

# Landed Resources, Property Rights, and Development in Africa: An Editorial Introduction

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*Landed resources, property rights, and development in Africa have always been the focus of much heated debates in geography and political economy more widely, but these controversies have become even more pressing now. This editorial introduction contextualises and sets the tone for Volume 37 of Geography Research Forum, which is a special issue that reconsiders these age-old debates. Specifically, this introduction provides the background to this special issue, clarifies which gaps the issue seeks to fill and how it has sought to do so, and emphasises the highlights of the special issue.*

*Key Words: Land, Property, Africa, Development, Political Economy*

## BACKGROUND

Geographers, especially those of a political economy orientation, have long argued that one of the most effective ways to dominate a people is to control how they think about their landed property (see, for example, Yiftachel, 2012; Meir and Karplus, 2017). Historically, the way to doing so has been to devalue Indigenous systems of thinking as backward or superstitious, strategically value the systems of the oppressor as 'science', and violently impose the latter on the former.

In the Malthusian Population Theory, for example, Rev. Thomas Malthus – a British man, claimed that the Irish were impoverished because of their population explosion; not because of British appropriation of Irish land, which was what the Irish contended to be at the root of their social problems and the gateway to understand the population problem itself (Remoff, 2016). Similarly, David Ricardo – another British man – used hypothetical numbers to try to 'prove' that Britain and Portugal would equally benefit from free trade in the Theory of Comparative Advantage when, in fact, Portugal an unequal trading partner to Great Britain, was

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being forced to sell off its assets, exploit Portuguese workers, and compel Black slaves to produce enough wine for merrymaking in imperial Britain (Watson, 2017). A third example is the GDP and its related theories of growth. American in origin, they were specifically created to enable the United States win its ideological wars over the Soviet Union and its allies, while devaluing the systems of measurement and growth used by Soviet economists (Fioramonti, 2015). These growth theories would later be used by a growth coalition led by landlords to dispossess people who were apparently not contributing to growth. To this day, the 'growth machine' sucks in land and spits out its so-called 'unproductive' owners 'who are mostly vulnerable' populations such as women of colour, people of minority faith, and generally people in the lower stratum of society (Molotch, 1976; Cox, 2017).

In all these cases, a dominant framework is violently imposed to control how people think about social problems and offer a new grammar to hide unequal property relations. In this process, the ideology of self-interest that drives the strategy is often hidden behind a pseudo 'science' image. So, in the labour 'theory' of property where John Locke – an avid slaver – proposed that Indigenous people should lose their land if they did not put it to the highest and best use and that others with better technology were allowed to dispossess the people on the land without technology, he was living this hypocrisy (Lea, 2008). But one need not establish raw self-interest to tear apart bogus theories: demonstrating major historical, contemporary, empirical, and analytical flaws is reasonable basis to call theories into question and theorise anew. So, Garrett Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' led to the transfer of land to private interests even though Hardin apparently was not a self-interested theorist. Hardin was later to apologise for empirical mistakes and Elinor Ostrom would try to provide additional empirical evidence leading to the conclusion that Hardin erred on empirical grounds. Yet, the framework for thinking, now established, has informed much transfer of land from common people to elites (Cobb, 2016).

From this perspective, empirical challenge is useful, but it is even more powerful to (a) challenge dominant modes of thought (b) utilise empirical evidence to challenge dominant voices, (c) transcend existing modes of thought by developing alternative ways to think, and (d) because dominant ideas are supported by dominant material interests, mobilise social action to support one's progressive courses. As a political economist with strong interest in geography, I have been trying to pursue these lines of analysis and action myself. My geographical focus has often been Africa – where the most violent forms of domination has prevailed, but I have tried to violate the myth that the African condition can best be understood in its own terms rather than in relation to the rest of the world. My research on the political economy of natural resources resulted in the publication of the book, *Oiling the Urban Economy: Land, Labour, Capital, and the State in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana* (Obeng-Odoom, 2014a) around which this special issue is based.

