

INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD WANTCHEKON, PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “The area I grew up in had three main characteristics that have helped shape my future career and research agenda. First, my community had a Catholic school built in it in 1895, and so education has always been highly valued. Second, my community was a multi-cultural place made up of migrants ..., which made it a relatively open-minded village. Third, I was lucky to derive high aspirations and ambitions from my uncle and from my parents that drove me ... to engage in political activism.”
- “I have always been passionate about history and its role in our current lives... Benin has an incredibly fascinating history of the ‘Amazons’ – also called the ‘female warriors’... They comprised of around one-third of the whole army... We are in the process of ... creat[ing] a museum dedicated to them.”

You are a Professor of Economics at Princeton University. Could you tell us a bit about the University?

Teaching in a university like Princeton is a great pleasure and real privilege. It is one of the top 3 or 5 schools in the country with very strong programs in Sciences, Engineering, and Humanities. Princeton provides a very stimulating research environment and has been really supportive of my academic as well as institutional building projects in Africa. On a personal level, I greatly enjoy working with the top-caliber colleagues from the Departments of Politics and Economics as well as the School of International Affairs here at Princeton.

What is your main area of research and what do you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

My fields are political economy, economic history, and development economics. I have conducted a wide range of studies on political institutions and governance, using field experiments.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Leonard Wantchekon, Professor at Princeton University, talks about his teaching and research. This interview is part of a series on Catholic economists in partnership with the Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO).

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Currently, I use the methodology of institutional experiments to study candidate selection in local elections, bureaucratic governance, and the politics of education policies.

In economic history, I study the long-term effects of historical events in a nascent field called “cultural economics.” For instance, I collaborated with Nathan Nunn at Harvard on a paper called “Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa” (AER, 2011) where we discovered a strong link between current differences in trust levels within Africa to the transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trade. Similarly, in another paper I wrote with Omar Garcia Ponce called “Critical Junctures” we found that levels of democracy in post-Cold War Africa can be traced back to the nature of its anti-colonial independence movements.

More recently, I have been employing a novel approach to study the effect of education on social mobility using historical micro-data from the first regional schools in late-19th century and early-20th century Benin. This new approach has proven to be very promising and I am currently applying it to study the social history of the origins of gender norms to the demand for education and to ethnic/racial inequalities in Africa and the US.

As you can tell, my research spans a wide array of fields! With regards to why I chose them, I would say it is the result of a number of factors. Some of my interests stem from my experiences growing up in Benin. The area I grew up in had three main characteristics that have helped shape my future career and research agenda. First, my community had a Catholic school built in it in 1895, and so education has always been highly valued. Second, my community was a multi-cultural place made up of migrants from throughout Benin, from Togo, and from elsewhere, which made it a relatively open-minded village. Third, I was lucky to derive high aspirations and ambitions from my uncle and from my parents that drove me to not only do well in school, but to engage in political activism from a young age. In addition to these values around education, open-mindedness, and political engagement, my research has always been informed by observations and experiences from growing up in Benin.

For example, the idea to study the legacy of the slave trade on trust levels in African countries was a direct result of my memories as a child in a country that, in the 17th and 18th centuries, had been a major supplier of slaves. I witnessed first-hand the resulting mistrust and skepticism that these legacies lent to much of the local population in their dealings with others.

Another big influence on my work comes from interacting with my doctoral advisers, Roger Myerson and Chris Udry. Roger, a Nobel prize-winning economic theorist, always stressed the need to imagine specific institutional fixes to

political problems and to test them empirically and rigorously. Chris Udry is a pioneer of empirical development economics, and has always had a strong focus on field work and data quality. Both advisors influenced my work and career immensely.

Are you able to share your values in your teaching? What seems to work and what does not?

I strongly believe in the importance of emphasizing the role of social experience in research. I really like to enable students to turn their personal motivation and experience into advanced economic research. I strongly believe that important social insights can be gleaned when students leverage their own experiences interacting with the world and with others, their own cultural awareness, and their own intrinsic motivation to really get to the bottom of issues of development. My beliefs in the values of inclusivity and representativeness are at the foundation of my desire to promote education and graduate training. It is for this reason that I founded the African School of Economics.

Do your values affect your research? If so, in what way? And what are some challenges you face?

I have already mentioned the three values that my community in Benin inculcated in me from a young age: the values of education, open-mindedness, and political engagement. My values guide me towards selecting topics that I believe can help reduce poverty and violence while improving human understanding and collaboration.

For instance, I am currently leading a project in Nigeria aimed at developing new ways to foster dialogue between politicians and the general population in a way that makes governments more responsive to the needs of students and communities that they are elected to serve. I believe that, ultimately, it is my strong conviction in the potential of human collaboration, openness to new ideas, and dialogue, which all stem from the values bestowed in my formative years, that have shaped much of my work.

Another example is my interest in education and social mobility. Many of my recent research projects are aimed at understanding the factors that underpin poverty and slow upward mobility. The Catholic school established in my village in the late-19th century has been central to my ongoing fascination with education and social mobility.

