

## A Brief Biography of Robert S. Browne

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Robert Span Browne, founding editor of the *Review of Black Political Economy*, died August 5, 2004 in West Haverstraw, New York. Bob was the inspiration for and the moving force behind the creation of several institutions devoted to the development of the African-American community. Over the course of his life he championed solutions not only for domestic problems, but he also focused on addressing problems in the international sphere, in Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. The *Review* in many ways reflected Bob's passion and concerns.

Bob was born in Chicago and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois in 1941 and an MBA degree from the University of Chicago in 1947. He studied economics at the London School of Economics and later completed the course work for a doctorate at the City University of New York. Bob began his career at Dillard University where he taught from 1947 to 1949 and later served as Industrial Field Secretary for the Chicago Urban League (1950–52). Bob spent a year beginning in April 1952 traveling throughout Europe and North Africa, visiting all but a few countries in those regions. He spent time in Madrid and Paris where he met with Richard Wright, the expatriate American author whose work he admired.

Upon his return to the United States Bob relocated to New York where he began work with the NYC Housing Authority while seeking an opportunity to work overseas.

Bob worked for the International Cooperation Administration (predecessor to USAID) in Cambodia (1955–1958) and Vietnam (1958–1961) and as a result of his experiences became an early outspoken critic of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Bob wrote a number of letters to newspaper editors and published several op-ed pieces critical of the U.S. course in Indochina. He helped to launch the college teach-in

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movement against the Vietnam War and ran an unsuccessful independent campaign for the United States Senate from New Jersey in 1966 on an antiwar platform.<sup>1</sup> In 1968 he served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention pledged to Eugene McCarthy. From 1964 to 1972 he was a member of the faculty at Farleigh Dickenson University in New Jersey and served as an adjunct professor at Rutgers University.

In 1969 Bob founded the Black Economic Research Center (BERC), an applied economic research center located in Harlem, New York, and served as its Executive Director. Over the course of its existence BERC involved a number of established Black economists as members of its Board of Directors and provided an environment for nurturing the careers of many aspiring Black economists on its staff who undertook various research projects dealing with issues facing the Black economy. Board members included Marcus Alexis, Charles Z. Wilson, Charles Hamilton, Alvin Puryear, and Karl Gregory, among others. Staff members included BERC's first Director of Research David Swinton, Lloyd Hogan (who would become the first permanent editor of the *Review*), Joseph Brooks, Julianne Malveaux, Julian Ellison, Daniel Mitchell, Stephanie Wilson, and me among many others.

It was also in 1969 that Bob established the *Review*, as a journal “envisioned for...the creation of an hospitable arena in which black people could explore ideas as to how they might bring about effective and substantial improvement in their collective economic position.” Bob believed that the history of Black oppression in the United States made a call for reparations and affirmative action appropriate or even necessary. Bob was diligent about soliciting and publishing articles in the *Review* that dealt with issues of black economic empowerment, economic development in the Third World, and the economic effects of racial discrimination. The *Review* became the publication of choice for many of the newly minted Black Ph.D. economists as well as others writing on topics of relevance to the political economic circumstances of African-Americans.

In his typical self-effacing style Bob assumed the title of Interim Editor of the *Review* at its founding. He published in the first several volumes of the *Review* his own articles on the barriers to black participation in the U.S. economy, cash flows in the ghetto community, and the political economic challenges and prospects for black economic development, as well as articles by himself and others on such topics as economic reparations to African-Americans, Caribbean and African economic development, Black banking, education, community development corporations, and assessments of the political economy of various policy proposals.

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<sup>1</sup> One writer dubbed Bob the Alexander Hamilton of the anti-war movement because of the role his knowledge and advice played in its development. See Caleb Rossiter, “The Chimes of Freedom Flashing: A Personal History of the Vietnam Anti-war Movement and the 1960s,” p. 212; [www.calebrossier.com](http://www.calebrossier.com). In her recent paper, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, discusses three aspects of Bob Browne's life and her interpretation of how they interrelate. First, his early frustrations with the state of U.S. race relations and his subsequent desire to travel abroad; second, his interest in foreign cultures; and third, how his international experience and multi-racial family helped shape his political views about U.S. intervention in Indochina. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, “An African-Vietnamese American: Robert S. Browne, the Anti-War Movement, and the Personal/Political Dimensions of Black Internationalism,” *Journal of African American History*, Special Issue, “New Black Power Studies: National, International, and Transnational Perspectives,” 92 (Fall 2007): 491–515.

