

Elinor Ostrom Wins Nobel for Common(s) Sense

Elinor Ostrom was an unusual choice for the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.

by Fran Korten

posted Feb 26, 2010

For one thing, she is the first woman to receive the prize. Her Ph.D. is in political science, not economics (though she minored in economics, collaborates with many economists, and considers herself a political economist). But what makes this award particularly special is that her work is about cooperation, while standard economics focuses on competition.

*Ostrom's seminal book, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, was published in 1990. But her research on common property goes back to the early 1960s, when she wrote her dissertation on groundwater in California. In 1973 she and her husband, Vincent Ostrom, founded the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University. In the intervening years, the Workshop has produced hundreds of studies of the conditions in which communities self-organize to solve common problems. Ostrom currently serves as professor of political science at Indiana University and senior research director of the Workshop.*

Fran Korten, YES! Magazine's publisher, spent 20 years with the Ford Foundation making grants to support community management of water and forests in Southeast Asia and the United States. She and Ostrom drew on one another's work as this field of knowledge developed. Fran interviewed her friend and colleague Lin Ostrom shortly after Ostrom received the Nobel Prize.



Nobel winner Elinor Ostrom has built her career on the science of cooperation.

Photo by Chris Meyer / Indiana University

Fran Korten: When you first learned that you had won the Nobel Prize in Economics, were you surprised?

Elinor Ostrom: Yes. It was quite surprising. I was both happy and relieved.

Fran: Why relieved?

Elinor: Well, relieved in that I was doing a bunch of research through the years that many people thought was very radical and people didn't like. As a person who does interdisciplinary work, I didn't fit anywhere. I was relieved that, after all these years of struggle, someone really thought it did add up. That's very nice.

And it's very nice for the team that I've been a part of here at the Workshop. We have had a different style of organizing. It is an interdisciplinary center—we have graduate students, visiting scholars, and faculty working together. I never would have won the Nobel but for being a part of that enterprise.

Fran: It's interesting that your research is about people learning to cooperate. And your Workshop at the university is also organized on principles of cooperation.

Elinor: I have a new book coming out in May entitled *Working Together*, written with Amy Poteete and Marco Janssen. It is on collective actions in the commons. What we're talking about is how people work together. We've used an immense array of different methods to look at this question—case studies, including my own dissertation and Amy's work, modeling, experiments, large-scale statistical work. We show how people use multiple methods to work together.

Fran: Many people associate “the commons” with Garrett Hardin's famous essay, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” He says that if, for example, you have a pasture that everyone in a village has access to, then each person will put as many cows on that land as he can to maximize his own benefit, and pretty soon the pasture will be overgrazed and become worthless. What's the difference between your perspective and Hardin's?

Elinor: Well, I don't see the human as hopeless. There's a general tendency to presume people just act for short-term profit. But anyone who knows about small-town businesses and how people in a community relate to one another realizes that many of those decisions are not just for profit and that humans do try to organize and solve problems.

If you are in a fishery or have a pasture and you know your family's long-term benefit is that you don't destroy it, and if you can talk with the other people who use that resource, then you may well figure out rules that fit that local setting and organize to enforce them. But if the community doesn't have a good way of communicating with each other or the costs of self-organization are too high, then they won't organize, and there will be failures.

Fran: So, are you saying that Hardin is sometimes right?

We have to think through how to choose a meaningful life where we're helping one another in ways that really help the Earth.

Elinor: Yes. People say I disproved him, and I come back and say “No, that's not right. I've not disproved him. I've shown that his assertion that common property will always be degraded is wrong.” But he was addressing a problem of considerable significance that we need to take seriously. It's just that he went too far. He said people could never manage the commons well.

At the Workshop we've done experiments where we create an artificial form of common property—such as an imaginary fishery or pasture, and we bring people into a lab and have them make decisions about that property. When we don't allow any communication among the players, then they overharvest. But when people can communicate, particularly on a face-to-face basis, and say, “Well, gee, how about if we do this? How about we do that?” Then they can come to an agreement.

Fran: But what about the “free-rider” problem—where some people abide by the rules and some people don't? Won't the whole thing fall apart?

Elinor: Well if the people don't communicate and get some shared norms and rules, that's right, you'll have that problem. But if they get together and say, “Hey folks, this is a project that we're all going to have

to contribute to. Now, let's figure it out," they can make it work. For example, if it's a community garden, they might say, "Do we agree every Saturday morning we're all going to go down to the community garden, and we're going to take roll and we're going to put the roll up on a bulletin board?" A lot of communities have figured out subtle ways of making everyone contribute, because if they don't, those people are noticeable.

Fran: So public shaming and public honoring are one key to managing the commons?

Elinor: Shaming and honoring are very important. We don't have as much of an understanding of that. There are scholars who understand that, but that's not been part of our accepted way of thinking about collective action.



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Fran: Do you have a favorite example of where people have been able to self-organize to manage property in common?

