

Interview with Professor Daniel W. Bromley, University of Wisconsin-Madison

FRANKLIN OBENG-ODOOM

Development Studies and Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science
University of Helsinki, Finland

Email: franklin.obeng-odoom@helsinki.fi

AND

DANIEL W. BROMLEY

Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics
University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

Email: dbromley@wisc.edu

Abstract

This interview essay focuses on Daniel W. Bromley's contribution to African economics and political economy. Centred particularly on his work on inequality, equality, and the institutional foundations of economic systems; economic development; and natural resources, which are Professor Bromley's key research areas, this essay offers a distinctive perspective on a radical economist who has been challenging development and environmental heresies in and about Africa. The essay covers questions about how he became interested in Africa, his methodological and ontological orientations, and his struggle to develop alternative political economic analysis of Africa and its relationship with the global economic system.

Keywords: Inequality; Institutions; Daniel Bromley; Institutional Economics.

1. Introduction

Daniel W. Bromley is Professor Emeritus at University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. Acknowledged as a prominent Africanist, economist, and the world's authority on land economics, he edited the leading journal in that field, *Land Economics*, for 44 years. The only other person who has more experience is R.T. Ely, the founder of the field, who passed on in 1943, almost 80 years ago. Thus, Professor Bromley's name has become synonymous with land economics itself.

His research is in institutional economics, a field to which he has contributed 11 major books and co-edited five others. These books, along with his numerous papers, have helped to advance a diverse range of fields, as illustrated by the titles of the books. Some of the most controversial ones are (1) *Economic Interests and Institutions* (Bromley, 1989); (2) *Environment and Economy: Property Rights and Public Policy* (Bromley, 1991); (3) *Sufficient Reason: Volitional Pragmatism and the Meaning of Economic Institutions* (Bromley, 2006); (4) *Vulnerable People, Vulnerable States: Redefining the Development Challenge* (Bromley and Anderson, 2012); and *Possessive Individualism* (Bromley, 2019). Emeritus professor of Applied Economics, his fields of expertise can be summarised as 'the philosophical foundations of economics; institutional economics; international economic development; and the legal and philosophical dimensions of property rights' (Bromley, 2019).

Not only is Bromley listed in Who's Who in Economics, he is a winner of the Veblen-Commons award, along with towering figures such as Gunnar Myrdal, the Nobel Laureate, J.K. Galbraith, and Paul Sweezy. Professor Bromley is a Fellow of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists and a Fellow of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association. In 2012, he received the Reimar Lüst Prize from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. His work is widely read and used. So sought after is his work and that some of his books have been translated into other languages (e.g., Bromley, 2006, 2008). Bromley has been President of the International Association for the Study of Common Property (1992-93) and Chair of the US Federal Advisory Committee on Marine Protected Areas under the U.S. Department of Commerce (2003-2006).

Combining scholarship on theorising, explaining, evaluating institutions with hands-on experience on institutional building, he has courageously offered policy advice to many governments and government agencies. Most recently, he has been consulted by the Government of National Unity in Sudan on economic recovery in the South, and ways of re-visioning economic reconstruction in Darfur.

That Professor Bromley is both a leading theorist and an engaged economist and Africanist require no further elaboration because these are well-known facts. What, perhaps, is not very well understood is that, unlike most prominent economists, Professor Bromley is, for most students, an inspiring teacher. Not only has he been decorated with the Outstanding Teaching Award of the University of Wisconsin, presented by the Graduate Student Club, Agricultural & Applied Economics, he has won it three times. AREF's inaugural biographical/interview essay (Obeng-Odoom *et al.*, 2019) is, accordingly, about Professor Daniel W. Bromley (DWB), who is interviewed by Franklin Obeng-Odoom (O-O), AREF Editor-in-Chief.

O-O: What drew you to research on development and underdevelopment in Africa?

DWB: In 1991, I was invited by the Rural Development Department of the World Bank to go to South Africa on an initiative (funded by the Danish government) to help South African universities develop research programs concerning land tenure, water policy, nature parks, and poverty in the Homelands. This activity was going on at the same time that another World Bank unit – the Research Department – was pushing a land-reform programme defined by the idea of “market-driven land reform.” As it turned out, two different parts of the World Bank were engaged in diametrically opposed agendas for rectifying the serious land problem in that highly unequal country.

I considered it immoral to expect that black South Africans should have to undertake a market transaction – even with the help of a small financial subsidy – to go to white commercial farmers seeking to buy back land that had been stolen from them in the 1950s and 1960s. This is what the Bank's “market-driven” land reform entailed. I quickly learned that the World Bank was not interested in morality. The Bank was committed to what its employees and advocates consider the manifold virtues of markets and market exchange.

The market-oriented faction within the Bank won the policy debate because the new post-apartheid government in South Africa was worried about how difficult it would be to attract international investments, if it were thought that the government did not “respect property rights.” Never mind that the property rights of such importance had emerged from complete theft and dispossession of black people 40 years ago. The Bank staff promised that 30 percent of the land held by white farmers would be sold to blacks within 10-15 years. We are now almost thirty years beyond that prediction (that promise) and the last time

I checked, less than 3 percent of white-owned land has been handed over to blacks. The reason is not hard to discover. White farmers are under enormous social pressure *not* to sell their farm to blacks. This is no mystery. We see the same phenomenon in the white suburbs of America.

