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If you go to the website and click on the audio version of this interview, you will find a large-hearted deeply grounded teacher, a real human being.

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Interview Transcript

Question: *How has being raised in the depression affected you?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, I think being raised during the depression is a very important thing in my generation. I

think it meant that I had to learn very early how to work hard and how to be independent and so maybe part of it is that you just learn that you've got to be independent and that the world isn't going to come with you with all sorts of gifts.

Question: *Was your family enthusiastic about your field of study?*

Elinor Ostrom: Not very enthusiastic. My mother wasn't even enthusiastic about my going to college, but I had good friends in graduate school who were very, very encouraging and I still retain some of those colleagues through all the years, and they made a huge difference.

Question: *Was it difficult to find work in your field as a woman?*

Elinor Ostrom: Early years it was a challenge to find a position, so in the early years I think being a woman was a big handicap. Pursing the kind of work I have been doing was not very much appreciated across the social sciences, but I just got fascinated with what I was doing and so being a stubborn son of a gun, I just kept going.

Question: *How did you deal with opposition from your colleagues?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, trying to do really good field work and then I was very fortunate, I was able, after being a graduate of UCLA during the Vietnam war and eighty entering students and a fair administrative load, I was able to teach my first graduate seminar and I had outstanding graduate students, some of whom have become colleagues and I work with all, have worked with for many years. And I then worked with undergraduate students so that I was able to blend research and teaching in a very active way in Indianapolis studying policing in black communities in Chicago, again studying policing. And that was so interesting that I wasn't so concerned about what my colleagues thought. I just got interested in what I was doing.

Question: *How were you treated by your male colleagues?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, it was a big controversy at UCLA in the political science department. They had not had a woman in their program for many years and there were four of us out of forty admitted in the year I was admitted to a doctoral program and there were many of the faculty who were extremely upset. But again, I had many friends that helped me through it.

Question: *Do you take issue with those who call your theories "implicitly socialistic"?*

Elinor Ostrom: Yes. I don't think they are supporting socialism as a top-down theory. A lot of socialist governments are very much top down and I think my theory does challenge that any top-down government, whether on the right or the left, is unlikely to be able to solve many of the problems of resource sustainability in the world.

Question: *Have you experienced a divide in economics?*

Elinor Ostrom: There is a strong divide between micro and macro and my theories are all in the micro area. But there's a big challenge in trying to understand why people make the decisions they do and particularly why they make decisions in dilemma-type settings, where our traditional theory had predicted that they would make decisions not to cooperate and they frequently make other decisions.

Question: *What are the dangers of this separation between macro and micro?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, I'm more concerned about the broader separation of the social sciences. I think that is a real danger because we can, I call them the silos, if everyone works in their silo, rather than learning from one another, so I work across disciplines and always have. My PhD committee, I had sociology, engineering, economics, and political science on it.

Question: *Should the social sciences be more integrated?*

Elinor Ostrom: Yes. But it's not integration, it's that people are learning their own discipline. I don't want to get rid of the disciplines entirely, but it is then that people learn how to work together and that the, we have very bad incentives. If you publish outside your discipline, frequently inside your discipline, that's not counted for tenure. And so there are very substantial dis-incentives to do interdisciplinary work. So interdisciplinary and integration are different.

Question: *Can you explain your work regarding the tragedy of the commons?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, Mensor, no, sorry, not Mensor, he came later, Gerharten wrote a very stirring article in 1968, published in science, and he imagined a pasture opened to all and posited that if that were the case, then everyone would bring their animals on and they would keep bringing more and more and more and they would eventually overuse the commons. What he went on to say was that they were trapped and could not themselves get out of it. And what our theoretical work and empirical work has shown, is that in many instances, but not all, people have found ways of agreeing on their own rules and extracting themselves from the problem.

Question: *Is there an alternative to top-down government or free market solutions?*

Elinor Ostrom: Yeah. This is the, this concept of polycentricity of enabling both market and governments at multiple scales to interact with community organization so that we have a complex nested system. and it ain't pretty in the sense that it's nice and neat and many people have tried to get rid of creative solutions that are complex, but society is complex, people are complex. And for us to have simple solutions to complex problems, not a good idea.

Question: *Can your research on the commons teach us about climate change?*

Elinor Ostrom: If the community at play were only the entire planet and we simply wait until the big guys make a decision, we're in deep trouble. Our theoretical work on polycentricity here is very relevant in that while in any greenhouse gas omission, does have a global effect, it may also have, and usually does, local and regional effects. So we need to be thinking about how to enhance the ways of organizing around the local and regional so as to produce more externalities that are positive at the global.