Bob's interest in the plight of Black farmers and the loss of black-owned farmland led him to create the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) in 1971, and to publish *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South*, a monograph underwritten by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund documenting the problem, in 1973.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brooks was recruited from Berkeley, California to head the ELF. In 1985 ELF merged with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, it continues efforts to aid small Black farmers and retain Black-owned land.

Bob believed deeply that Blacks should draw upon their own resources to address pressing issues in their communities. As part of this vision he created the Twenty-First Century Foundation based on an endowment provided by a generous friend. The foundation has provided approximately \$2 million in funding for projects and organizations since its inception, and has established as its mission advancing Black philanthropy by encouraging others to become knowledgeable, active, donors.

Bob returned his attention to a greater emphasis on international concerns in the 1980s. From 1986–1991 he served as Staff Director of the Subcommittee on International Development, Finance, Trade and Monetary Policy of the House Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee working on issues related to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and Third World debt.

When the African Development Bank was reorganized to accommodate non-African membership and participation, Bob was appointed as the first United States Executive Director (representing the United States, United Kingdom, and Yugoslavia) and served in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, from 1980–82. Subsequently Bob was appointed a senior research fellow in the African Studies and Research Program and Center at Howard University, and later a Ford Foundation research fellow there.

While at Howard Bob engaged with students, faculty and administrators around the issues of his concern and expertise. Of particular note is Bob's collaboration with the late Robert (Bob) J. Cummings in producing *The Lagos Plan of Action vs. The Berg Report*,<sup>3</sup> a monograph that analyzes alternative formulations of the path forward for African economic development. The Lagos Plan of Action, a document describing the steps needed for African nations to achieve self-reliance and regional economic integration was adopted by 50 African leaders in Lagos, Nigeria in April, 1980. What became known as the Berg Report was a World Bank report that espoused export-led growth and a minimal role for the public sector as the best development strategy. Elliot Berg, a University of Michigan development economist and long-time consultant to the World Bank, served as the coordinator and principal author of the report.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Browne, *Only Six Million Acres: The Decline of Black Owned Land in the Rural South*, (New York, The Black Economic Research Center), 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Browne and Robert J. Cummings, *The Lagos Plan of Action vs. The Berg Report: Contemporary Issues in African Economic Development*, (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick Publishing), 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa 1980–2000*, Organization of African Unity, (Geneva, Switzerland: International Institute of Labor Studies), 1981; World Bank, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action*, (Washington, DC) 1981.

Browne and Cummings sought to provide an examination of the principal assumptions and conclusions of the two documents and to highlight “in particular, the conflict between the short-term prescriptions of the World Bank/Berg Report and the long-term development needs of Africa as defined by the Lagos Plan of Action.”<sup>5</sup>

Bob was an active member of Howard’s African Studies and Research Program faculty (later to become the African Studies Department). He participated regularly in the African Studies Wednesday seminar series, produced a number of papers dealing with economic development in Africa, mentored students, and frequently spoke at conferences and symposia on economic issues. Bob served as the primary Economic Advisor to the 1984 presidential campaign of Jesse Jackson and was appointed to the Advisory Council of the African Development Foundation.

Bob retired in 1993, but continued to serve as an economic consultant to a number of organizations and on various boards as an advisor and counselor, including as an advisory council member to the Calvert Social Investment Fund. Bob’s final effort was a 2004 report for a committee of the Council on Foreign Relations that he co-chaired titled *Freedom, Prosperity, and Security*.<sup>6</sup> Bob worked tirelessly to assure that African-Americans and others throughout the world might enjoy those very benefits.

Bob was a kind, humble man, who tended to downplay the impact of his efforts through BEREC, the *Review*, the Emergency Land Fund, and the Twenty-First Century Foundation which directly touched the lives of many. His collected papers and writings are housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, the Swarthmore College Peace Archives, and the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. The Twenty First Century Foundation in New York also holds some of his papers including “Dance as if No One is Watching: the Memoirs of Robert S. Browne.”

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<sup>5</sup> Foreword, The Lagos Plan of Action vs. The Berg Report.

<sup>6</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, *Freedom, Prosperity, and Security: The G8 Partnership with Africa, Sea Island 2004 and Beyond*, May 2004.