One more experience at this time was foundational. The experts from the World Bank, and other economists, were simply shocked to learn that dispossessed blacks, having spent the past 40 years in the desolate and degraded homelands, or in the inhospitable cities of South Africa, had no interest in going into the hinterlands and becoming black versions of the white commercial farmers they were displacing. The term-of-art at the time was “same car, different driver.” The World Bank’s catechism simply had no understanding of black people who wished to have their ancestral land returned to them as part of their heritage and patrimony. In other words, if blacks who got their ancestral lands returned to them were not going to farm it like the white folks had done, their restitution was illegitimate. Most importantly, it was bad for the country. How could good agricultural land just be allowed to sit idle? This was blasphemy.

These two experiences seared in my mind a deep and strong revulsion towards how the international donor community viewed Africa, Africans, and the general enterprise called “development.” I was hooked – and all of my work since that time has been to confront, challenge, and confound those engaged in the usual business of “development.” And since Africa is always thought to be the place most in need of the standard development prescriptions, there has never been a shortage of contestations in need of engagement. I am still doing it in South Sudan.

O-O: Unlike others who have become disillusioned, what has kept you as an Africanist?

DWB: As earlier indicated, the reason I have stayed engaged, and not become disillusioned, is that my agenda has been motivated by supporting African countries to resist the standard development catechism. My agenda has been to rethink and contribute to their economic and governance processes in more imaginative ways. Others, peddling the usual nostrums, have perhaps become disillusioned because they realized, after several tries, that their message was inappropriate, it had not worked, and they kept encountering governments disinclined to accept lecturing from a group of individuals who really had no idea what they were talking about. Most of them had taken one or two college courses in “the development problem” and figured that they were thereby

qualified to dispense advice. Even if they came armed with a Ph.D., their grasp of the economy as a system and a process was non-existent. They commanded nice little micro-models of rational choice, but were ignorant of an African farming village and the many forces that made it work – and that made it resistant to their handy prescriptive certitudes. They preached the gospel of getting markets to work, without understanding the markets they thought were defective.

O-O: Clearly, focusing on, re-theorising, and re-building institutions are key elements in your sustained critique of development economics. How did you become an institutionalist?

DWB: My early education was in environmental and natural resource economics. That entire field is not about trees and fish and coal and recreationists and pollution. That field is about the rules and conventions that define how humans interact with each other in their desire to derive benefits from trees and fish and coal and recreation and pollution. Those rules are institutions. If you do not understand economic institutions (rules) you cannot possibly understand resource use and resource policy.

In addition, I have always been a bit of a contrarian. I recall once in graduate school asking my macroeconomics professor about this thing I had heard of called “institutional economics.” I wanted to know what it was. He glibly told me not to worry about it – the field was dead. As luck would have it, upon gaining my Ph.D. I had job offers from Cornell and Wisconsin. By then, I knew that Wisconsin was the fountainhead of institutional economics. I accepted the job at Wisconsin – it was the smartest decision of my life.

O-O: You have described how you developed the legacy of R.T. Ely, but could you clarify whether you worked with him personally or have you had any dealings with his students such as J.R. Commons or some other family members? How did you gain access to Land Economics, his ‘flagpole’, as you call it (Bromley, 2008)?

DWB: Ely and Commons had long passed on when I arrived at Wisconsin in 1969. I was lucky to inherit the course “Institutional Economics” that Commons had taught. The journal *Land Economics* was founded by Ely in 1923 and had been published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Madison was its home. When the editorship opened up in 1973, I expressed interest. The Board selected two of us – Charles Cicchetti and me. Charley grew tired of the burden after several years and I have done the job ever since (until stepping down in 2018).

O-O: Judging by the pattern of your citations, it seems, Commons more than Ely, influenced or influence you much more (e.g., you attribute ‘volitional pragmatism’ and ‘reasonable value’ analyses to Commons, see, Bromley, 2006). Given that Ely wrote more on land (e.g., Ely, 1925, 1930), could you explain whether this observation is accurate and, if so, why Commons has become more central to your thinking?

DWB: Commons was one of the founders of institutional economics. His two books – *Institutional Economics* (1934) and *The Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (1924) – have always been central to my thinking. Commons was a pragmatist in the tradition of John Dewey. That explains the importance of Commons in my thought and work.

You are correct that I have not followed much of Ely’s work – primarily because I was interested in the broader aspects of Commons. This is especially the case concerning the “legal foundations of capitalism” – to use the title of his most profound book.

2. Inequality, Vulnerable People, Vulnerable States

*O-O: When you say in your book, *Vulnerable People, Vulnerable States* (Bromley and Anderson, 2012), that the development catechism has run its course and has nothing else to offer, what do you actually mean?*

DWB: I believe that the development catechism is a spent force because, as the World Bank likes to pronounce, it is working for a world without poverty. I find this incoherent. Poverty is the end result of myriad causes and reasons – and the very idea of poverty is problematic. Pragmatism is a diagnostic epistemology – pragmatists want to ask “why.” Fighting poverty is like fighting terrorism. You can never be sure when you have “won.” More seriously, you do not know what “winning” means. When, exactly, has poverty been whipped? As long as development assistance is focused on fighting poverty, there is no hope for meaningful engagement. In fact, it is worse than that. A “poverty reduction strategy” identifies so many things that need to be fixed, international donors end up squandering all of their money and effort on a long list of alleged problems. My grandfather taught me that if you chase two rabbits at the same time, you will not catch either one.

