Liberia’s Amos Sawyer Returns to Conduct Research at Political Theory Workshop

Dr. Amos Sawyer, former dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Liberia in Monrovia, Liberia, and former Interim President of Liberia from 1990–1994, has been a visiting scholar at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis since April 2001. He is chair of the Centre for Democratic Empowerment with offices in Monrovia and Abidjan. Reproduced below is an article by Sawyer from the Workshop’s June 2001 newsletter, Polycentric Circles.

In 1986, after 11 years of university teaching and pro-democracy advocacy in an increasingly turbulent Liberia, I was invited to the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. The workshop turned out to be exactly what I needed: a vibrant community of scholars and an environment for reflection and intellectual refreshment. Benefiting from such an exciting intellectual adventure, I was able to complete a book, contribute three chapters to two other books written at the workshop, and write a few short essays and critiques.

I left the workshop at the end of the 1987–1988 academic year but was never separated from it. It was always with me because it had given me a deeper appreciation of what Vincent Ostrom calls human artisanship: the enormous ingenuity and self-organizing capabilities of human beings. It had enlightened me about the vast array of orders that exist in human societies and the possibilities for deepening democratic experiences in human societies. I attained a broadened perspective of what human beings can achieve within institutional arrangements that unleash human potentials. Writing the book The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992) brought home to me how centralized structures dominating Liberian society had over time produced profound perversities that led to human tragedies of huge proportions. Several African societies, including Liberia, are today struggling to break out of the cycle of violence and human misery.

Upon leaving the workshop, I continued working with others on issues having to do with human rights and constituting democratic orders in Liberia and elsewhere in Africa. Such efforts undertaken within a combustible environment can often generate as much heat as light, and I have no doubt that my own interventions, though well-intentioned like those of many others, must have contributed to the cycle of violence and human misery that continues to plague Liberia and the larger Mano River basin region of West Africa. The way forward, however, is through deeper study and more enlightened engagement with others—more work—and not through shouting matches and exchange of fire.

And so I have returned to the workshop for deeper study and to share my experiences after trying my hands at conflict management and peace negotiations in Liberia and the larger subregion; raising the visibility of and fashioning programs for war-affected children; and becoming alarmingly aware and gravely concerned about the thriving economy of small arms, light weapons and natural resource trafficking, and warlordism that threatens humanity in West Africa.

On this, my second tenure at the workshop, I will endeavor to explore the challenge of governance, going beyond the examination of state failure and its tragic consequences. I intend to explore the possibilities of self-governance for African societies. One of the specific puzzles to be explored is, how can African societies, drawing upon their own self-organizing capabilities and learning from experiences elsewhere, craft institutional arrangements for democratic self-governance? The rich body of research and the lively community of scholars that constitute the workshop provide a good home from which to pursue this puzzle. Once again, the workshop is poised to offer an exciting intellectual adventure. I’m happy to be back!