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Institutional analysis and economic development
policy: notes on the applied agenda of the
Bloomington School
Extending Peter Boettke and Christopher Coyne's
Outline of the Research Program of the Workshop
in Political Theory and Policy Analysis

Paul Dragos Aligica*

Mercatus Center at George Mason University, 3301 N. Fairfax Dr., Ste. 450, Arlington, VA 22201, USA

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Abstract

This paper takes as a starting point Boettke and Coyne's argument and uses it as a vehicle in order to focus on one aspect related to the Bloomington research program that was mentioned but not elaborated by them: the applied theory agenda that this program has been inspiring. Specific concentration is placed on one particular facet of that agenda: the issue of economic development policies.

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* Tel.: +1 703 993 4933; fax: +1 703 993 4935.

E-mail address: daligica@gmu.edu.

In their discussion of the Bloomington research program, Peter Boettke and Christopher Coyne not only offer a very compelling “intellectual archaeology” of the Bloomington School of Institutional Analysis, but also manage to outline in a precise way the main distinctive features of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom’s work. My contribution will take as a starting point Boettke and Coyne’s argument and use it as a vehicle in order to focus on one aspect related to the Bloomington research program that was mentioned but not elaborated by them: the applied theory agenda that this program has been inspiring. My comments will especially concentrate on one particular facet of that agenda: the issue of economic development policies.

There are two main reasons why I consider that the issue of economic development policies deserves a special discussion in the present context. The first is because Elinor and Vincent Ostrom’s contribution to the way development is understood and analyzed today is undoubtedly outstanding. Their work offers a paradigmatic example of the policy relevance of the intellectual tradition so precisely and coherently outlined by Boettke and Coyne in their paper. However, there is a second reason I feel compelled to emphasize this topic, and this reason is somehow special. I am representing in this forum one of the many international, non-American students who over the years were attracted by the lure of the Bloomington Workshop and came to US to study with Lin and Vincent. For most of us, our interest in the Workshop was not merely theoretical or academic. Most of us wanted to apply the ideas and approaches learned at Bloomington to concrete policy problems confronting our (developing or transition) economies and societies. For us, the main fascination with Elinor and Vincent Ostrom’s work came from its extraordinary potential to generate novel and resourceful policy solutions to be applied back in our countries. Our relationship with the Workshop was thus predetermined and shaped by this special concern with economic development policy issues, and I find it natural that today, in this forum, my comments should echo that fact.

If one looks back at the way the economic development discourse has changed in the last 15 years or so, one cannot fail to notice that Elinor and Vincent Ostrom had a central contribution to the paradigm change in development thinking that took place during that period. The turn to an institutionalist approach, the focus on social capital issues, decentralization, local communities and stakeholders’ participation in development and infrastructure projects all reflect a change of perspective that has always had vibrant advocates and promoters in the Bloomington scholars. However important those contributions have been, I would venture to say that all of them are just the first wave that shows the beginning of their influence. More is to come in terms of applied level implications of the Ostroms’ work on institutions and institutional change. Three such specific issue areas are noteworthy in this respect, and the rest of my intervention will outline and briefly discuss each of them.

Boettke and Coyne have mentioned that the notion of “action arenas” and the concern for conceptually capturing and operationalizing the “situational logic” and the consequences of the actions shaped by it permeate deeply the work of the Bloomington scholars. Their approach tries to combine conceptual simplicity with empirical realism in capturing the normative, cognitive and institutional patterns defining the actors’ decision-making in concrete “action arenas”: rules of the game, incentive systems, knowledge and information, routines, customs and so on, but their efforts go beyond a mere list of additional elements or variables to be taken into account beyond those typically considered by the standard models.

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