Question: *Have there been any particularly misguided government actions in this area?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, a great number of the policies laid down, let's take the policies for eastern Africa related to the pasture area that the Masai occupied. The Masai had been there for centuries and had figured out a way of grazing over a great distance so that in an area where the rainfall was limited and spotty, they were able to maintain that range land in very good form. It didn't look pretty, as that's the way it was, but if you graze down too far, and then you let some other things come up and don't graze in an area and you get

big bushes, then you end up with ruining the functioning of it. Well, when the Brits came in, they gave half of it—well, I shouldn't say that, not half—they gave a very large segment away to colonial farmers and to set up a big reserve. The Kenyan government in the 1950's onward kept giving away, giving away, giving away. They finally created group ranches, but the group ranches weren't large enough to really enable them to maintain the kind of system that worked. They the have been privatizing themselves, the Masai, their land, so it would not be given away again by the government, and working out arrangements so that family and friends can share and they're recreating the movement of the cattle around, and Esther [IB] has done a wonderful job of studying this over time and they may, the local people may again find a way of coping with a very difficult and challenging environment.

Question: *If you could have dinner with anybody, who would it be?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, I would like to have a dinner with John R. Commons, who was a very distinguished labor economist at the University of Wisconsin and whose work I've read multiple times and I still assign to my students. He was struggling with trying to understand how to enable labor to organize more effectively and wrote some of the initial legislation for labor law in Wisconsin and elsewhere. And he had a very interesting philosophy about rights having a counterpart to duties. And so if somebody has a right, somebody has to have a duty! And I would love to discuss with him some of those philosophical foundations.

Question: *What other industries need to adopt commons-oriented economics?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, all of the water industry in the United States is dealing with a common pool resource and so there are many private and public firms, and many of them do very well and others don't. Some are not good at all.

Electricity is also using common facilities, but both with electricity and water, they both have an arrangement in many cities where when you actually use it, in the household, you now have converted the water in the household to a private good. And so, it is again, showing this difference between the water in the lake or in the river, and the water that's in the pipe and gone into the household and you turn the tap and now it's private good.

Question: *How does information on the internet vary from natural resources?*

Elinor Ostrom: Okay. We've made a distinction in our work between public goods and common pool of resources. Both of them have a problem of keeping people out, it's difficult to exclude people from a large fishery or an internet. But my use of knowledge does not take away from your use of knowledge, there's no subtractability.

Now, on the internet, there are problems of congestion from time to time and we've been building and building and building so that we keep making it bigger and bigger and the problems of congestion are not as great, but we have problems then when we develop freeware, who is encouraged to do so, how do we give credit where credit's due, and there are lots of people who said, "Oh, you'll never have people contribute to making freeware." Well, wrong. They do. So there's a, there are many similarities, but it is a somewhat different problem and Charlotte Hess and I have been working on that one and Charlie Schwike at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Question: *Does the internet show the benefits of governing by informal rules?*

Elinor Ostrom: Well, they're not so informal. Over time, Doug Van Houweling and others who have been involved in developing those rules have tried to be sure that there were reasonable rules and it's a challenge, this is not an easy thing to organize. But people have been working on it very hard. There are problems of common pool and all sorts of problems of this sort. But even in farmer's markets around the world, you sometimes will find some people coming in a vegetable stand and having rotten fruit underneath the good fruit. So I don't know any institution that works perfectly in all circumstances.

Question: *How does economics differ between renewable and non-renewable resources?*

Elinor Ostrom: Yeah, it's a big problem and Gary Libecap has done an excellent variety of very good economic articles on oil wells. And there your problem is timing rather than how much you take out now. Because if you take out oil too fast, the soil around it collapses. And so oil companies have had to invest heavily in getting good technical geologic information and then developing agreements among them as to the way they're going to extract. And to that extent, while the oil is in the ground, it's a common pool. But like water, once it's pulled out, it becomes something that can be packaged. And here, the problem of getting good timing is a very big one. In the Middle East, oil has been run pretty much as an oligopoly and a part of our problem is the pricing of an oligopoly is not necessarily a fair pricing.

On the other hand, we do need to have more resources that are used for heating and transport priced higher, but then can that money go into public coffers that then invest in new solar innovations, wind power, and a variety of other techniques, rather than into an oligopolous pocket.

