

Elinor Ostrom: An uncommon woman for the commons

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On June 12, 2012, Elinor Awan Ostrom died of pancreatic cancer after an illness of about 6 months. Lin Ostrom, one of the few political scientists to win the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, showed that solutions to common resource problems worked out by individuals directly involved are often more successful and enduring than regimens imposed by central political authorities. Under specified conditions, common resources—forests, fisheries, oil fields, or grazing lands—can be managed successfully by the people who use them. She showed creatively and rigorously that participatory decision-making can work: as she said the day her Nobel Prize was announced, “What we have ignored is what citizens can do and the importance of real involvement of the people involved.” Ostrom’s pioneering work influenced and inspired researchers across many fields, and she has scores of disciples around the world, including innumerable young people who she touched with her work or personally. She loved to welcome visitors, but especially young scientists, into her Indiana workshop and made each one feel special.

Elinor Ostrom was born Elinor Awan on August 7, 1933, in Los Angeles, an only child. She was educated at the University of California at Los Angeles, completing her BA with honors in 1954. She then worked for a time before completing her MA in 1962 and her PhD in 1965. While at the University of California at Los Angeles, she met and married Vincent Ostrom, a distinguished political scientist who was 15 years her senior and who passed away little more than 2 weeks after Elinor. The Ostroms moved to Indiana in 1965 when he got a job in the political science department. Although Ostrom rarely mentioned the discrimination that she faced as a woman, she was not initially appointed to the faculty at Indiana University but hired only 1 year later, because, she later said, the department needed someone to teach a 7:30 AM class. In 1973, she and her husband founded the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University, an interdisciplinary institution that provided an intense but cooperative setting in which she developed her ideas and nurtured generations of younger colleagues and graduate students. She became a full professor in 1974 and, by the time of her death, was still active in teaching and



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research; she was a Distinguished Professor at Indiana University and the recipient of the University Medal as well as scores of other honors, including the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Honor of Alfred Nobel. She is the only woman to have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. She also somehow found the energy to become, just a few years before her death, the Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity at Arizona State University, shuttling between Indiana and Arizona as needed to get the new institute off the ground.

Her Indiana colleague Michael McGinnis commented after her death that Ostrom donated her share of the \$1.4 million Nobel award money to the Workshop—the biggest, by far, of several academic prizes with monetary awards that the Ostroms had given to the center over the years. The couple had no children and few living relatives; all of Ostrom’s substantial parental instincts went into the nurturing of her students and younger colleagues. They, and the staff at the Workshop, were absolutely devoted to her. We have rarely seen an academic leader inspire such devotion. As Professor McGinnis commented, her family “was the group of people who worked around the Workshop. She was devoted to her students, to her colleagues, to her staff.”

Ostrom’s demonstration that small-scale farmers, herders, and fishermen could devise and maintain institutional solutions to commons problems challenges both adherents of *laissez faire* and proponents of state action by showing that institutions are essential to solve commons problems but that these institutions need not be imposed by the state. Indeed, her work is

relevant not only to local commons issues but any situation characterized by an absence of authoritative hierarchies to enforce rules. It is relevant to world politics as well as irrigation systems in Nepal. Ostrom showed, especially in her masterpiece *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1), that, at vastly different scales, collective action problems can, under some conditions, be overcome without hierarchical government when participants provide their own institutions. However, these institutions must be supported by self-enforcing agreements and maintained through strategies that make the maintenance of such agreements consistent with the perceived self-interest of participants. Cooperation is maintained by the interaction of reciprocity, reputation, and trust and not by altruism. It follows that we live in “a world of possibility rather than of necessity. We are neither trapped in inexorable tragedies nor free of moral responsibility for creating and sustaining incentives that facilitate our own achievement of mutually productive outcomes” (2).

This insight led Ostrom to deep involvement with the application of game theoretic methods to problems of cooperation, and game theory grew in importance in her work after she and Vincent decided to spend a sabbatical with Reinhard Selten in Bielefeld in the early 1980s. The Ostroms remained close colleagues of Selten, and her work took on a new and deeply mathematical dimension. The way in which she shifted the terms of the institutional challenges was truly revolutionary but based on the most careful of methodologies. Indeed, in the last few years of her life, she was actively using geographic information system technologies to map land use changes. In these respects and others, she showed both continuing innovation and great intellectual courage.

Ostrom also became fascinated with the perspectives that could be gleaned from the study of complex adaptive systems more generally, which helped inform her emphasis on the need to take polycentric approaches. Polycentric governance had been pioneered by her husband Vincent,

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