When the book was first published, the editors of *Urban Challenge* generously asked me to reflect on the book and bring its key message to the readers of the jour-

nal. I did so with gratitude but also trepidation (Obeng-Odoom, 2014b) as I struggled to be simultaneously measured and excited at my good fortune. Since then, the book has been reviewed at least ten times around the world, in diverse disciplines, and through various outlets: the *Journal of Australian Political Economy* (vol. 74, pp. 143-145), *African Review of Economics and Finance* (vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 132-136), the *Extractive Industries and Society* (Volume 2, Issue 3, August 2015, pp. 603-604), *UrbanAfrica.net* <http://www.urbanafrika.net/review/review-oiling-the-urban-economy-land-labour-capital-and-the-state-in-sekondi-takoradi-ghana/>, *African and Asian Studies* (2015, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 227-236), *Africa* (2015, vol. 85, no. 3, pp. 559-560), *Africa Spectrum* (2015, vol. 50, no.2 , pp. 143-145), *Review of Radical Political Economics* (2015, DOI: 10.1177/0486613415603165); *Australasian Review of African Studies* (vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 132-134); *Heterodox Economics Newsletter*, Issue 190 December 28, 2015, and in this journal (2016, vol. 36 pp. 167-169).

How should we judge this post-publication reaction to *Oiling the Urban Economy*? According to one Book Review Editor of a major journal, 'Usually very popular books get 5 to 10 reviews, no more. But that's an exception. In between two and four it's the norm' (email correspondence July 25, 2017). *Oiling the Urban Economy* may be 'popular', but, of course, it is also important to look at the content of the reviews. Of the ten reviews, only two [*African and Asian Studies* (2015, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 227-236) and *Africa Spectrum* (2015, vol. 50, no.2, pp. 143-145)] offered a defence of the orthodoxy, which they contended is capable of doing everything the book set out to do. In showing appreciation to S.K. Andoh for his detailed (ten pages) review in *African and Asian Studies*, especially because his review contains detailed helpful suggestions for improvement, I must also observe that his defence of the orthodoxy is ideological. As he notes himself 'I am a neo-classical economist and deeply entrenched in the ability of the market to right wrongs' (p. 234)...In the end, what is happening in Sekondi-Takoradi can be explained by familiar economic concepts, not a new theoretical model' (p.235).

Clearly, I was not successful in conveying to Andoh the importance and distinctiveness of research and policy inspired by a blend of Marxist, Georgist, and institutionalist political economy. Fortunately, while pointing to areas for further development, the overwhelming majority of eight (compared to the two dissenters) reviewers commended both the empirical and analytical breakthrough of the book. These eight reviewers include Chibuzo Nwoke, author of the prescient book: *Third World Minerals and Global Pricing: A New Theory* (1987), Deborah Bryce son, co-author of the book *Mining and Social Transformation in Africa Mineralizing and Democratizing Trends in Artisanal Production* (2014), Paul W.K.Yankson, co-author of the first *Ghana National Urban Policy* (2012), and, in this journal, by Haim Yacobi, author of the book, *Israel and Africa: A Genealogy of Moral Geography* (2015). *Oiling the Urban Economy* was listed in the 'Books You Should Read' list (issue 6, December, 2014, p. 25) published by eco-instigator: *The Publication of the*

*Health of Mother Earth Foundation* and the book has been the primary reference text for research in this genre.

It was on these bases that this special issue was invited. In his invitation dated January 1, 2015, the editor of this journal – Avinoam Meir wrote ‘...the broader subject of your book has triggered my imagination and brings me to asking whether you ... would be willing to become a guest editor of a special issue’. Thus this special issue was born.

## GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE

The editor of this journal generously allowed me to interpret the ‘broader subject’ of the book as (a) the reactions to the book (b) the research project of which the book was a part and (c) research on land in the wider intellectual environment.

Research on oil in Ghana has grown. Since publishing *Oiling the Urban Economy*, many other studies have been published (for an extensive review, see Obeng-Odoom, 2015a). The books include Kwamina Panford’s (2017) *Africa’s Natural Resources and Underdevelopment: How Ghana’s Petroleum Can Create Sustainable Economic Prosperity* (reviewed in this issue) and another book published this year: *In Pursuit of Jubilee: A True Story of the First Major Oil Discovery in Ghana* by G.Y. Owusu (with M. Rutledge McCall). The studies on oil cities have been relatively few. Most of such studies affirm what we know (Oteng-Ababio, 2016; Yankson et al., 2017) and hence suggest that the issues in the book are of continuing importance. The rest of the studies suggest that new lines of analysis are required, including probing the role of transnational corporations in urban, regional, national, and continental development (Obeng-Odoom, 2015a, 2017a, b).