O-O: You are clearly critical of development economics and share many of the concerns of critics (Obeng-Odoom, 2018), but your approach is different. Could you, for example, clarify the difference between your approach and that of those who focus on inequality?

DWB: I want economic systems – and their associated governance regimes – to cohere. That means I want an economy to work well in all of its necessary tasks and manifestations. Inequality is presented as a severe problem. A more severe problem in many African countries is that almost everyone is disadvantaged and unable to move. Look at the stylized circumstance of the mythical Ghanaian farmer Kweku Owiredi in Chapter 1 of *Vulnerable People, Vulnerable States*. Kweku's problem is not that he is poor. His problem is that nothing in his economic and political world works – and there is nothing he can do to get it to work. Kweku is a microcosm for the entirety of the continent. We must understand an economy as a process. An economy is not just some textbook “market” fantasy from a college classroom. An economy is an organic thing that is always in the process of becoming. An economy is like a favourite old car that requires care and curating. Many little things must be attended to.

It is my view that if we can get African economies to cohere and deliver plausible livelihoods for most individuals, inequality will take care of itself. After all, equality is a superior good – one to be cultivated and rectified after more basic obligations have been addressed.

O-O: Is your critique of inequality research also about the neglect of institutions?

DWB: I am critical of all research, and all practical policy advice, that neglects institutions. After all, institutions are the blueprints of an economy. How can an engineer or an architect, brought in to modify a building, ignore the blueprints that gave the building its essential structure?

O-O: Who are vulnerable people? Please could you give some examples of their characteristics?

DWB: I suppose there are two types of vulnerable people in a typical African setting. The first is the active energetic entrepreneur – personified by Kweku in Ghana – confronting a daily barrage of hurdles, blockages, frustrations, and distractions that stand between his little going concern and the larger world in which he must engage and interact. Kweku is vulnerable because of what he is unable to do, and he is vulnerable because at some point he is going to throw up his hands and retreat into self-sufficient autarky. When he does that, the economic future of his village, his immediate region, and perhaps his country, is jeopardised. He can survive by his withdrawal. But his retreat into autarky – if it becomes “contagious” among others similarly burdened – carries a high price for all of his compatriots.

The second type of vulnerability is the woman in a remote village somewhere trying to raise and feed a family without any help from the local, regional, or national government. There are few impediments in her way because she has not tried – like Kweku – to engage the larger world of an urban place in need of her wonderful vegetables. But she is vulnerable just the same through neglect, privation, hardship, and little hope.

O-O: What about vulnerable states?

DWB: My vision of vulnerable states flows from my account of two different types of individual vulnerabilities. The entrepreneurial thrusting and energetic existence of a Kweku who refuses to give up, and the withdrawn defeated woman who knows better than to try very much. States become vulnerable when their people have given up.

O-O: How different or similar are these concepts to Paul Collier's 'bottom billion'?

DWB: I admire Paul's work... few economists know Africa as well as he does, and even fewer people understand the development problem as well as Paul. He identifies most of the usual suspects – conflict, bad neighbours, poor governance, and the natural resource trap. We may emphasize different aspects of the development problem, but if we were on a panel discussion together, I am quite sure that we would disagree about very little.

O-O: Could you clarify the Sachs-Easterly approach and why you reject it? (Bromley and Anderson, 2012, pp. 25-27)

DWB: In our book (Bromley and Anderson, 2012), we characterise Jeff Sachs and Bill Easterly as advocates of the “great leap forward” (Sachs) and “smart searching” (Easterly). Sachs seems to be in no doubt that the standard development catechism is the correct approach and he is pushing donors to do more of it. He seems to blame donors for a timid and sporadic commitment to development. We regard Easterly as equally committed to the standard development approach, but critical of its implementation. He urges the development community to be more strategic (smart) in what it pushes on African governments.

If I were on a panel with Jeff and Bill I suspect we would find areas of quite striking yet respectful disagreement.

O-O: If your own approach is different from the 'failed state' framework, as you pointed out in your Veblen-Commons Lecture (Bromley, 2016), may I ask why you still call yours 'vulnerable states' (Bromley and Anderson, 2012) or 'dysfunctional states' (Bromley, 2016)? Is the difference just about their distinct roots: politics and economics, as you suggest (Bromley, 2016)? Are 'dysfunctional', 'vulnerable', not as categorical as 'failed'?

DWB: I believe that words matter. When so-called experts pronounce that certain nations are “failed states” it has a certain finality to it – all hope is lost, it is too late, clean house and start over. I dislike final judgments. As you know, I insist that an economy is always in the process of becoming. Is that process gathering steam and providing necessary “lift” – to use an aeronautical term? Or is that process of becoming simply bouncing along with scant sign of improvement?

I am a diagnostician. A medical doctor would never consider a patient to be a “failed patient.” The medical doctor would identify areas where certain interventions – some of a medical variety, some of a behavioural variety on the part of the patient – seem likely to deliver good results. These good results are not guaranteed – they are probable. The doctor’s task is to further the process of enhancement of the patient. I approach my work in Africa through this lens.

Friends often ask me: “Are you doing any good there?” My answer always is: “It is too soon to tell.” And so we keep working, always aware that economic and social change is both slow and also discomfiting to many interests.

O-O: Could you further elaborate on the idea of a notional/vulnerable/juridical state in terms of different types of institutional economics, say, old and new, extending the distinction you make between your work and that of Acemoglu based on, say, the historical approach in original institutional economics (Bromley, 2016)?

