

# BOOK REVIEW

**Franklin Obeng-Odoom. *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xiii + 364. Figures. Tables. Index. \$32.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781108709996.

*Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* by Franklin Obeng-Odoom is about inequality within Africa as well as the inequalities that exist between the countries of this continent and other parts of the world, especially in relation to the Global North. These are subjects that have been explored by other scholars, but the originality of Obeng-Odoom's research is his analyses of inequality in relation to property and wealth distribution by institutions. Obeng-Odoom is highly critical of some previous analytical methods based on economics, so his concentration on property—particularly land—over financial capital is a significant insight. He also criticizes the fact that development economics measured by GDP ignores some structural inequalities. According to Obeng-Odoom, “[i]nequality drives social conflict, reduces happiness, and contributes substantially to both crime and grime” (77).

Obeng-Odoom's scholarship also makes a significant contribution to the understanding of socio-economic stratification in Africa. He uses an abundance of sources to demonstrate his findings, including historical research, survey data, and illustrative case studies. One shortcoming is Obeng-Odoom's criticisms of Hernando de Soto's view of property, because of the rational and individualistic models that ignore considerations of political economy, particularly where formalizing land ownership is said to have done greater harm than good. While there have been issues with allowing transnational firms to have more control over natural resources, greater empirical evidence through economic data supporting Obeng-Odoom's critique of securing private property rights in general as bad for development is needed. This is necessary in order to counter the recent body of research on development economics, which argues that secured property rights are beneficial.

Obeng-Odoom organizes the book into three parts: (I) The Problem, (II) Problematic Explanations and Solutions, and (III) Alternatives. “Part I: The Problem” begins with an Introduction, where Obeng-Odoom contextualizes the current situation on how the Global South is compartmentalized in


the world, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa (raising the question “Why Development Economics Fails Africa?”). This is followed by the first chapter, on “The Foundations For a New Beginning,” which also presents the subsequent organizational breakdown of the remaining parts of this book. The overarching thesis that Obeng-Odoom seeks to address is, what are “the appropriate paradigm[s] for studying African political economy”? (62). This is an important topic, though its location so far into the book buries this objective perhaps too deeply into the narrative. Obeng-Odoom also investigates the reasons for the inadequacy of different kinds of capital (human, physical, and natural); societal characteristics; and the reasons for non-Western formalized property rights in Africa, among other issues that characterize economies in African countries.

“Part II: Problematic Explanations” is the largest section, consisting of Chapters Two through Six. This section examines, in order, “Property Economics,” “Land Reform,” “Human Capital,” “International Trade,” and “Economic Growth,” which Obeng-Odoom describes as “emphasizing the central theme” of his book. He states that “the existing explanations of the African condition are fallacious, and their resulting posited solutions are misleading or create even more problems” (61). These chapters critically review the current reasons for Africa’s “backwardness” (a term that others have applied, and that Obeng-Odoom rightly addresses) and the numerous explanations that scholars and politicians have suggested for uplifting the economies of the countries in Africa from the lower realms of global material wealth stratification. Obeng-Odoom also identifies at the end of this section that while Africa is being “pushed into a growth egress and its economies may be said to be doing really well” (215), this success will not benefit everyone, not even the majority of people in African countries, because the inhabitants, environment, and the relationship between people and ecology are being harmed by exploitive economic practices

“Part III: Alternatives” is the third and final section, with Chapter Seven on “Socialisms,” Chapter Eight on “Africanisms,” and then a conclusion on the “Groundwork for a New Political Economy of the Global South.” Much of the material in this section focuses on political alternatives that have been previously suggested to address the problems of economic underdevelopment in African countries, though the author expounds upon the shortcomings that have limited such alternatives. Obeng-Odoom closes his argument “against the preference for an Indigenous economics that idealizes culture as panacea and other revisionist proposals of today” and recommends that “the emergent field of stratification economics, led by black political economists, has been shown to be a more fruitful alternative. This field can better engage the concept of rent, better engage institutional economics, and better engage Georgist [i.e., Henry George] land economics....” (293). The problem with an extreme approach such as Obeng-Odoom’s position on the use of stratification economics is that one could end up completely overlooking human decisions that are influenced by social and cultural influences, especially at the micro or local level, which ignores how people have

free will and can make “irrational” choices from the perspective of economic-based logic.

*Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* is an important book for policymakers, economists, and researchers who are interested in improving their understandings on the intersections of economic development and inequality in the Global South and how this relates to social and wealth stratification in African countries. Obeng-Odoom offers very well-written and original ideas, as well as examinations that renew the study of economic and social inequality in African countries and the relationship of these countries with the Global North.

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