Recorded on: October 25, 2009

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Big Think Interview With Elinor Ostrom



[Elinor Ostrom](#)

Nobel Prize, Economics 2009

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Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize in Economics

Posted By [Peter Boettke](#)

Elinor Ostrom is the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. She is also one of the most iconoclastic thinkers to win the prize. (She shared the prize with Oliver Williamson.) Professor Ostrom's work focuses on the mechanisms of self-governance that operate in different societies. Her intellectual curiosity led her to study local public economies—in particular the municipal provision of police services, the management of water supplies, fisheries, forestry, and development in the less-developed world. Her framework of analysis builds from a model of humanly rational choice to a historically grounded institutional analysis. She studies the rules that govern the behavior of individuals in their interactions both with nature and with one another. ✓

Her colleagues at Indiana University describe her as "humble and hardworking," and another Nobel Prize winner, Vernon Smith, calls her a "remarkable scholar" with a passionate drive to understand human societies in all their variety. A former president of the Public Choice Society and the American Association of Political Science, Ostrom is also one of the most beloved teachers in academia. The Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University that she co-directed with her husband, Vincent, is perhaps the ideal model for a research and graduate education center.

But what do we learn from her studies? I would argue that we learn at least three major points of style and substance. First, much of the last century of political and economic discourse has been dominated by a debate between advocates of perfect markets and perfect central planners. For one side, the demonstration of market failure was accompanied by an insistence that government would provide the necessary corrective. Ostrom was one of the core thinkers in the social sciences to say, "Hold on. Markets may fail, but government solutions also might not work." One must always remember that Elinor and Vincent Ostrom are foundational contributors to the theory of **Public Choice** [1]. But the Ostroms went further than simply demonstrating the possibility of government failure. ✓

Smith versus Hobbes

This leads to the second point. In the history of political and economic thought the source of social order has been attributed either to the invisible hand of market coordination (Smith) or the heavy hand of state control (Hobbes). Perhaps one of the best ways to understand Elinor Ostrom's work is to see it as working out a Hobbesian problem by way of a Smithian solution. That is perhaps a bit of a stretch but not by much. Her work on local public economies and common-pool resources focuses on actual "rules in use" (as opposed to the "rules in form") that decentralized individuals and groups rely on to make decisions and to coordinate their behavior in order to overcome **social dilemmas** [2]. Hers is an optimistic message about the power of self-governance to succeed even in difficult situations. As my colleague Alex Tabarrok put it, she sees how, through various voluntary associations, groups transform the common-pool resource situation from a "tragedy of the commons" to an "opportunity of the commons." ✓

Traditional economic theory argues that public goods cannot be provided through the

market. Traditional Public Choice theory argues that government often fails to provide solutions. Ostrom shows that decentralized groups can develop various rule systems that enable social cooperation to emerge through voluntary association. A point that sometimes trips up readers is that Ostrom often focuses on situations where the technology of parceling property into private plots does not exist. In these situations she studies collective, but non-State decision-making over common-pool resources. While private-property solutions are not employed in such cases, the "rules in use" that do operate accomplish what private property would have accomplished. We find rules that limit access and that make individuals in the group accountable for their misuse of the resource. We also find enforcement of those rules. In short, the analyst must be willing to look at both the form and function of rules in a variety of social situations. There is a diversity of institutions at work in different societies that promote voluntary cooperation. As social scientists, we have to be able to understand them. There are rules that are in use, rules that are stated but not in use, rules that go by one name but that in practice do something else, and rules that tightly fit use, form, and function. Ostrom has insisted that social scientists must understand the rules that govern human behavior—both the way we interact with one another and the way we interact with nature. Some rules systems promote human betterment through the promotion of peaceful social cooperation and wealth creation; others thwart human progress by ensuring violence and poverty. It is actually that simple, and that profound. ✓

The foundation of the social order of a free people is self-governance, not governmental authority and centralized power. Decentralized decision making that drills deep into the local social dilemmas real people face, that mobilizes incentives within a local rule structure, and that utilizes local knowledge is how the process of institutional development assures that self-governance is effective governance, enabling fallible human beings to reasonably manage scarce resources and the relationships among themselves. ✓

Understanding Diverse Societies

The final point I want to stress concerning Ostrom's research comes as a methodological message. Elinor's work is humanistic and scientific. She is trying to understand human societies in all their variety. To do so she had to get up close and personal: from local government in California to irrigation systems in Nepal—and everything in between. Her field work in economics and political economy is guided by the logic of human choice. She describes her research program as "a behavioral approach to the rational choice theory of collective action." If you take away the academic language, it translates into a research program that begins with human beings and their purposes and plans, and ends with their stumbling and groping to find voluntary solutions to difficult social dilemmas through norms, conventions, and rules. ✓

Let me conclude by bringing this back to my title: Why should people who care about liberty rejoice in this choice for the prize? There is an ideological importance to the work of Elinor Ostrom. She has not stressed it in her work, but Vincent has ventured into the field of social philosophy. My favorite book of his is *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerabilities of Democracies* (1997). In that work Vincent asks what are the preconditions for a self-governing citizenry. He answers that a self-governing society must be composed of citizens fully capable of embracing the "cares of thinking and the troubles of living." Unfortunately, the machinations of democratic politics—with interest-group manipulation, logrolling, rent-seeking, and the vote motive—tend to undermine the capacity for self-governance among a people. ✓

Nothing in this should be interpreted as deterministically pessimistic. The message is that hope is to be found not in the State but in the people. A society of free and

responsible individuals who are able to form voluntary associations will solve the social dilemmas they confront through various means of self-governance.

Nobody has done more than Elinor Ostrom, both in her research and in her teaching/mentor capacity at the Workshop in Political Philosophy and Policy Analysis, to help us understand the self-governing rules and institutions that work to elicit cooperation in a wide variety of societies. And nobody has done more to alert us to the damage governments can do when they attempt to impose alien rules on local peoples from afar—especially when their own systems are already addressing social dilemmas in their own way. Elinor demands that we understand and respect institutional diversity in our world, to see the ingenuity and wisdom in local solutions and in the entrepreneurial creativity and resourcefulness of individuals throughout the developed and less-developed world. Transcending the older debates in social science and public policy, Elinor Ostrom's work emphasizes the richness of the institutional environment and the creative solutions that arise when individuals are free to form associations and work within a network of informal rules that promote individual responsibility and collective accountability.

Supporters of FEE and readers of *The Freeman* are attracted to the vision of a society of free and responsible individuals. Elinor Ostrom's research gives us a window into the diverse world of associations that do not fit neatly into the categories of "market" or "State" but nevertheless are essential to peaceful and prosperous social cooperation.

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[1] Public Choice: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicChoice.html>

[2] social dilemmas: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_dilemma

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THE CROSSING

WELCOME TO THE STEPS CENTRE BLOG

THURSDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2009

ELINOR OSTROM'S NOBEL PRIZE



By Lyla Mehta and Melissa Leach

After a surprising Nobel Prize week, Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize award in Economic Sciences, shared with Oliver Williamson, is to be welcomed and celebrated. Photo: Elinor Ostrom courtesy of McGill University

The Prize has been awarded for her analysis of economic governance, especially of resources held as commons, and

we are pleased to see public recognition for these 'non-mainstream' economics perspectives.

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences has awarded the economics prize not only to the first woman, but also flagged the importance of cooperation and collective action to safeguard the local and global commons, something urgently required by our planet currently in peril.


Elinor Ostrom has provided transdisciplinary perspectives in the study of institutions and co-operative resource management. Her groundbreaking work on Common Property Resource (CPR) theory has been built up from field studies with communities in Africa and Asia. It takes its theoretical grounding from game theory - looking at collective action dilemmas and focusing on the ways in which institutions or rules can be purposively crafted to produce collective action. It has been central in establishing the significance of local institutions in resource management.

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WELCOME TO THE STEPS CENTRE BLOG

The STEPS Centre (Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability) is an interdisciplinary global research and policy engagement hub combining development with science and technology studies.

We aim to develop a new approach to understanding, action and communication on sustainability and development. Our work covers agriculture and food, health and disease and water and sanitation.

The importance of Elinor Ostrom's work

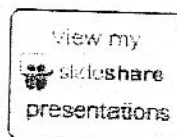
- ✓ Refuting Hardin's (1968) pessimistic 'tragedy of the commons', her publications have highlighted a variety of conditions under which collective action in resource management operates effectively, such as clear resource boundaries and relative socio-economic homogeneity among users - sometimes presented as 'design principles'. Through the meticulous study of local institutional arrangements in irrigation management, rangelands, fisheries, forests and other CPR regimes around the world, Ostrom and her collaborators at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University have shown us that CPR management neither has to be private nor state driven to be successful. The importance of this analysis in refuting Malthusian and neo-Malthusian thinking about overpopulation, Hobbesian anarchy and resource scarcity has been tremendous, and the credit for this must largely go to Elinor Ostrom. Her work has inspired generations of researchers and students to value and explore local institutional responses to environmental challenges, while giving theoretical underpinning to policy approaches in community-based sustainable development.