DWB: I use the term “notional state” as an aspirational idea. There is much confusion – especially among economists – about this thing call a nation, or a state, or a nation-state. Economists are never exposed to these ideas as they work their way through graduate school. Most economists think only about the market and governments. Conservative economists regard this as the main battlelines. They do not want governments “interfering” with the marvellous work of markets. Progressive economists see governments as a source of making the market work better – reducing transaction costs.

Immanuel Kant introduced us to the concepts of phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are observable experiences – national boundaries on a map,

membership in the United Nations, government employees and office buildings, and parliaments. These are the things we see and experience. We can call this the juridical recognition of boundaries and identity.

Noumena are the realisations of shared ideas and perceptions. The idea of a “state” is a noumena. In essence, a state is the idea – and then the subsequent practice – of a group of people, identified as belonging to a nation, who engage in an ongoing “conversation” about what sort of society they wish to create and sustain. A nation is not automatically a state. But nations that are unable to craft the necessary structures and protocols to launch and sustain a healthy collective discussion are vulnerable and fragile. A state is able to bend and adapt because individuals are participants in the shared experience of reason giving. Nations that cannot bend, break.

In 2014, at a Development Policy Forum sponsored by the Ebony Center for Strategic Studies in Juba, South Sudan, I pointed out to attendees that South Sudan had been a nation since July 9, 2011. However, South Sudan was not yet a state. My assertion caused great consternation. But the audience soon came to realise that with civil conflict and political tensions still running high, it was indeed true that South Sudan was not yet engaged in the necessary civic conversation to be considered a state.

When economists lament “failed states” they generally mean that governments are defective and, therefore, markets cannot work the way they are supposed to work. It is another way of blaming governments for their failure to make sure markets work. I therefore find the idea – and the language – of failed states to be unhelpful.

Language of failed states is entirely consistent with thinking among the so-called “new institutional economics.” Participants in this line of work share with other economists the idea that the purpose of governments is to make sure that “efficient markets” emerge and thrive. As I mentioned earlier, this view is misplaced and incoherent.

O-O: You clearly do not share the claim (e.g. Hodgson, 2014) that the distinction between old and new institutional economics is becoming blurry.

DWB:I certainly do not. Geoff Hodgson has been a prolific contributor to what I prefer to call “political economy.” He is very interested in Darwin, Veblen, and evolutionary economics. But he does not understand Commons, pragmatism, or the systemic problems that animated Commons and others. His failure to grasp

that essential point then allows him to declare – without plausible evidence – that there is little difference between new and old institutionalists. This mistake emerges from his affiliation with the “new” institutionalists – and his desire to be a peace-maker between the two camps. Peace makers are to be admired. But they must be intellectually credible.

O-O: If these ideas are actually about institutions and development is essentially about good institutions (see also Bromley and Anderson, 2012, pp. 3-5), might you have been more effective in simply calling your book ‘vulnerable institutions’?

DWB: I am not sure “institutions” (rules and customs) are “vulnerable.” People, natural habitats, and small children are vulnerable. People (and nation-states) are vulnerable because their economies do not work. Recall that colonialism was a regime of imposed institutional arrangements “on top” of the residue of a long historical process of layered rules and customs. Life in much of Africa remains the product of an accretion of institutional arrangements reflecting different epochs of shifting control and varied allegiances. Individuals are able to draw on a wide range of behavioural expectations – each of them parameterized by a particular imposed structure from the past.

When European colonisers quit Africa in the 1960s, individuals faced two contrary realities. Political independence seemed to offer autonomy – agency. But the other reality was one of an “institutional vacuum” in which the old order of rules and behavioural norms disappeared, yet was not quickly replaced by a new order. And then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the world decided it was time to bring economic development to this abandoned landscape and so while young nations were seeking to get their footing and balance as “political orphans,” the World Bank and other national development agencies arrived with a new menu of imposed rules. Paramount here were structural adjustment obligations, and a long list of faddish development initiatives that promised nice results from good government behaviour—import substitution, appropriate technology, getting prices right, land titles, liberating markets by eliminating agricultural marketing boards, etc. And then when the environment and gender empowerment emerged as essential commitments, a new layer of imposed behaviours was laid on.

None of these imposed normative imperatives has managed to do much good – and several of them, notably structural adjustment, actually did great harm.

So it was (and is) people who remain vulnerable to yet more official dogma that whipsaws acceptable behaviour. When people are vulnerable, states are vulnerable.

O-O: You have been a major critic of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), correctly predicting that they would not be met. What are your concerns with the MDGs and do the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address them?

DWB: The MDGs, like the SDGs, are the result of too many foreign experts, with abundant time on their hands, sitting around and thinking up ever-more creative ways to impose themselves and their values on others.

The purpose of development is not to make other people and other countries look like those in the Global North. To claim that the only problem with Senegal is that it is not more like Sweden. Or the problem with Nigeria is that it is not more like Norway. That is the very definition of arrogance and conceit. The purpose of development is to support the process in which others achieve their goals, not ours. The entire exercise of creating glorious-sounding goals is nothing but a modern version of colonialism. The exercise is seriously dangerous when those individuals doing the imposing of goals are comprehensively innocent of the means – both necessary and sufficient – to achieve the selected goals.

O-O: What about your interest in ‘good governance’? Is it similar to your concept of ‘economic coherence’?

