dimensions. We become familiarized with their various interpretations (ranging from crisis of youth to cultural

atavisms), among which the most traction was gained by the 'civil war as development in reverse' articulation. On top of this, we analyse some examples of civil society activism (such as the international design of the Kimberley process or the role of women in Liberia's peace activism) which provide some interesting discursive angles for consideration.

After all of the above is accomplished, we move on to the fifth chapter, which tackles the post-conflict articulations of civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone and identifies the two main trends concerning civil society which we have traced and identified as creating a state of discursive stagnation in what regards Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society. We start by tracing the discursive link between the key concepts of development, democracy and civil society, which enables us to move onto discovering how civil society was articulated by our three essential categories of actors (donors, governments and CSOs) within the hegemonic development-democracy discursive field. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to dissecting the attempts made at deconstructing the dominant discursive articulation of Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society, with the conclusion being that these attempts are trapped in the 'deconstruction through negation' faze, thus creating a static antagonism between the two rival modes of articulation, illustrated briefly in the table below:

The dominant discursive articulation	Attempts at deconstruction
• 'Western' origin.	• Criticism of 'Western' models.
• The development – good governance couple as a nodal point in this articulation; • Seemingly technocratic good governance, but with implied liberal-democratic characteristics; • Civil conflicts as a deviation from the path of development.	• Criticism of the exclusive liberal-democratic key of understanding local realities; • Criticism of neo-liberal standards for development and good governance. • Criticism of neo-liberal development as the preferred path for post-conflict reconstruction.
• Civil society as a floating signifier with its meaning coloured by the aforementioned nodal point.	• Criticism of civil society incorporation into the democracy – good-governance couple as restrictive and ignorant of several types of local civil society.
• Civil society as democratic, civilized; • Top-down approach – civil society as partner, implementer, beneficiary, trainee, but not as contester, policy-maker and agenda-setter; • Participation is strongly encouraged, but imagined almost exclusively in the context of development-democracy • Professionalization of CSOs and competition for funds, meaning that many CSOs will function based on	• Criticism of 'transplanted' profiles of civil society such as advocacy NGOs or pro-democracy groups for having weak ties to the local culture and a limited capacity to respond adequately to local needs; • Emphasis on the 'foreignness' of 'transplanted' models even if some local CSOs function in accord with them; • Argument that local civil society is much more diverse than what donors perceive; • Criticism of donor dependency and its

unpredictable grants; • CSOs that can 'speak' the language of donors and can carry out the project management cycle; • CSOs accountable to donors • Transparency and accountability of CSOs; • States and government ministries as partners (they attempt to appear discursively receptive to donor articulations) • => a profile for CSOs attempting to conform to these patterns.	consequences, (including that of CSO accountability skewed towards donors instead of beneficiaries) • Criticism of donor 'knowledge bias' and top-down approach • Criticism of project-by-project financing • States criticised due to their actual legally restrictive, oppressive approach to civil society in general and NGOs in particular.
• Increasingly inclusive approach to civil society organisations, provided they can adapt to the neo-liberal model => evolving articulation of civil society; • Capacity building to help CSOs adapt to the preferred profile (still dominated by the development-democracy couple).	• Calls for a more inclusive approach to civil society, which includes organisations that are not necessarily organized similar to 'Western' ones; • Frequent engagement with a donor articulation perceived as static instead of evolving.

The last chapter represents the innovative part of our thesis, given that it proposes a model for understanding civil society based on a combination of agonism and caution, which can move beyond the problematic dichotomy identified and explained in chapter five. Chapter six therefore acknowledges the stagnation of the discursive field and provides an antidote represented not only through explanations, but through visual representations meant to lead us to a more practical understanding of the proposed model.

To summarise, through the application of our model and per the rules of agonism, the various articulations of civil society that currently find themselves on opposite and seemingly static branches of the discursive divide no longer need to be inimical or even mutually exclusive, but can come together within the same side of the discursive frontier as adversaries. These emerging adversaries would have a recognised legitimate right to operate within the discursive field – provided that they follow a minimal set of rules – and to advance potentially arresting constructs which may redefine the flow of difference and equivalence.

