



Published on Grassroots Economic Organizing (<http://www.geo.coop>)

Grass Roots and Big Trees: The challenges and potentials of polycentered collective action

By Forrest Fleischman

In this essay I will draw on the work I have done as one of Elinor Ostrom's graduate students to illustrate some of the areas in which Ostrom's work can support the practice of grassroots economic organizing. In so doing, I hope to challenge some notions that seem to be widely held among people interested in solidarity economics, and also to point to areas where grassroots economic organizers can contribute to the improvement of theories of collective action and local governance that Ostrom pioneered.

Introduction: The Dangers of Ideological Interpretations

One of the curious aspects of having your doctoral advisor win a Nobel Prize is seeing the many ways that formerly little-known academic research can be reinterpreted to support ideological and political agendas. In the wake of the Nobel Prize announcement Elinor Ostrom's work received favorable press from libertarians (who were happy to hear that people could solve their problems without solutions imposed from the above by "The Government") as well as from socialists (who were happy to have their skepticism of "The Market" confirmed). Favorable attention from grassroots economics organizers, practitioners of solidarity economics whose economic and political philosophies tend to share both the libertarian skepticism of "The Government" and the socialist skepticism of "The Market," is not surprising. However, like the attention from libertarians and socialists, their attention also has an unfortunate tendency to obscure aspects of the research which might unsettle preconceived ideologies.

Ostrom's greatest contribution to scholarship on collective action is to show that, contrary to the dour predictions of early neoclassical economics, people can cooperate to solve their problems. While this point may seem obvious to anyone who has participated in a family or a well-run cooperative enterprise, Ostrom's careful cataloguing of examples from different political and cultural systems shows that cooperation is not confined to small, homogenous groups, but exists as a universal human potential, one that can thrive for centuries among large groups of people who face strong incentives to cheat. Ostrom's studies of irrigation systems in Nepal show that under certain circumstances, community-based cooperation can outperform systems of organization based on greater technical knowledge and funding. This may mislead advocates into believing that Ostrom favors universal decentralized community governance, but much of Ostrom's recent work emphasizes caution on the application of panaceas to social problems.[1]

Just as many libertarians and socialists put excessive faith in markets and governments, solidarity economists are at risk of putting too much faith in communities and locally-based democratic governance mechanisms to solve social problems. In other words, Ostrom's work shows that locally based autonomous organizations have more potential than has been recognized by other social scientists, but that they are not a cure-all, and probably work best in tandem with other kinds of higher-level institutions. In the 1970s, Ostrom conducted a series of studies on the organization of police services in American cities, and found that small, locally controlled police departments were more effective at policing, at much lower cost, than large centralized departments. However, these locally controlled departments also relied on higher-level organizations to provide services such as dispatch and crime labs, which were not cost effective for small departments to maintain. Ostrom's husband, Vincent, has referred to this as the need for "Polycentricity," as opposed to simple centralization or decentralization of political and economic power.[2]

Contributors from the Ostrom Workshop collaborated in creating supplementary information to assist readers with some of the technical language, basic tools, and key concepts they work with. They include the following three sections:

- [I. Basic Concepts](#) [0],
- [II. The Eight Design Principles](#) [0], and
- [III. Further Reading](#) [0]

The Potential of Local Collective Action

Let me give an example of the kind of potential that Ostrom's work highlights. A few months ago, in the polluted industrial city of Chandrapur, near the geographic centre of India, I met Mohan Hiralal Hirabai, an anthropologist and Gandhian social activist. Gandhi argued that India should rebuild itself as a group of semi-autonomous village republics, operating on the basis of consensus - an ideal which many of us who consider ourselves grassroots economic organizers, solidarity economists, or libertarian municipalists share. As a young man, Mohan was bothered by the fact that although Gandhi had advocated for consensus based decision making in these village republics, he had never practiced it. He began to wonder if consensus was in fact a practical method for decision-making. In search of answers, he and his wife set out on a research expedition into the tropical deciduous teak forests surrounding Chandrapur. He wanted to see if any of the remote tribal villages practiced consensus. If these villages were capable of consensus-based decision-making, Mohan thought, it would show that Gandhi's ideas had real potential.



A village on the edge of the forest, Central India

[All photos courtesy of the author]

In the small village of Mendla, Mohan found what he was looking for. Although they were illiterate villagers with no knowledge of Gandhian philosophy, the men of Mendla had independently begun operating on a consensus basis in their informal village council. Mohan began visiting the village regularly, teaching those villagers who were interested about Gandhi's teachings of self-reliance and social equality. As they learned more, the villagers began to make improvements in their practices. They decided that they wanted to include women in the decision-making process, but when approached, the women replied that they did not want to attend village meetings, since the men drank heavily during the meetings. After serious discussions, the village made a consensus decision not only to include women in village meetings, but also to ban alcohol in the village.