DWB: Good governance is an idealised vision that, if successful, can contribute to economic coherence. But good governance is a little evasive because we are not sure exactly what it means. All of the contrived indices and assessments are vacuous, circular, and empirical travesties.

I like to think of governance as an opportunity for individuals to exercise effective voice. I am a big fan of Albert Hirschman’s 1970 classic *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge University Press). The ideas of voice and loyalty are so central to the well-being of going concerns. Exit robs entities of corrective feedback. Loyalty to a going concern is a necessary condition for individuals feeling a commitment to exercise voice for the purpose of correcting what seems defective. It is a mistake to suppose that democracy is about voting. Democracy is about reason giving, and reason giving is precisely how going concerns learn about their good and bad traits. Pragmatism is about the asking for and giving of reasons.

3. Environment, economy, and development

O-O: Your contributions to environment, economy, and development have been very controversial. For example, you seem to contend that the so-called trade-offs between environment, economy, and development are merely ideational. To

overcome them, truth claims could be replaced with reason giving, a practice or tactic of not invoking the inherent human instinct to contest imposition. By this pragmatic strategy, you suggest that we can arrive at the reasonable. How about vested interests? In other words, is what we see not also based on why we come to choose how we look and keep looking in that way; not simply a function of how we look and, hence, what we see, as you suggest (Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016)?

DWB: What a wonderful challenge. The key here is your phrase: "... is what we see not also based on why we come to choose how we look and keep looking in that way; not simply a function of how we look and, hence, what we see..." I agree, but allow me to re-phrase it in a more direct manner: "what we see is a function of why we come to choose how we look, and why and how we choose to keep looking in a particular way." Re-phrasing yet again, "seeing is not believing, believing is seeing." We only see what we are already in mind to look for. The quest for the reasonable, therefore, operates at a meta-level of insisting that all we see is simply what we are in a frame of mind to look for (to want to see).

Recall that the essence of a plausible state is the creation and maintenance of a process of reason giving – advancing contending "truth claims" – until the better way forward can be considered and eventually worked out. The reason we reason is to find reasons for choosing those courses of action that will come to be considered reasonable.

O-O: Your critique of the conception of 'nature' in environmentalist movement is fascinating. It suggests that, much like the coloniser, contemporary environmentalists appear to be colonising nature themselves when they frame people as being apart from nature and economy as standing outside of nature (Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016, pp. 35-54). Could you elaborate this critique in the context of current pressure on African countries and of Indigenous people to stop all forms of mining and drilling?

DWB: The social construction of what we wish to call "nature" is an ongoing process. It comes down to the central idea of purpose. What is the purpose of that river over there? At one time, the purpose of that river was to carry away human and industrial waste. Of course, fish were probably sacrificed, but fishing was not yet a widespread socially approved pastime. Proper fish came from mountain streams, deep lakes, and the ocean. When rivers gradually came to have a new purpose, we gradually realised that discharging wastes into rivers violated what those rivers "were for."

Opposition to mining and drilling by anyone – indigenous or recent arrivals – emerges because of the view that this is not what nature is for. To some, nature is only for looking at and revering. We must see these contests as addressing the purpose of nature.

O-O: Does your analysis of environmental governance (e.g., Bromley, 1991, chapter 6, 2008a; Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016, chapters 4-5) suggest that the Elinor Ostrom approach is a distraction?

DWB: Elinor (Lin) Ostrom was a marvellous scholar who taught us a number of very important lessons about small-scale governance. She was an empiricist. But empiricism can be dangerous when it is unhitched from a theoretical structure that can withstand scrutiny. Lin's doctoral research was focused on groundwater overdraft problems in southern California. This problematic structure – a seemingly fixed resource with too many claimants drawing too much water from the “pool” – came to define her view of natural resource use and governance. For the rest of her career, everything came to look like a “common pool resource.” Unfortunately, the acronym for a common pool resource (CPR) was the same acronym for a common property resource (CPR). This dangerous slippage between “pool” and “property” plagues all of Ostrom's subsequent writing. We still encounter researchers who remain confused. It is nonsense to say – as Ostrom and her many disciples do – that a forest or a rangeland is a “common pool resource” for the simple reason that a single owner of that forest or that rangeland eliminates any idea of “common.” We see that Lin failed to grasp the essence of property and property rights, and confused a common pool for practically any natural resource.

In that regard, Lin Ostrom has been worse than a “distraction.” She has set back work on the necessary understanding of exactly what “common *property*” is and means. Lin has not been alone in destroying theoretical (conceptual) coherence. Garret Hardin, with his mis-named “tragedy of the commons” was even worse. As a biologist agitated by population growth – and being ignorant of social and economic history – he grabbed hold of the “common pasture” from antiquity to spread his corrosive allegory about the allegedly destroyed “commons.” Late in life, under pressure from me and a few others, he admitted that he should have titled his destructive article “the tragedy of open access.” But of course that title does not have the nice ring to it that the “tragedy of the commons” does. And there is an even more dangerous message in all of this conceptual confusion. It played right into the hands of economists such as Douglass North who were

intent on celebrating markets and the glories of private property over shared (common or joint) tenures. It has been part of a grand yet poisonous agenda – furthered by the silliness of Hernando De Soto’s “dead capital” – to undermine traditional property regimes throughout Africa (and elsewhere).