Elinor: One that I read early on that just unglued me—because I wasn't expecting it—was the work of Robert Netting, an anthropologist who had been studying the alpine commons for a very long time. He studied Swiss peasants and then studied in Africa too. He was quite disturbed that people were saying that Africans were primitive because they used common property so frequently and they didn't know about the benefits of private property. The implication was we've got to impose private property rules on them. Netting said, "Are the Swiss peasants stupid? They use common property also."



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Let's think about this a bit. In the valleys, they use private property, while up in the alpine areas, they use common property. So the same people know about private property and common property, but they choose to use common property for the alpine areas. Why? Well, the alpine areas are what Netting calls "spotty." The rainfall is high in one section one year, and the snow is great, and it's rich. But the other parts of the area are dry. Now if you put fences up for private property, then Smith's got great grass one year—he can't even use it all—and Brown doesn't have any. So, Netting argued, there are places where it makes sense to have an open pasture rather than a closed one. Then he gives you a very good idea of the wide diversity of the particular rules that people have used for managing that common land.

Fran: Why were Netting's findings so surprising to you?

Elinor: I had grown up thinking that land was something that would always move to private property. I had done my dissertation on groundwater in California, so I was familiar with the management of water as a commons. But when I read Netting, I realized that when there are "spotty" land environments, it really doesn't make sense to put up fences and have small private plots.

Fran: Lin, if you were to have a sit-down session with someone with a big influence on natural resources policy—say Robert Zoellick, head of the World Bank, or Ken Salazar, Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, what would be your advice?

Elinor: No panaceas! We tend to want simple formulas. We have two main prescriptions: privatize the resource or make it state property with uniform rules. But sometimes the people who are living on the resource are in the best position to figure out how to manage it as a commons.

Fran: Is there a role for government in those situations?

Elinor: We need institutions that enable people to carry out their management roles. For example, if there's conflict, you need an open, fair court system at a higher level than the people's resource management unit. You also need institutions that provide accurate knowledge. The United States Geological Survey is one that I point to repeatedly. They don't come in and try to make proposals as to what you should do. They just do a really good job of providing accurate scientific knowledge, particularly for groundwater basins such as where I did my Ph.D. research years ago. I'm not against government. I'm just against the idea that it's got to be some bureaucracy that figures everything out for people.

Fran: How important is it that there is a match between a governing jurisdiction and the area of the resource to be managed?

Elinor: To manage common property you need to create boundaries for an area at a size similar to the problem the people are trying to cope with. But it doesn't need to be a formal jurisdiction. Sometimes public officials don't even know that the local people have come to some agreements. It may not be in the courts, or even written down. That is why sometimes public authorities wipe out what local people have spent years creating.

Fran: You've done your research on small- and medium-sized natural resource jurisdictions. How about the global commons? We have the problems of climate change and oceans that are dying. Are there lessons from your work that are relevant to these massive problems we're now facing?

Elinor: I really despair over the oceans. There is a very interesting article in Science on the "roving bandit." It is so tempting to go along the coast and scoop up all the fish you can and then move on. With very big boats, you can do that. I think we could move toward solving that problem, but right now there are not many instrumentalities for doing that.

Regarding global climate change, I'm more hopeful. There are local public benefits that people can receive at the same time they're generating benefits for the global environment. Take health and transportation as an example. If more people would walk or bicycle to work and use their car only when they have to go some distance, then their health would be better, their personal pocketbooks would be better, and the atmosphere would be better. Of course, if it's just a few people, it won't matter, but if more and more people feel "This is the kind of life I should be living," that can substantially help the global problem. Similarly, if we invest in re-doing the insulation of a lot of buildings, we can save money as well as help the global environment. Yes, we want some global action but boy, if we just sit around and wait for that? Come on!

Fran: Do you have a message for the general public?

Elinor: We need to get people away from the notion that you have to have a fancy car and a huge house. Some of the homes that have been built in the last 10 years just appall me. Why do humans need huge homes? I was born poor and I didn't know you bought clothes at anything but the Goodwill until I went to college. Some of our mentality about what it means to have a good life is, I think, not going to help us in the next 50 years. We have to think through how to choose a meaningful life where we're helping one another in ways that really help the Earth.

Fran: Let's look ahead 20 years. What would you hope that the world will understand about managing common property systems?

Elinor: What we need is a broader sense of what we call "social ecological systems." We need to look at the biological side and the social side with one framework rather than 30 different languages. That is big, but I now have some of my colleagues very interested. Some of them are young, and what I find encouraging is that with a bunch of us working together, I can see us moving ahead in the next 20 years or so. Twenty years from now, at 96, I probably won't be as active.

Fran: Not as active? I wouldn't bet on that.



Fran Korten interviewed Elinor Ostrom for **America: The Remix**, the Spring 2010 issue of YES! Magazine. Fran is publisher of YES! Magazine.

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