

*Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School of Political Economy:  
A Compendium of Key Statements, Collaborations, and Reactions*

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Elinor (Lin) Ostrom was awarded the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for her path-breaking research on “economic governance, especially the commons,” but she also made important contributions to several other fields of political economy and public policy. The bracing range of topics she covered and the multiple methods she used in her collaborations with many different teams of co-authors may convey the mistaken impression that her body of work is disjointed and incoherent. We intend this four-volume compendium of papers written by Lin, alone or with different co-authors, supplemented by a few papers on closely related topics written by others in anticipation of or reaction to her own work, as an exercise in demonstrating the common strands of research that serve to tie her impressive oeuvre together. Each volume should end up being approximately 400 pages in length, but this level of magnitude is required by the scale of her contributions to scholarship.

Lin would have been the first to point out that she was not alone, and that the bulk of her best research was done in collaboration with others, without whom she would not have been able to range nearly so widely nor so effectively throughout so much of the academic landscape. We have selected readings that help locate her contributions in the context of those of related scholars.

We have paid particular attention to the pervasive influence of Vincent Ostrom, her beloved husband and collaborator of nearly 50 years. To those of us fortunate enough to have known them in person, Lin and Vincent will always be a team, each a powerful intellect on their own but brought together by their complementary skills and orientations into a powerful combination.

Their body of research, and their personal example of scholarship, provided the energy at the core of what has come to be known as the “Bloomington School” of institutional analysis, or of political economy. Each of the Ostroms has published a series of influential books in which they detail some important aspects of their solo or joint work, but as a consequence other, equally important areas of contribution suffer by comparison. This compendium is meant to complement these books by connecting their themes to their equally impressive research on other topics, and thus to raise the visibility of these other areas of application. But even 1600 pages cannot suffice to encompass all of the research projects that they personally conducted or inspired so many of their students and colleagues to pursue in their own careers. The most we can do is to catalogue the core themes of this scholarly tradition, by bring together in one set of four volume seemingly unrelated works originally published in diverse settings in hopes of highlighting their shared themes.

We have organized these readings around four central themes.

Volume 1 is entitled simply *Polycentricity*, but much is implicit in that single word. Initially coined by Vincent Ostrom in a classic article co-authored with Tiebout and Warren (included here), polycentricity describes a complex system of governance in which public authorities and private actors transcend standard disciplinary boundaries between political science, economics, and other social sciences. Tocqueville was perhaps the single most important inspiration for this basic understanding of this concept, and of the critical need for interdisciplinary research to understand the constitution of order in human societies. This volume includes papers that illustrate how “Tocquevilian analytics” can be applied to contemporary policy problems, especially the police studies that were the first major project around which the Bloomington School emerged. Other papers specify the lessons that Lin Ostrom in particular drew from this research for the disciplinary structure of research in the social sciences. This volume also includes a pair of interviews, conducted late in their lives, in which the two Ostroms reflect on the reason they first established the Workshop that became their academic home for over nearly four decades, as well as Lin’s reflections on the personal challenges she faced as a woman in what was then a nearly exclusive male domain.

Volume 2 addresses *Resource Governance*, the most long-enduring focus of their empirical research and their policy concerns. This volume includes papers that come before and after Lin’s best-known book, *Governing the Commons*. The initial section on water resources includes early statements of an approach to research that Vincent first developed and that later became the basis for what would eventually lead to a Nobel Prize for Lin. Several papers demonstrate their shared appreciation for the ways in which different forms of property ownership are best suited for different types of goods or resources, and illustrate the gradual progression of their understanding of this surprisingly subtle concept. Other papers extend this lesson to the diversity of institutions more generally, another of the key insights at the core of the Bloomington School. This volume concludes with revisions and extensions of the design principles for sustainable management of natural resources by community-based user groups, which is clearly the most widely known contribution of Lin to scholarship. But she always presented this list as tentative and subject to revision by later researchers, and participated in some of these revisions. Just because this finding was enough to warrant a Nobel Prize is no reason to treat it as written in stone.

In order to conduct effective research within teams of researchers trained in different methods and disciplines, it was necessary for these scholars to come to some common understanding of the most critical factors that can help explain why we see the outcomes that we see. Volume 3, entitled *Frameworks and Methods*, illustrates the progressive steps through which two very influential frameworks were developed. The first, the IAD framework, has been applied to problems in many different policy sectors, and the second, the SES framework, was designed to be more specifically addressed to the core structure of social-ecological systems. Lin was among the first political economists, and certainly among the first political scientists, to test her hypotheses in laboratory settings, and this volume includes several examples of what was then considered to be a very unusual mode of social science. It was also necessary to build new interdisciplinary professional organizations to

help sustain these modes of research, and this volume includes a few papers illustrating their contributions to the rise of public choice and commons theory.

The final volume in this compendium showcases applications of this general mode of analysis to a range of policy areas. Public administration was an especially important focus of their early research, especially that of Vincent Ostrom. Later their focus shifted to questions of development and democratization in the poorer regions of the world. Unlike most of the scholars working in these areas, the Ostroms presumed that we could learn a great deal from the peoples living in these communities, and from their efforts to solve what often seem to outsiders to be insolvable problems. The study of forest communities played an especially important role in deepening their understanding of the conditions that facilitated successful adaptation to emerging challenges. Lin in particular then took these lessons and applied them to a much broader canvas, namely, the still-emerging challenge of global climate change. Her recommendations for an approach that integrates policy interventions at multiple scales of aggregation is both based on the findings of these many research programs and a natural consequence of the fundamental ideas laid out so many years ago by Vincent and his colleagues at that time. Finally, this volume concludes with a few examples of applications to other policy areas, as a suggestion of the lessons that remain to be learned by other scholars and policy analysts.

The list of potential contents remains tentative, and subject to obtaining permission from the copyright holders. But we are confident that most copyright issues can be overcome in some way, since the Ostroms so often made similar points in different papers, often written for quite different audiences. This compendium includes papers written for informal settings as well as formal publications in scientific journals. The Ostroms were always interested in finding ways to communicate to diverse audiences, thus giving us a plethora of choices for inclusion. Lin in particular became an effective speaker later in her career, and we have included several of her best and most prominent public addresses in this compendium. Her Nobel Prize speech is justifiably lauded, but she made many other speeches that were equally effective, and that communicated her ideas and her research findings to diverse audiences. It is our fervent hope that this four-volume compendium can continue this process, by enabling our readers more convenient access to a fuller sampling of the precious contributions of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom.