

The Calculus of Commitment:

The Ostroms, The Workshop and The Commons

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When Elinor Ostrom was interviewed at Indiana University after winning the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics for her study of economic governance, particularly the commons, she said “The prize did come to me personally, but it would never have come but for the work I did with Vincent Ostrom all these years and the Workshop.” This piece ponders those humble words by a world-renown scholar through an—albeit brief—examination of the decades-long collaboration between Lin and Vincent Ostrom: two brilliant minds committed to better understanding the complexities of human behavior and the challenges of cooperation. They have shared a rich and ever-constant intellectual exchange that has surely enriched each others’ lives and scholarship. Particularly striking is their clear focus, the complete integration of their intellectual theories with the life they have created around them, with their dogged persistence throughout the years. As the hundreds or thousands of researchers who have made the pilgrimage to Bloomington Indiana to visit the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis have experienced, it’s a dynamic place where people engage in rigorous debate, wrestle with difficult ideas, and immensely enjoy themselves and their colleagues along the way. “We called it a workshop,” Vincent once commented, “to communicate a commitment to artisanship and collaboration.” As many of us commons folk are aware, this year is the twentieth anniversary of Elinor Ostrom’s groundbreaking volume, *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Collective Action*. It is certainly the most cited and well-known of all of Lin’s works and considered a landmark publication on many grounds. Among them are: its case studies of successful commons which refute the myth of the tragedy of the commons; its deep analysis that lead to the eight design principles of long-enduring, robust commons; its situating the study of commons within a multidisciplinary approach, especially political economy; its once and for all distinction between common-pool resources as types of goods and common property as formal or informal property regimes.

Few people are aware that this year also marks the anniversary of two other important milestones for the study of the commons: the 45th anniversary of Ostrom’s Ph.D. dissertation from UCLA, *Public Entrepreneurship: A Case Study in Ground Water Basin Management* (1965)³ and the 60th anniversary of Vincent Ostrom’s dissertation (also from UCLA) *Government and Water: A Study of the Influence of Water Upon Governmental Institutions and Practices in the Development of Los Angeles* (1950). While these are quite different studies, both examine the relationship between institutions and their outcomes on water resources—and both contain the seeds of future institutional and commons-related analysis.

Lin’s dissertation expands on Joseph Schumpeter’s work on entrepreneurship, taking the concept beyond the realm of private enterprise. Her focus is on the role of public entrepreneurs in water users’ associations to craft institutional arrangements in order to create more efficient outcomes in the West Coastal Basin of Southern California. In her introduction Lin expresses her dissatisfaction with popular analytical approaches in her discipline:

“The traditional literature of political science and economics has given little consideration to the strategy used by individuals in organizing public enterprises to provide public goods and services (P. xvi).”

Both Lin and Vincent have noted the important influence of Buchanan and Tullock’s 1962 volume *Calculus of Consent* because of its focus on public choice as well as individuals’ capacity for self-governance and collective action. Vincent’s thesis traces the institutional structure of L.A.’s water system to the shared property of the original pueblo system of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles, the original name of the city of Los Angeles, California. He notes, “in no other phase of modern life has the impact of the Spanish origin of Los Angeles been so great as in the establishment of the general policy of community control of water resources (p. 37).” One sees from the outset the strong presence of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose method of political analysis has had such a lasting influence on the Ostroms’ theory and methodology. His analysis echoes the structure of Tocqueville’s in *Democracy in America*, beginning with the physical description of the resource (southern California, its desert, and its water systems), and continuing with a survey of the evolving institutions in a rapidly growing community. Vincent understands the historical governance of L.A. groundwater as a type of commons: “From the various instructions and regulations governing the pueblos of California, elaborate rules were established for the government of the water distribution system, beyond the provisions declaring water to be subject to the common use of the pobladores (p. 40).”

Vincent began to work with Lin and Lin’s colleague Louis Weschler on the evolution of southern California water institutions in what he refers to as “the 1958-62” era⁴ when he was also collaborating with the organization of metropolitan government as political economies. It was during this time that Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren were developing their concept of polycentricity where there are multiple levels of (self) governing activities. (Later, Lin would argue the utility of this concept in possibly solving collective-action problems by developing systems of governmental and nongovernmental organizations at multiple scales).

By the time they met, Vincent was a leading analyst of natural resource policy and administration. Their mutual interest in water institutions led to analyses of self-governance, institutions as rule-ordered relationships, and the benefits of multidisciplinary of political economy. When they came to Indiana in 1964 Lin was finishing her dissertation and they were working on their first co-authored article. During the next few years, amidst their other research, they wrote working papers and correspondence with colleagues, working toward a deeper understanding of the nature of common-pool resources and institutional analysis. In 1968, the same year that Garrett Hardin wrote that “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all,” proposing privatization and government intervention as the only viable solutions to such commons problems, Vincent Ostrom wrote a paper called “Organization of Decision-Making Arrangements and the Development of Atmospheric Resources.”

Here he proposed an antithetically different approach to the commons-problem, one that underlines his belief in human capabilities to self-govern: The existing structure of institutional arrangements provide a basis for taking the first steps in the development of atmospheric resources. Concepts associated with the development of common property resources and the organization of public and mixed enterprise systems will help guide the way to further solutions.