However, as stated at the end of chapter two, this type of dynamic's very existence presupposes the presence of some kind of antagonism, given Mouffe's own position on the indissolubility of antagonism and Laclau's necessary observation that extending a chain of equivalence indefinitely dilutes a concept (in our case civil society) to the point where it becomes irrelevant. Laclau basically explains that an overextended chain of equivalence comes to progressively obscure the differential character of its links, while also constantly risking a collapse into full identity which constitutes the ideal space for the re-emergence of empty

signifiers and the resumption of the discursive struggle cycle. For added clarity, we have included below the schematic representation of the thought process involved in the development of our model.

Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil society discursive field
- Which articulations populate the field?
- How does civil society being a floating signifier influence its articulation? -imbued with meaning by the articulations it attaches itself to

Deconstructing discourses on civil society
- What is the hegemonic articulation?
- What is the antagonism anchoring the current discursive struggles and establishing the frontier?
- What efforts have been made to deconstruct the hegemonic articulation?

Liberia and Sierra Leone civil society status-quo
- Stagnation of the discursive field;
- Stalemate wherein articulative efforts have not moved beyond a pure negation of the hegemonic articulation;
- Capacity building as a seemingly agonistic solution -> subsumed by the hegemonic articulation - every CSO can be trained to contribute to development-democracy.

Moving beyond the status-quo through agonism
- Who is the 'other'? How do they contest our position?
- What are the basic rules in which the functioning of civil society is rooted? (e.g. freedom of association)
- Does the 'other' respect said rules?
- Can we admit that their position as generators of alternative articulations is legitimate?
- Antagonism replaced by the understanding that the 'other' is not an enemy, but an adversary who has a legitimate say in the articulation of civil society; they can interpret the meaning of civil society and even democracy differently, but all involved adhere to the same rules of conduct.

Consequences of introducing agonism
- Less stakes in defining civil society; less focus on whether an organisation can/cannot be considered part of civil society; more focus on participation and solutions; potential new ideas/perspectives from unexpected/previously excluded or easily dismissed sources;
- Potential new links between moments that would have otherwise been on opposite sides of the discursive frontier (less rigid); rearticulation of nodal points and reshaping of chains of equivalence;
- More organisations can define their identity as (and be accepted as) members of civil society;
- A more flexible and accessible civic arena may prevent polarization and radicalization through the opening of legitimate channels for contestation.

Applying Laclau's cautionary note
- Antagonism can never be fully overcome, as the presence of the frontier is an indispensable condition in forming discursive articulations;
- What happens if a chain of equivalence extends indefinitely (e.g. CSOs in Liberia and Sierra Leone= all types of organisations as long as they can contribute something to development);
- At some point, the meaning of the concept becomes so dilluted that the concept loses its substance;
- An agonistic articulation can only sustain itself if there is a discursive frontier towards which it can position itself (e.g. excluding those who reject the basic rules of conduct within the civil society sector emerging in postwar Liberia and Sierra Leone, such as violent groups) -> there are incompatible elements that will remain beyond the frontier.

Our conclusion focuses chiefly on the way in which the initial research questions have been answered throughout our thesis and on the impact that our model may have in further research and practical engagement efforts, not only regarding civil society in Liberia and Sierra Leone, but also in what concerns African civil society, civil society operating in conditions of transition, lessons to be learned by major donors, and even in what concerns the use of discourse theory premises to understand civil society.

Taking everything into consideration, the aspect which is worth remembering is that, as a result of our commitment to the type of ambitious research design proposed in our thesis, we have been able to construct a model for understanding civil society with a very solid grounding in the empirical – which has offered us the possibility to trace the trends we respond to in our model – but a very rich potential for influencing current ways of understanding civil society in countries that share commonalities with Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In what follows, we explore the aforementioned directions for further research which help to strengthen the novelty and current relevance of our model, while also demonstrating that it can be translated and applied to different circumstances at different levels. It is our belief that, given the current worldwide proliferation of political and social upheaval, civil society is an underexplored field with an unexploited potential to offer solutions and to channel legitimate debate between discursive positions which might otherwise end up manifesting violently. On top of this, 'Africa' has become a 'hot topic' on the European and global agenda, given the very real issue of a dearth in the expertise necessary to adequately tackle the consistent waves of migration coming from the continent. An understanding of Liberia and Sierra Leone specifically can offer an edge in what concerns this realm, given that precarious economic conditions, civil conflicts, or the questionable management of their aftermaths (including their effects on the articulation of civil society) are understood to represent one of the leading causes for migrants' decisions to leave their countries.

One potentially fruitful avenue for further research would be to look at Liberia and Sierra Leone as countries that find themselves in a process of transition after a paradigm-altering event or series of events. By generalising in this manner, we gain the ability to penetrate the more deeply entrenched layers of discourse which reveal that the logic of equivalence can be applied so as to highlight the similarities between a broad range of social and political actors. It is usually already acknowledged that there are certain similarities between African countries, and many of them share a history plagued by social exclusion and violent civil conflicts. But, by going one step further, we discover that, although it may not have been reached in the same manner, the status of 'country in transition' is rather widespread across the whole world, with civil society potentially subject to the same challenges and opportunities encountered in Liberia and Sierra

Leone. Consequently, it would be interesting to research ways in which our model could be further adapted so as to provide solutions which would generate a productive engagement of civil society that goes beyond basic antagonisms such as foreign/national, formalised/informal, Western/local etc.

Another thought-provoking path for taking our research further has emerged in the last few years, taking the shape of the aforementioned migration phenomenon. Many of those resorting to this option are believed to be coming from African countries (plagued with problems ranging from economic difficulties to pervasive societal violence) and are seen as trying to reach Western European countries. This has prompted the European Union to put significant effort into trying to regulate the phenomenon, which has in turn led to the realisation that addressing the causes of migration needs to be prioritised. In this context, developing our model further can prove to be extremely helpful in guiding the European Union's interventions within migrants' countries, specifically in what concerns the engagement of and dialogue with civil society.

First and foremost, it is important for the European Union to acknowledge that civil society represents a valuable social resource which can be mobilised into tackling pressing national issues, building unconventional solutions and fostering the formation of social capital to counteract antagonistic tensions. The advantage provided by our model is that it would force the Union to reconsider its current pattern of engagement and to approach civil society from different angles, so that it may cooperate with its CSO partners in rearticulating the discursive scaffolding used when interpreting and altering social and political realities or their connections. In other words, through understanding civil society in the way intended by our model, the European Union can more easily attempt to reach out to this sector without pre-conceived expectations pertaining to the organisations it can work with, thus accessing new ways of thinking with regard to partner political entities which have shaped, and been shaped in turn by, their civil society environment.

Another potential field of research turns inward by proposing a more particularised approach to civil society actors from Liberia and Sierra Leone, which at the beginning would probably involve a series of qualitative studies undertaken with the cooperation of various CSOs. The organisations would need to be willing to be introduced to this model and to apply it in what concerns not only their perception of themselves as civil society actors, but also the way in which they relate to different kinds of partners. Throughout a period of observation focused on these CSOs, several interviews and focus groups could be carried out in order to provide input with regard to the impact of the model, the lessons learned through its implementation or the components and connections of the model which need to be reconsidered.

Last but most certainly not least, the study and application of discourse theory can also gain certain benefits from our type of research, given that our endeavour has proved that, although seemingly abstract and concerned with 'politics and the political', discourse theory can become a valuable tool in studying and understanding various components of our social, political, economic, cultural etc. landscape. In the future, students of discourse theory could harness the significant value of practical examples when making theoretical points, which would facilitate a more constructivist type of relation between discourse theory and the realities that it aims to analyse and deconstruct.

To sum everything up, the research effort involved in the conception and execution of our thesis has yielded the added value of a potentially transformative model tackling one of the most important sectors of our 'global' society. It is our belief that deepening our study into the multiple fresh facets of our design can generate thought provoking results and branch out into new research areas, which is why we end this summary by expressing our continued interest in and potential future commitment to this research area.

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