*Oiling the Urban Economy* was part of the bigger research project called ‘African Land Rights or Land Rights in Africa? A Study of ‘Land Rights’ in Development Discourse (2012 -2016). Funded by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) under the UTS Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (UTSCPDRF), and the project was under the distinguished supervision and mentorship of Spike Boydell. As the primary investigator, I was simply interested in seeking to answer ‘the land question’ in Africa’s development (Sjaastad and Cousins, 2009). The desirability of secure land tenure for human development is settled (Kerekes and Williamson, 2010). However, *how* to bring about secure tenure that is sensitive to gender relations has remained elusive. Is there such a thing as ‘African land rights’ or it is rather ‘land rights in Africa’?

Two views are prevalent. On the one hand, some sociologists and anthropologists endorse the former, arguing that there is such a thing as pristine African land rights (see, for example, Katz, 2000). On the other hand, most neoclassical economists prefer individualised property rights systems and hence endorse a general modern, non-Indigenous notion of land rights (see, for example, De Soto, 2000). Both

‘schools of thought’ argue that their distinctive stance is *the* way to ‘develop’ Africa through land rights. So influential have these viewpoints been that most African countries have ‘reformed’ their land tenure systems to reflect the prescription of one or the other school (Abdulai, 2006).

Although longstanding, this issue obtained renewed interest in the light of the 2008 economic crisis. Investment in African land has been dramatized as a stabilisation of the world system. The extensive literature on ‘land grabbing’ (for a review, see Obeng-Odoom, 2013a) captures the mood. However, restricting a study of Africa’s land economy and land resources to so-called post 2008 land grabbing or ‘land grabbing’ in historical context can only be a first, not a final, step. As Spike Boydell argued throughout his career, at the root of such controversies is the highly contested notion of property rights (Boydell et al., 2007), but most papers on land grab have little or nothing to say about property rights, most ‘experts’ on land grab have done no background research on land at all, they say nothing about ‘rent’, do not appeal to key theoretical debates about Polanyi, Marx, George or anything (Obeng-Odoom, 2015b). One way to analyse the fast growing body of proposals is simply to compare diverse land regimes to see their real world experiences, but even that simple analysis is rare (Elhardary and Obeng-Odoom, 2012), while alternative models of organising food is seen as separate from land grab research (Obeng-Odoom, 2013b). In other words, the existing body of research simply considers land grab as something that is just happening, something new, or something exceptional (Amanor, 2017) – without appealing to the bigger debates about how to make land rights conducive to Africa’s economic development, in what ways particular natural resources can improve the energy, food, sustainability, and development experiences in Africa, and how policy/market structures predicated on certain mainstream theories and designed to help avoid certain mishaps (e.g., ‘resource curse’, ‘corruption’, and neopatrimonialism) creates major contradictions in African society, economy, and environment. In other words, while there is a giant statue of research on land, its foundations are brittle, and the future of the structure is quite bleak.

### **THIS SPECIAL ISSUE: FILLING THE GAPS**

The seven articles that make up this issue seek to address these gaps. They do so by pulling together literatures in economics, geography, political economy, and development studies. The opening theme of resource appropriation is made up of two articles. Manase Chinewese’s contribution is original in three respects. First, it shows that land grab can better be understood as part of rather than apart from the long history of land contestations in Africa. This historical research approach shows the fallacies in the quest to look for what is ‘new’ in contemporary land grabs. We cannot understand land grabs as a stand-alone phenomenon. Rather, it is to be seen as part of the long transformation of land rights in Africa. This methodological

approach is distinct from the mainstream orientation of Klaus Deininger and the World Bank. But it is also distinct from some left wing arguments that contemporary land grabs are just another form of colonialism. Indeed, as Chiweshe's second contribution helps us to see, in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's land reform was not just about taking land from White farms and giving them back to Black farmers. Instead, the 'reform' took land from few Whites to even fewer Black business elites who appear to have underutilised the land, indeed simply held it perhaps for hoarding purposes to benefit from rent, creating a new Black rentier class. So, both the radicalism of Mugabe and the 'failure' of the Zimbabwe case must be understood in context. Third, 'security of tenure' does not just mean holding title because, in Zimbabwe, Black farmers as a race and a class suffer structural insecurity of tenure regardless of title certificate while, paradoxically, White farmers with title certificate appear to enjoy security of tenure. Here, Chiweshe shows the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the land grab case, moving beyond the emphasis on class in outlets such as *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