You created the Africa School of Economics. How did that relate to your values?

As with my research work, my drive to start the African School of Economics (ASE) stems from those foundational values in education, openness to ideas, and political engagement instilled in me as a child in Benin. I have always strongly valued the importance of giving

others a fair opportunity in life. African students, unfortunately, often grow up in environments that do not give them a chance to make the best of their skills and devotion. And so, to try and remedy this reality, I couldn't just sit in academia and write about education and social mobility, I had to act. ASE is the result of my values impelling me to action.

In the past, and still today to some extent, some of the most important work to mitigate these challenges is performed by Catholic missionaries on the continent. Drawing inspiration from their work has given me an avenue to bring my values to the fore with the creation of ASE. At ASE, the aim is to train young Africans to be able to apply their natural abilities in the generation of substantive and useful knowledge. This not only helps them build successful lives and careers, but also puts them in a position to advance the quality of life of all those on the continent.

Is being a Catholic economist easy or hard, and why is that?

Being a Catholic economist is easy! Particularly so in the fields of development economics, welfare economics, and public economics. This is because the Catholic faith tends to align well with the types of research topics that are popular in those subfields like, for instance, the focus on reducing poverty and inequality. The concept of fairness too is central to many subfields of economics and aligns very well with Catholic principles.

In addition, the Catholic Church is a central part of many of the top economics programs in the world. In developing countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Chile, but also in North American and European universities, many of the top economics programs are hosted by schools that are mission-driven or at the very least retain a strong Catholic influence. The University of Notre Dame and Laval University in Canada come to mind as good examples.

What is your advice for graduates who may be Catholic or have an affinity with Catholic values and are contemplating doing a PhD?

My main advice to young Catholics with aspirations of pursuing a PhD is to let their values guide their personal motivation, and then once you gain insights and publish ideas you should also "preach" (or disseminate) those findings to policy-makers so that your insights have the chance to leap off the page and into reality. A good economist is both a generator of ideas as well as a generator of action to manifest those ideas.

Ultimately, academia represents a fantastic avenue to help make the world a better place. Using your values as a guide to identify the biggest problems in the world today, can help you direct your research to the generation of

knowledge that facilitates better governance and gives less-advantaged people better chances in life.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I was born and raised in a small village in central Benin. My father was a subsistence farmer and was arrested when I was a kid for failing to pay a tax amounting to some 80 percent of our family income! The episode stayed with me and inspired my early days of political activism fighting for democracy and against unjust taxes on the poor. After entering the University of Benin in 1979, I put together a clandestine campus group to fight for freedom and democracy in the country. Needless to say, that was not well received by the authorities, and I was expelled after organizing a large general strike. I was forced into hiding for five years!

In the mid-1980s, the government came under pressure to be less oppressive, so I returned to the university campus where, however, I did not see the political change I had expected. So, naturally, we organized larger protests that involved university students, high school students, and civil servants. Within three months of coming out of hiding, I was arrested again and spent the rest of my time in Benin as a prisoner—until I escaped to Nigeria in 1986.

From Nigeria I was able to fly to Canada as a political refugee and immediately enrolled in Laval University in Quebec City. There I bypassed many undergraduate courses to go straight to an M.A. in economics, despite having no background in the discipline: the master's is actually my first university degree! After that, I earned my PhD in economics from Northwestern University in 1995, specializing in political economics and development economics.

My first academic job was at Yale University. They were looking for an assistant professor of political science with a specialty in game theory which happened to align closely to my interests and passions. I taught there from 1995 to 2001. I then taught for a decade at New York University, until Princeton offered me my current job in 2011. Now, I divide my time between my position here at Princeton, and the ASE campus in Benin where my dream of training African economists is taking shape.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

In 1982, I visited Paris for the first time for two weeks. During that visit, I was so obsessed by art and military history that I would spend 10 hours a day touring le Louvre, the Museum of the Army, and the Museum of African Art among others. I have been nowhere else, not even the Eiffel Tower, the Parc des Princes (the football stadium), or La Sorbonne (the University).

In addition to my academic work at Princeton and my role founding and running ASE, I would really like to set up museums in Benin and other African countries, particularly around the sites of the first Catholic missions from the mid to late 19th Century in Zagnanado (my home town) and Agoue, the settlement of former slave returnees from Brazil.

I have always been passionate about history and its role in our current lives. And yet our history on the African continent is rarely told or relayed to younger generations in a way that resonates with them – through museums and cultural centers, This is largely due to a lack of investment. So an abiding aspiration of mine is to raise money to build museums on or around existing historical sites. The materials are there. The investment is not. For example, Benin has an incredibly fascinating history of the 'Amazons' – also called the 'female warriors' – where every conflict involved an elite, all-female military unit (not unlike Spartan women in ancient Greece). They comprised of around one-third of the whole army. My team in Benin has been able to identify about 50 or 60 of

these female warriors and we are in the process of profiling them and create a museum dedicated to them.



Photo: Outdoor class in the late 19th Century in my hometown Zagnanado.



Photo: ASE and IERPE staff group picture (2014). Leonard is on the left.