In the mid-1980s, out of frustration at the confusions, the U. S. Agency for International Development asked the U. S. National Academy of Sciences to help sort out the mess. The Academy created a Panel on Common Property Resource Management in the hope of bringing both conceptual clarity and serious empirical evidence to bear on the folly started by Hardin, North, and a few others. I was Chair of that Panel, and Lin Ostrom was a valued member. We published a volume entitled *Common Property Resource Management* in 1986 (Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resource Management, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.). Much scholarship has followed – some of it very good, some of it curiously perpetuating earlier conceptual mush.

O-O: In Environmental Heresies (Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016), you argue that the climate change challenge is precisely hindered because of its framing as an economic problem instead of as an economic concern. You argue that, as a result of this framing, economists have become more important than, perhaps, they should be and that the public has become increasingly uncertain about climate change as they are caught in the tension between economists’ flawed certainty of market approaches and scientists’ more cautious approach (Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016, chapter 6). How about the attitude of left-wing green activists who frame the climate problem not just as an economic problem, but as a capitalist economic problem? They talk about rights, but do they, in your experience, appreciate the nature of property rights, environment, and economy (Bromley, 1991)?

DWB: There are several important thoughts here. My concern with climate policy being framed as an economic problem is that it then invites us to think of it as a pollution problem – one of externalities. And all economists are quite sure that Pigovian taxes are the marvellous solution to pollution problems. But notice that taxes are a dangerous policy domain, and one then immediately ends up in heated political and economic debates. The focus on taxes (to solve externalities) has undermined coherent climate policy. So many reasons (causes) give rise to climate change – only a few of which lend themselves to correction by Pigovian taxes on carbon. So why have we allowed ourselves to get bogged down in this useless digressionary fight?

Climate change is the product of thousands of different life-style choices involving urban sprawl, flawed transport policies, cheap energy, over-large houses and buildings, food production systems, and more. As for the “green lefties”, I would like to lead them on a site-visit to the former East German industrial town of Karl-Marx-Stadt (since renamed to its original Chemnitz). It would take about five seconds for them to see that planned economies of the East German variety were more than capable of spewing all manner of awful poisonous stuff into the atmosphere. It is not the “system” (the “ism”) that is dispositive. It is the institutional arrangements within that system that allow or prohibit the discharge of air-borne contaminants and other dangerous effluents. It is not “capitalism” that is a threat to the environment. It is a market culture, and a citizenry of selfish acquisitive individuals who like low prices, that allow factories in a market economy (capitalist) to destroy nature.

4. Conclusion: Institutional change and setting new research agendas

4.1. Policy process

O-O: You discuss the issue of special interests in your analysis of policy reform, but this issue is left out of your ‘five essential activities’ that make up the policy reform process (Hiedanpää and Bromley, 2016, pp. 105-106). Often, policy makers and politicians are so invested in the land tenure system that change looks almost impossible. That is at the national level. At the global level, as your books have carefully shown, interested parties such as the IMF and the World Bank are interested in particular forms of policy that cannot easily be addressed in your ‘five essential activities’ in the policy reform area. Although influences on you, such as Commons, advocated the use of unions, it is not clear how you see the role of social movements in the policy reform process.

DWB: I often have difficulty with the idea (and the term) “special interests.” Very often, this implies anyone or any group that disagrees with us on a particular policy debate. It is easy to label something a “special interest” just as it is easy to identify interests with too much “power.” But the specifics of these epithets are often vague. It is very clear that inordinate income and wealth bestow advantages. But some new policies are blocked and defeated simply because a large number of individuals are comfortable in the status quo, and properly concerned about some imposed change. As I have shown elsewhere (Bromley, 2009), the aggressive efforts by the disciples of Hernando de Soto to impose formal titles on traditional land and associated tenures across Africa

are resisted by women and other relatively vulnerable members of society precisely because they are sure that they will be dispossessed. Evidence from a few places (for example Kenya) where titling has been imposed justifies their concerns. Yet, I doubt if many of us would consider these vulnerable women to be “special interests.”

The interest in unions by Commons and other labour economists was motivated by the concept of countervailing power in an economic climate where owners of capital had the momentum of the law on their side, and there was little other way to balance the scales. In capitalism, owners of labour power will always be disadvantaged.

O-O: Your new book appears to be shifting away from institutions to individuals and their behaviour. Is this a new research agenda?

DWB: You are referring to my recent book, *Possess Individualism: A Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Appearances are misleading. This book is a diagnostic undertaking in the abductive tradition of Aristotle and Peirce. My argument in the book is that the possessive individual is the reason for the crisis of capitalism. This is surprising since most of us like to blame others, and who better to blame than despicable capitalists? I argue that we are the reason for our own anxiety and frustration because we have allowed ourselves to be seduced by the conceit of the autonomous individual endowed with innumerable “rights” yet bearing few if any “duties.” It is our acquisitive hedonism that then authorises our elected politicians to join in the campaign against taxes, against social obligations, against environmental policies, against obvious climate change. After all, addressing these problems might limit our range of “free will.” Or, more seriously, corrective action might require a small increase in the taxes we must pay. Possessive individualism is a sign of the insidious triumph of the self-interested individual who stands against any social obligations.

This new frame of mind has been furthered by the pervasive market culture that defines life in our time – markets are said to give individuals exactly what they want, without some authoritarian planner deciding what they will have. Markets ratify the possessive individualistic instincts of our age. The market of such esteem in contemporary life is the essence of an institution.

O-O: Could you kindly clarify your central concerns in linking the old to the new agendas?

DWB: I am not sure I understand the point of “concerns linking the old to the new agenda.” My latest book is a departure from an emphasis on environmental economics and development economics, But that “old” agenda was always concerned with the institutional foundations of economic systems and processes. The “new” agenda expands that slightly to a somewhat larger canvass.

O-O: In this respect, please, how is ‘possessive individualism’ (Bromley, 2019) linked to the current concerns about inequality?

DWB: The reigning market culture of capitalism – animated and sustained by the possessive individual – stands implicated in the rise of inequality. That inequality operates within the modern capitalist economy, and it certainly defines inequality at the global level. Global capitalism is now orchestrated by a class of financial wranglers, hedge-fund conjurers, and private equity tormentors who can render low-wage workers in the poor periphery unemployed at the click of a button on their computer. They bear no responsibility for their actions because they are from Thomas Nagel’s *Nowhere* (1986). They are divorced from place and the attachments thereof.

O-O: What role, Professor Bromley, can policy play in arresting this possessive individualism? Resocialising individuals and re-envisioning private firms as public trusts, as you argue in the book (Bromley, 2019), sound compelling, but how can we move from ‘here’ to ‘there’?

DWB: I close *Possessive Individualism* with an appeal for the rediscovery of the idea of loyalty – loyalty to neighbours, loyalty to co-workers, loyalty to something beyond the acquisitive self. It is loyalty, as Hirschman pointed out, that keeps us engaged with a variety of essential social activities.

Loyalty is not a trait that can be created and sustained by some “policy.” But there are profound institutional changes – new policies – that can indeed foster greater loyalty. One of them, central to the argument in *Possessive Individualism*, is that the private firm must be reconstituted in a way that forces it to take the interests of workers into account. This is what I mean by the need to convert the private firm into a public trust.

This change will shock some people, but it is made necessary by the realisation that the private firm under contemporary capitalism has shown itself to be insufficiently interested in the well-being of the workers it hires. When

labour can be discarded by the firm – either from moving abroad, going out of business, or automation – its workers are forced out and must look out for themselves. The only thing that allows us to imagine this situation is normal (and therefore “right”) is that it has been the legacy of capitalism since the seventeenth century in Britain. But when looked at on its face, it is barbaric. How are workers to eat without work? It is easy to tell workers to find other lines of work. But if contemporary capitalism is no longer interested in hired labour, and if automation is as imminent as some experts point out, the historic nexus between labour and capital is irreparably broken.

With the private firm reconstituted as a public trust, and thereby obligated to show long-run concern for those it hires, we will begin to see the notion of loyalty emerge once again. Firms will show a real commitment to hired labour and, in return, it is easy to imagine that workers will once again show some measure of loyalty toward their employer. This is what I mean by converting the private firm into a public trust.

O-O: You have previously said that journals set new agendas, they validate the standards for developing those agendas, and confer authority on the prophets of such agendas. At the same time, they need to balance academic respectability with being widely interesting (Bromley, 2008). It has been more than 10 years since you made these observations. Do you see still see a role for journals or has this changed?

DWB: I think these observations still apply. Journals are vexing for all of us. I have had “wonderful” papers rejected by various journals. On reflection, I realised that my special little creation was less wonderful than I originally thought. Academic work invigorates and humbles us. During my long tenure (44 years) as a journal editor, the most frequent letter I received was from authors thanking us for making their paper better than it was upon original submission. Such recognition of forced reconsideration and revision remains the *raison d’être* for peer review of papers. And peer review is what legitimises the social enterprise of scholarship.

The agenda-setting aspect of journals remains central to the advancement of shared stories about our world. As I look back over the fifty years since receiving my Ph.D., publishing trends, fads, and themes have evolved – both capturing the tenor of the times, and often anticipating new themes and imperatives. I am no fan of standard “mainstream” economics, but any fair reading of the journal literature continues to inspire me and reassure me that young economists coming along will bravely engage any and all economic challenges they see

in front of them. The encouraging thing about young scholars is that there is intense pressure for them to find a niche – to make a name for themselves. And it is important to note that professional acclaim will always arise from those who managed to show the established folks a new way to think about a problem. Remember it is the old guard that will always be most invested in protecting what they produced and defended throughout their career. The old do not easily change their mind. The German physicist Max Planck wrote that: “An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out, and that the growing generation is familiarised with the ideas from the beginning: another instance of the fact that the future lies with the youth [Planck, 1949, p.22].” I like to paraphrase Planck by noting that science progresses academic funeral by academic funeral. Newcomers to a discipline have scant incentive to defend the status quo, and very strong incentives to create a new status quo. Science marches on.

O-O: How do editors deal with non-response to invitations encouraging economists to be both elegant and relevant or, just, relevant? When you edited Land Economics, you faced this issue when you invited ‘speculations’ (Bromley, 2008, pp. 37-38). You seem to have dealt with it by pursuing your own broader interests, while keeping the flagpole for narrow research, leading some to claim that ‘Dan Bromley is more progressive than the journal he edits’. That seems to contradict the idea that one should use one’s influence to advance one’s beliefs.

DWB: I introduced the idea of “Speculations” because I worried that there were promising ideas floating around out there that were unable to see the light of day. Or, perhaps they were not ready for a full-blown journal article. I believe the rules were that the contribution should be brief (10 pages) without mathematics or econometric pyrotechnics – just share some interesting ideas with our readers. There were a few submissions, and I edited them lightly. None was ever rejected. But interest dropped off. Sadly, in my eyes, there was no demand for such an opportunity. Or, more probably, individuals were so pressed with other obligations that there was little time to pursue such thoughts. I hope this was not the case. But that little section of *Land Economics* disappeared for lack of submissions.

Editing a journal is a public trust – there is that idea again. I do not believe any editor should use her/his obligation as a steward of an epistemic community to advance her/his own idiosyncratic notion of truth. There are other outlets for that attempt at “influence.” An editor’s only job is to facilitate honest reason

giving. Journals are concerned with giving authors an opportunity “to bring others to their side.” That is their sole purpose. Academic journals are not for the purpose of bringing others to the side of the editor.

Having said that, it is essential to notice that some aspects of scholarship can get stuck in self-referential “shadow boxing” and can gradually become of little relevance to the larger epistemic community. This tendency can also drag the discussion in obscure directions. Journal editors are, therefore, justified in watching out for the general structure of the conversation they are responsible for curating. In the extreme, new journals emerge out of a growing sense that existing outlets (journals) have failed to capture and present the essence of pressing problems. I suspect that this explains the frustrations felt by Professor Imhotep Alagidede when he undertook the founding of this journal (Obeng-Odoom *et al.*, 2019).

As you note, I find the metaphor of a flagpole quite useful. Journals exist to give scholars a chance to try out their ideas on the rest of us. Journals are the “flagpoles” up which those ideas can be run. Some of those ideas will be ignored and quickly forgotten. Some of those ideas will receive widespread accolades. That is the purpose of academic journals.

O-O: What about Teachers in African universities: what could economics teachers do, given the sharp disconnect between economics that matter and economics that is published? How might the existing incentive structure, which rewards elegant, but not necessarily essential work?

DWB: The dilemma we face is that “economics that is published” today usually becomes the “economics that matters” tomorrow. It is generally difficult to be sure today what will “matter” tomorrow.

I think the proposition also assumes that all “published” economics is not pertinent. The role of a teacher, whether in Africa or elsewhere, is to make sure that the enormous and rich literature in economics is discovered, placed into a “practical” context, and then presented to students in a way that both inspires and informs. A teacher is under no obligation to expose a body of literature that is inaccessible and generally irrelevant to students. For works that are central to the purpose of the classroom, it may well be that a few seminal and canonical works must be presented in a manner that students can be exposed to the essential message without having to stumble through difficult (and advanced-level) material. Teachers are not mere delivery mechanisms. We must also be collectors, synthesizers, interpreters, curators, and coaches.

Biographical notes

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is Associate Professor of Sustainability Science with Development Studies and the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science, both at the University of Helsinki in Finland. He is the author of *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and the Editor-in-Chief of *African Review of Economics and Finance*.

Daniel W. Bromley is the Anderson-Bascom professor of applied economics (Emeritus), at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. He is an authority on institutional economics. He is the author, most recently, of *Possessive Individualism* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Acknowledgements

We thank Imhotep P. Alagidede for helpful feedback. Thanks also to Jones Mensah and Ferdi Botha for encouraging the production and publication of this interview essay.

References

- Bromley, D. W. (1991). *Environment and Economy: Property Rights and Public Policy*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bromley, D. W. B. (2006). *Sufficient Reason: Volitional Pragmatism and the Meaning of Economic Institutions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bromley, D. W. (2008). 'Epistemic Flagpoles: Economics Journals as Instrumental Rhetoric'. *The American Economist*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 33-41.
- Bromley, D. W. (2009). 'Formalising Property Relations in the Developing World: The Wrong Prescription for the Wrong Malady'. *Land Use Policy*, 26(1):20-27.
- Bromley, D. W. and Glen, D. A. (2012). *Vulnerable People, Vulnerable States: Redefining the Development Challenge*, London: Routledge.
- Bromley, D. W. (2016). 'Institutional Economics'. *Journal of Economic Issues*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 309-325.
- Bromley, D. W. (2019). *Possess Individualism: A Crisis of Capitalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Commons J.R. (1924). *Legal foundations of capitalism*. The Macmillan Company, New York.

- Commons, J. R. (1931). 'Institutional Economics'. *American Economic Review*, vol. 21, December, pp. 648-57.
- Ely, R.T. (1914). *Property and Contract in their Relations to The Distribution of Wealth*, Macmillan and Co., Limited, London.
- Ely, R.T. (1925). 'Research in land and public utility economics'. *The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-6.
- Ely, R.T. (1930). 'Land planning and education'. *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 10-13.
- Hiedanpää, J. and Bromley, D.W. (2016). *Environmental Heresies: The Quest for Reasonable*, London: Macmillan.
- Hirschman, A. (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hodgson, G.M. (2014). 'On fuzzy frontiers and fragmented foundations: some reflections on the original and new institutional economics'. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, Volume 10, Issue 4, pp. 591-611.
- Nagel, T. (1986). *The View from Nowhere*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Obeng-Odoom, F. (2018). 'Critique of Development Economics'. *The Japanese Political Economy*, vol. 44, issue 1-4, pp. 59-81.
- Obeng-Odoom, F., Mensah, J.O., Botha, F. (2019). 'African Review of Economics and Finance: Past, Present, and Future'. *African Review of Economics and Finance*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 3-18.
- Planck, Max (1949). *Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie. Mit einem Bildnis und der von Max von Laue gehaltenen Traueransprache*. Johann Ambrosius Barth Verlag (Leipzig 1948), p. 22, in *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*, as translated by F. Gaynor, pp. 33-34.