The next paper by Fenda Akiwumi analyses the contradictions between the support for externally-driven land-based development agendas and the rhetoric of a culturally-sensitive approach to development often mentioned in official national and African-Union-wide speak. Rejecting the new institutional economics framework in which land is seen merely as commodity, Akiwumi adopts a broader postcolonial approach whose features are more germane to old institutional economics but transcends it because of its (i) particular emphasis on Indigenous systems of knowledge and practices (ii) rejection of the eugenics found in some work in old institutionalism, and (iii) focus on the dynamic relationship between the South and the North as equals. However there are also many overlaps between Akiwumi's approach and the theoretical perspectives of old institutional economics such as the embrace of *Bien vivir* as a vision over GDP, the consideration of land as more complex than commodity, and the utilisation of more transdisciplinary perspectives.

Akiwumi's paper shows major contradictions in land policy in Africa. The *Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa: A Framework to Strengthen Land Rights, Enhance Productivity and Secure Livelihoods* (African Union [AU], 2010) exalt a deeper cultural view of 'land' as the most conducive for Africa in contrast to the Eurocentric commodity view of land by the FAO and World Bank guidelines. However, the AU itself and the Sierra Leonean state are also signatories to and advocates of other resource-based capitalist programs.

Using Sierra Leone as case study, Akiwumi looks at different land contracts, ranging from ones in which transnational corporations (TNCs) deal directly with local communities and to those contracts in which the relationship is mediated by the state. Either way, the study shows that the Lockean view that land must be commodified for social progress is not borne out by the Sierra Leonean experience. Akiwumi shows that the process is fraught with conflicts over dispossession, exploitation, and exclusion at the hands of large transnational corporations. The dynamics

differ depending on contract type, but they are ultimately conflictual. Contrary to claims by new institutional economists that such new modes of governance entail less transaction costs, the transition to and maintenance of these governance modes entail substantial transaction costs, sometimes for nothing because as in the case of Sierra Leone, the TNCs finally pack up and leave realising the cost of conflict to be prohibitive. According to Akiwumi, the original stranger-landlord framework, in which strangers became embedded within existing communities for their own well-being while supporting the well being of Indigenes, has long served the needs of Africans (for example, by bringing fresh labour and ideas while supporting the strangers with land, implements, and ideas) and hence there is no need to seek new modes of resource governance, only a need to adapt the people's-based stranger-landlord framework to new conditions.

The next paper focuses on oil cities. Raphael Fiave's focus is on the 'hard impacts of oil' in various visible forms such as the expansion of the port facilities in the Sekondi-Takoradi city in Ghana, West Africa, the rapid development of commercial real estate, including a much discussed mall and in what ways the city authorities can cope with the rapid transformation. Further, he clarifies the complicated picture of how are city authorities to regulate the activities of transnational corporations, if they continue to fund the programs and plans of urban planners. The voice of capital is so commanding that, although planners have grave concerns about where the proposed sixty five million-dollar Takoradi Mall is to be sited, the demolition of structures occupied by over two thousand people, and the uneven development of the city, it is capital that determines what path it prefers. Parking is now a major issue in a way that raises the question of why the public must socialise private benefits. It is not, however, accurate to regard the transformation as merely negative. For instance, while the Takoradi Port now handles three times more vessels than it used to in 2003 and hence it is likely to obtain more revenues, at its expansionist phase now 'it is estimated that hundreds of people have so far lost their means of livelihood since the expansion works at the port started'. Recognising the failings of a free market model for urban development, Fiave puts the case for critical planning. Here, the better use of urban land, the greater use of fiscal powers by the state, and a more faithful commitment to existing plans already designed for a liveable Sekondi-Takoradi can help, although these ideals are quite distant from current urban planning realities.

The next two papers are on coal, another member of the fossil family. For Chris Motengwe and Paul Alagidede, it is crucially important to establish the nexus between coal consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, and economic growth in South Africa. The focus on South Africa is particularly useful given that it is a major world producer of coal. The use of a Cobb-Douglas type production function to work out the impact of energy use on economic growth appears appropriate and the finding that more growth entails the burning of more coal is expected. The contention that because more economic growth brings about a kind of Galbraithian leisure class

whose lifestyle necessitates even more energy consumption and hence more emissions seriously questions the call by ecological modernisation advocates for green technology. Suggesting that such green technology is supply-side policy, the paper points to demand-side dynamics that are unlikely to tame the 'leisure class' and its rapacious appetite for energy consumption. Totally neglecting environmental economics' standard tool kit of demand management such as the implementation of eco taxes and cap and trade instruments, the paper instead looks at alternative energy. Whether the important findings in the paper should lead to the promotion of even more growth albeit with greener alternative energy inputs is controversial.

In his time, William Stanley Jevons addressed this controversy in his famous book, *The Coal Question* (1906), the focus of Obeng-Odoom's analysis in the next article. Starting on the premise that much of the debate about coal in Africa is weakly conceptualised, this paper seeks to make *analytical contribution* to the coal question. Its point of departure is W.S.Jevons' book *The Coal Question*. Apart from the idea of a 'Jevons Paradox' which many scholars mention without having carefully studied its original meaning in Jevons' important oeuvre, Jevons' insights have been lost. As a towering figure in the development of neoclassical economics, political economists shun Jevons' company and while neoclassicals look at Jevons more favourably, he is – apart from his paradox – shunted to the dustbin of 'historical figures' in the discipline. Yet, as Obeng-Odoom's paper shows, Jevons offered to mineral economists a most prescient magnum opus combining a detailed exploration of alternatives to coal both in the form of green technology and natural resources such as wind, water, and sunlight. As Obeng-Odoom shows, Jevons dismissed all these alternatives as inadequate.

Jevons' framework was also inadequate, especially because it neglected property rights. *The Coal Question* must be revised and the antinomies of 'no coal' and 'more coal' rejected, according to Obeng-Odoom, who prefers, instead, that the focus be put on particular social relations, especially property relations. His justification is that the monopolistic structures that result from such institutional arrangements trump the no-more coal debate. The problems of coal, the article shows, arise not so much from the resource but from how it is developed, managed, and controlled. Where transnational property classes dominate the mining of coal for profit-making purposes, we should expect that more coal will be dug and spit out. When coal is governed as a commons, however, the focus is not on more but on harmonious use of the resource for the commune.

But how can we move from 'here' to 'there', from current conditions to the ideal? The court in Africa has emerged as a powerful institution. In both Ghana and Kenya, the court has been asked to annul the election of the incumbent and in both countries politicians have heeded the pronouncement of the courts. But can the courts play a similar role in land governance, if so how and if not why not? Franklin Obeng-Odoom and Ransford Gyampo attempt to answer these questions. In doing so, they build an original institutional economics model, populated with data from



court cases, and results from Afrobarometer surveys. The paper finds that, although it is possible for the courts to transform property relations, especially when private property appears to be failing its supposed role as a social trust, this role of the courts is far from assured. The paper shows that existing approaches to contesting land grabs – centred on popular protests, international guidelines and national laws from the executive and the legislature are incomplete without the courts, but several factors constrain what the courts can do, notably how well cases are presented, the orientation of judges, the resources of plaintiffs and, most fundamentally, the content of the legal rules shaped by both colonial and neoliberal forces. These empirical findings raise the issue of how best to frame the complexities of landed resources and, crucially, how Africans themselves have radically theorised the issues.

This Liberation in Radical African Thought is the focus of the last article. Joe Collins reflects on the contribution of C.N. Nwoke, pointing to three particular insights. First, Collins shows how Chibuzo Nnate Nwoke's work can lead to a critique of mainstream ideas on rent. Second, he contextualises and better explains a superior methodology offered by Nwoke. Third, he shows how Nwoke's ideas can be applied to the current issues of land grab, oil cities, and energy/sustainability. Collins' article shows how Nwoke's original thought received the prompt and undivided endorsement of Immanuel Wallerstein, who stressed the wider context of Nwoke's work for world systems theory while clarifying the intellectual environment and political context within which Nwoke developed his important contribution to political economy. Based on Nwoke's work, Collins demonstrates fundamental failings in the mainstream economics theories of rent. First rent is seen simply as a payment for a factor of production.

## TOWARDS THE FUTURE

As this special issue has shown, the alliance between geographers and others can help to shed light on the tensions and contradictions in the world in which we live. Rent analysis, the Indigenous stranger-landlord frameworks, and the ecological limit to growth frameworks developed in this issue all help to radically move how we think forward, but other approaches can be further developed and illustrations improved. Clearly, the historicity of the papers is good, but we need to go beyond colonialism to look at slavery itself and how the former provided a model for the latter. It is towards this course that my forthcoming book, *The Myth of Private Property* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto), is committed.

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