

# Resources, Institutions, and Political-Economic Processes: Beyond Allegory and Allegation

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For those who believe that economics is a social science, an article in *The Economist* ("The Cambridge Tendency," 1988) on recent trends in this discipline, illustrated through brief intellectual biographies of eight of the "best young economists" in the United States, contains guardedly optimistic news. The "New Classical" (or "rational expectations") school, whose "abstruse virtuosity . . . appeal[s] to students who enjoy difficulty for its own sake" (1988:92), has begun to give way to a variety of approaches focused on market failure and its policy implications. Nevertheless, it is telling that none of *The Economist's* eight young virtuosos works in either resource or development economics, the major areas of expertise of Simon and Bromley whose position papers on the Robinson Crusoe allegory follow in this issue. This speaks to the marginality of these specialties in modern economics. Yet it is also evidence that resource and development economics have managed to avoid the sterile cleverness of the parent discipline during the early and mid-1980s. These two fields—in which social processes, market failure, and state intervention tend more often than in more mainstream areas of economics to be treated endogenously rather than as annoying epiphenomena—remain particularly ripe for interdisciplinary social science dialogue and mutual intellectual innovation.

The disagreements between Simon and Bromley—over what is a resource, the finiteness of resources, the nature of technological innovation and change, the role of population in economic development and change and ecological degradation, the Crusoean allegory, and other matters—are genuine and unambiguous, and have major implications for several social science disciplines. Yet longstanding readers of *Social Science Quarterly* will recognize that many of the matters at issue in Simon's and Bromley's papers are by no means new (see, for example, Dunlap's [1983] overview of earlier incarnations of this debate, between Simon and Paul Ehrlich among others). What, then, is new, and relevant to the development of the social sciences?

At one level, this most recent version of the "resource debates" has moved to a greater degree of specificity on the assimilative capacity of the global en-

vironment as the court of final appeal in adjudicating the debate over the finiteness of environmental resources. Likewise, the seemingly elementary matter of what is a resource can be seen through comparison and contrast of Simon and Bromley as a fundamental issue (see also Norgaard [1985] and Martinez-Alier [1987] for especially provocative assessments of neoclassical economics' conceptualization of environmental resources). At another level, the matter of what is new and relevant must go beyond what is explicitly stated—that is, beyond allegory and allegation. In particular, the works of Simon and Bromley, while seemingly exhibiting diametrically opposed positions on a wide range of issues, must also be examined for their commonalities. Two commonalities, which reveal major limitations as well as also important potential convergencies or synergies among the social sciences, strike me as being especially important.

One commonality, though only implicit, has important implications for method. Simon makes a strong case for an evolutionary-historical approach to socioeconomic change, a point which Bromley implicitly accepts (see also Clark and Juma, 1987). As such, both papers should be seen as cautionary tales about the tendencies of the major social sciences to fetishize the present and to ignore the past and the future. A second commonality is one of mutual omission, namely the two authors having given relatively little attention to the role of the state. Simon's argument unfolds with virtually no consideration of the role of the state. Bromley, though he provides several illustrations involving state intervention, tends to reduce the state to an allocator of property rights. "Bringing the state back in" (to borrow the title of the recent Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol [1985] manifesto for political sociology) and international political economy (e.g., Gill and Law, 1988; Krasner, 1985) may be especially promising avenues for pushing forward the economics—as well as sociology and politics—of natural resources and socioeconomic development. Perhaps four or five years hence *Social Science Quarterly* will present its readers with what I hope is a sequel to the "resource debates"—on the state, scarcity, and evolutionary-historical processes. SSQ

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