I would have liked to visit Mendla, but the region has been overrun in recent years by a violent conflict between Maoist rebels and government police forces. Mohan told me that the villagers had organized to resist occupation and alliance with either side in the conflict. When armed men - Maoists or police - approach the village, the villagers tell them that weapons are not permitted in the village. If the men wish the villagers to do something, they must attend a village meeting, at which their proposals will be evaluated by the villagers using their standard decision-making procedure: consensus. Today a banner hangs across the entrance to the village which proudly declares: "we have government in Delhi and Mumbai, but in this village, We are the government," a remarkable statement for an impoverished village surrounded by war and oppression to make. If they can do it in Mendla, we ought to be able to make similar efforts here in the peaceful and wealthy United States.



A woman carries firewood for cooking past a local Forest Department office in Central India.

To me, the story of Mendla is a dramatic illustration of the kinds of cooperative potential that Ostrom's work highlights. But it also illustrates some of the limitations. While humans have the potential to cooperate, they frequently fail to do so. Mohan searched for months before he found Mendla. The story of Mendla has now been spread as an exemplar of what villages could accomplish in India, but the simple fact is that the vast majority of villages fail to achieve such high levels of cooperation. In fact, the villages closest to Mendla, which we might expect to be the most likely to follow its example, have shown little interest in cooperation and collective action. Ostrom asked when would cooperation succeed because, in part, prevailing social science theories tended to predict that cooperation would never succeed. But if we wish to build grassroots movements around economic and social cooperation, it may be equally necessary to ask the question in reverse: Why does cooperation so frequently fail?

Understanding Failures

How many of us have dreamed of starting some kind of community activity, only to have our dreams tempered by the disinterest of our friends, infighting, or our own weak organizational skills? Ostrom's work has surprisingly little to say about collective action that never materializes. The Institutional Analysis and Development framework aids scholars who would like to examine the pieces of institutions (i.e. analysis) and see how they change (i.e. development), but it has little to say on the subject of origins. Similarly, her famous book "Governing the Commons" is subtitled "The *Evolution* of Institutions for Collective Action," again emphasizing change within existing institutions. The origin of such institutions is difficult to study because researchers can rarely be present at such moments of origin, and because it is difficult to locate examples of collective action that never materialized. In "Governing the Commons," Ostrom offered eight "design principles," [3] which are frequently misinterpreted as a set of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for originating successful collective action. A careful reading of this text reveals that Ostrom found that most of these eight characteristics were present in many of the cases she examined, but she makes no claim about these characteristics being present at the time of institutional origin, which was frequently not observed.

Practitioners, who are likely to have been present both at failed and successful institutional births, may have a lot to contribute to theoretical developments in the study of the origins of collective action. It is also an area to which scholars who wish to support a movement towards greater economic democracy should devote greater attention, as a move towards democratization of economic structures is likely to require development of new institutions.

My own experience is that there are often very severe external barriers to collective action. Laws and social norms often restrict certain kinds of organization. For example, cooperatives in the United States have diverse histories and origins, but many people believe that housing cooperatives are only for "hippies" and will therefore avoid joining them to avoid the stigma. For many others, the potentials of autonomous collective action are hidden by ideologies and laws which obscure the fact that much of life occurs

outside of the stale dichotomy of "market" and "state". In India, laws governing the operation of cooperatives restrict cooperative organization to specific purposes defined by law, and organizers I've met there describe how their agricultural cooperatives have been shut down by local government officials because they did not meet specified purposes. Practitioners and researchers could collaborate to identify failures and their causes, and in so doing, could make a major contribution to the development of collective action theory.

The Grassroots and the Big Trees: the value of higher-order governance

Even when collective action materializes, there is no guarantee that it will survive. We recently published a study of five intentional communities in southern Indiana,[4] each of which had survived for decades. We found that all five intentional communities had faced crises which threatened their viability. In some cases, the communities had relied on their own resources, as when the community of Maple[5] reorganized their living arrangements after a fire destroyed their main community building. However, in other cases, the communities relied on building connections to outside governmental and market institutions. For example, the community of Box Elder was founded by a charismatic leader. After many years, that leader began to treat the community's money as his own, and also became involved in the use of drugs. After he was arrested, remaining members of the community reorganized using the legal framework of 501c(3) non-profit status, relying on the higher level of monitoring that comes from being a recognized organization. Similarly, after Tulip Poplar suffered a devastating flood that destroyed significant community-owned infrastructure, community members appealed to various local, regional, and national government agencies for disaster assistance. These cases illustrate the importance of two of Ostrom's design principles which should receive heightened attention from solidarity economists: recognition by higher authorities of rights to organize (which in the case of Box Elder, enabled them to adopt standard institutional forms provided by those higher authorities), and nested enterprises (Because Tulip Poplar was "nested" within a larger framework of functional government, it was able to appeal for help from higher authorities). Like a bundle of reeds, each weak on its own, but strong when bundled together, autonomous collectives are highly vulnerable alone, but stronger when banded together and/or supported by higher level authorities. This isn't to say that higher levels of government involvement are a panacea - members of the Oak community have repeatedly failed to solve internal disputes through recourse to the court system.