Concurrently, Lin was working on the problem of groundwater basin management.¹¹ Lin also advocated an institutionalist approach finding it helpful to “understand the logic of constitution making since it is a classic example of a common-pool resource—the actions of any producer affect all other producers utilizing the basin.”

Vincent and Lin may have disagreed with many of Hardin’s assumptions but they enjoyed the challenges he posed. Lin engaged in a vigorous correspondence with him. They also contributed two chapters to Hardin’s edited 1977 volume with John Baden (a former student of the Ostroms) *Managing the Commons*.

A groundbreaking contribution to the study of the commons was their 1977 publication “Public Goods and Public Choices” where they outlined their typology of four types of goods—rather than Samuelson’s two—based on the degree of jointness of use and difficulty of exclusion. (As Lin has often pointed out, these are not discreet units but rather continuums or even “continents.”) The expanded typology provided a much-needed distinction between the simplistic public-private dichotomy, adding an important new element to the language and understanding of commons scholarship as well as providing greater clarity to important differences between common property regimes and common-pool resources as types of economic goods. When the Ostroms founded the Workshop in 1973 it was to fulfill a number of goals: to provide a multidisciplinary approach to the study of institutions; to acutely integrate the process of teaching, research, and intellectual problem-solving; to build an international network of like-minded scholars; and to build a publications and dissemination program.

They modeled the Workshop according to their belief that organizations are artifacts that contain their own artisans. Anyone who has visited the Workshop has witnessed that each member—whether visiting scholar, local student, staff members, or affiliated faculty—is an essential artisan who makes important contributions to the Workshop commons. As a well-crafted institution, the Workshop encompasses a unique combination of characteristics: its Monday noontime cross-campus colloquium series; its two-semester Seminar on Institutional Analysis and Development, the unique two-day miniconferences at the end of each semester; the self-governing and often spontaneous study groups, and its library with unique collections on the study of institutions and the commons. Today, the workshop has its own Facebook page, where our colleague Anil Gupta recently wrote on the wall: “The Ashram-like atmosphere of the Workshop is something that teachers worldwide need to learn from.”

Considering the many successes of the Workshop—as evidenced by the large and ever-growing number of publications, the impressive number of dissertations, a distinguished international network of scholars, the many awards and honors that have been bestowed on Vincent and Lin, even those prior to Lin’s Nobel Prize; the millions of dollars in research grants; the Tocquevill Endowment that Lin and Vincent started years ago; the Digital Library of the Commons that provides free universal access to thousands of full-text commons papers, articles, and dissertations—it is hard to imagine how challenging it must have been in the formative years. In a letter dated June 20, 1984 Vincent wrote: “We have struck a sensitive and hostile response where our work has not confirmed the predispositions and aspirations of other scholars. We have had great difficulty in securing publications; and we have a great reservoir of important work that has never seen the light of day.”

He worried about being able to attract students and about the high demands made upon them, but then reminded his colleagues of their overall mission:

Our distinctive contribution is best indicated by how a science of association would contribute to an understanding of human institutions... My conclusion is that institutional analysis and design, in light of both recent and earlier intellectual developments in an appropriate subject for focused inquiry by a rather highly disciplined sort, which is also strongly multidisciplinary in character.

Much began to change in the mid 1980s. The Ostroms often refer to their first year at the Center for interdisciplinary Research at Bielefeld University in 1981-82 as a turning point for their research and for the Workshop. There, they studied some new intellectual traditions such as the European sociologists, Ordnungstheorie of the Freiburg and Marburg schools of economics, and game theory and experimental economics. Upon their return they brought a more international focus to the Workshop and began inviting postdoctoral students along with graduate students who could help deepen productive scholarship in the social sciences. They began to define their work as more interdisciplinary and less confined to political theory.

The 1985 Conference on Common Property Resource Management (CPRM) hosted by the National Research Council was the catalyst that radically redirected Lin's research and writing. Before the conference almost all her commons-related work was in tandem with Vincent, while her other work was on U.S. police services and metropolitan governance and reform. After the CPRM conference her contributions to commons research grew at exponential proportions. She hired a professional librarian, Fenton Martin, to help build a concerted library on the commons. In 1986, she worked with Vincent and with Larry Kiser to further develop the IAD framework, and began working with her graduate students to code case studies of natural resource commons based on that framework. In 1987, she and student Edella Schlager collaborated on their first paper exploring types of property rights¹⁷; and she began her long collaboration on game theoretical analyses of common-pool resources and economic behavior with Jimmy Walker and Roy Gardner. In 1989, Lin was one of the founders and the first president of IASC(P). By that time, she had already taken off: Between 1985-2010 Lin Ostrom has published 22 books, over 200 chapters in books, and over 150 journal articles, all related to commons research and analysis.

In truth, the enormous contributions Lin and Vincent have made to scholarship cannot be captured with numbers or statistics. It will take scholars many years to determine how Lin's work on the commons has shaped our understanding of democratic societies and governance. Other researchers will study how Vincent's theories of polycentricity and the constitutional level of analysis have facilitated a better appreciation of how commons work. Both the Ostroms have fundamentally changed the way we think about commons, self-governance, institutions, and the capabilities of human beings. The Workshop has changed our understanding of how best to teach, learn, do research, problem-solve, and engage in intellectual exchange.

In February 2010 Vincent and Elinor Ostrom were awarded Indiana University's highest award, The University Medal which only ten other people in the university's history have received.