Where grassroots collective action succeeds, there is no guarantee that it will support other goals. In the 1990s there was great enthusiasm for community-based approaches to natural resource conservation around the world. This enthusiasm has faded as scholars have learned that community-based groups do not necessarily contribute to conservation. For example, India's widely acclaimed Joint Forest Management program, which I studied as part of my dissertation research, often contributes to making women's work more difficult (because they are restricted from collecting necessary firewood in their village), has disproportionate negative economic impact on poorer households (who tend to rely more heavily on forest products in the absence of other income sources), and often does not contribute to conservation goals, as decision-makers prefer to plant high-profit monocultures of eucalyptus rather than natural forests which could contribute to improving ecological balance. Although there are requirements that women and poor people be represented in decision-making, the deeper inequalities of Indian society reproduce themselves even when efforts are made at representation. In a society in which power inequalities persist at local levels, it may be necessary for higher level authorities to intervene, as happened in the American South during the Civil Rights Movement, in order to achieve goals of social justice, political equality, and environmental quality.



A village weekly market, Central India

Conclusion

In the introduction to my piece, I suggested that it was strange to watch my advisor's work twisted to supporting various and often contradictory ideologies. I was attracted to studying with Elinor Ostrom in part because I saw parallels between her work and my own bias towards a solidarity economics perspective. In this essay, I've tried to illustrate what I've discovered about some of the strengths and pitfalls of such an approach. Ostrom has suggested that there is no panacea - that each circumstance is unique and calls for distinct approaches. She has also suggested that a polycentric approach - one in which authority is dispersed among diverse institutions situated at different levels - is likely to be superior than a completely centralized or decentralized approach. The strength of solidarity economics, building on this, is that it seeks to strengthen and empower the grassroots in a society where power is overly centralized. As such, solidarity economics practitioners could make a major contribution to theories of collective action by helping scholars to understand the practical challenges of decentralizing power. Its weakness, then, would appear to be that it could turn into an uncritical celebration of the local and decentralized, and lose sight of the benefits of nesting the grassroots within a supportive economic and political order. The Ostroms' concept of polycentricity can help us to develop ideas about how solidarity economics can work at multiple scales - both the local and the regional and national.

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About the author

Forrest Fleischman is a PhD student of Lin Ostrom at Indiana University's School of Public & Environmental Affairs, where his dissertation examines the tensions between democracy and sustainability in the management of forests in Central India. When he isn't interviewing government officials in Central India or writing, he is usually gardening. In previous lives, he worked as Policy Advocate for Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, based in Eugene OR, and as a farmer at The Chewonki Foundation, a large outdoor education center on the coast of Maine.

See <http://forrestfleischman.blogspot.com> [1] for more writings.

Citations

When citing this article, please use the following format:

Forrest Fleischman (2011). Grass Roots and Big Trees: The challenges and potentials of polycentered collective action.

Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO) Newsletter, Volume 2, Issue 9.

<http://geo.coop/node/652> [1]

Endnotes

[1] Ostrom, E. (2007). Going Beyond Panaceas Special Feature: A diagnostic approach for going beyond panaceas. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104(39), 15181-15187.

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[2] These studies, and Vincent's explanation of polycentricity, have been republished in: McGinnis, M. D. (Ed.). (1999). *Polycentricity and local public economies: readings from the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

[3] See Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, p. 90. For a more updated view, which is freely available on the internet, see: Cox, M., Arnold, G., & Villamayor Tomás, S. (2010). A Review of Design Principles for Community-based Natural Resource Management. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4), 38. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art38/> [2]



[4] Fleischman, F. D., Boenning, K., Garcia-Lopez, G. A., Mincey, S., Schmitt-Harsh, M., Daedlow, K., . . . Ostrom, E. (2010). Disturbance, Response, and Persistence in Self-Organized Forested Communities: Analysis of Robustness and Resilience in Five Communities in Southern Indiana. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4), 9. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art9/> [3]

[5] The names of the communities have been changed to protect their privacy.

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[1] <http://forrestfleischman.blogspot.com/>

[2] <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art38/>

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