The challenges from Elinor Ostrom's work

Despite her training as a political scientist, Elinor Ostrom draws on the tenets of new institutional economics. Her work is underpinned by economic perspectives on human behaviour and the notion of a universally rational, self-interested actor. Her approach and messages about the advantages of community control - together with the broader CPR work she has pioneered - have inspired key strands of work within the Knowledge, Technology and Society team (KNOTS) at IDS, but her perspectives also raise challenges which we have sought to address.

The KNOTS Team is working to understand and influence the institutions and power-knowledge relationships that link technology, ecology and society - connecting global debates with local realities through interdisciplinary research, networks and partnerships. Institutional arrangements for natural resource management have been a key concern, drawing on field research on water, rangelands, forests, biodiversity and agricultural livelihoods. Our approaches, bringing together disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, ecology and science and technology studies, complement the CPR literature

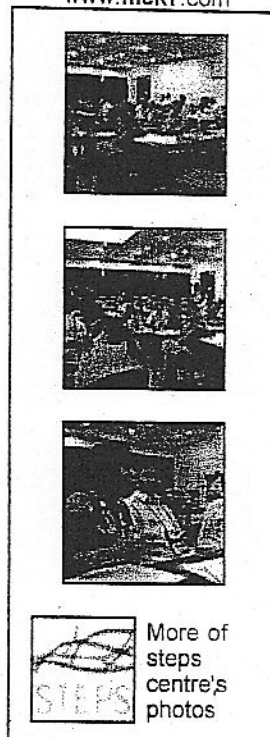
Based at the Institute of Development Studies and SPRU (Science and Technology Policy Research) in the UK, with a network of partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America, we are funded by the Economic & Social Research Council.



WHY THE CROSSING?

Crossing: a place at which pathways or tracks intersect; a path which can be crossed to get from one side to the other. We want to generate and encourage debate about pathways to sustainability through our research. The Crossing is a place where that debate can happen. Please join in.

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in exploring how questions of knowledge, power, culture and history shape resource governance. We have also been particularly interested in the implications of dynamic and uncertain contexts for natural resource management.

By not paying enough attention to the nuances of community dynamics, CPR work has often underplayed questions of social difference and the diverse - and sometimes conflicting - interests of resource users. In addition the focus on collective action has tended to direct attention away from the fact that, while institutions can enhance co-operation, they can also be beset with conflict, factional divisions and power politics. The design principles, while very useful, can also appear to be a 'blueprint' for collective action, something that risks ignoring uncertainty and unpredictability, both in terms of human action and in the ecological world.

Elinor Ostrom's recent work has attempted to engage more fully with some of these issues, moving away from the early rigid approach to design principles and embracing questions about the learning and resilience needed for successful collective action in today's rapidly changing societies and environments. We look forward to continued fruitful and challenging debate with her and her colleagues, looking across disciplines and perspectives. Notwithstanding these issues, there is much reason to be pleased with the Nobel committee's decision. The planet urgently needs cooperation, not conflict, in resolving compelling issues such as water shortages and climate change, and in safeguarding our common heritage. Elinor Ostrom's work provides us with the optimism and assurance that this is possible.

Nobel Prize for Economics 2009

The International Association for the Study of the Commons

KNOTS team publications

Mehta, L et al, 1999 'Exploring Understandings of Institutions and Uncertainty New Directions in Natural Resources Management', IDS Discussion Paper 372, Brighton: IDS

Mehta, L, Leach, M. and Scoones, I. , 'Editorial. Environmental Governance in an Uncertain World', IDS Bulletin 32: 4, Brighton: IDS

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Future Health Systems
New Agriculturist
OneWorld.net
Open Democracy
Principal Voices
Realising Rights
Research & Media Network
SciDev.net

Leach, M., I. Scoones and A. Stirling, forthcoming 2010, *Dynamic Sustainabilities: technology, environment, social justice*. London: Earthscan

Fairhead, J. and M. Leach, 2003, *Science, society and power: environmental knowledge and policy in West Africa and the Caribbean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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POSTED BY NATHAN OXLEY AT 08:46

LABELS: COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCE, COMMONS, ECONOMICS, ELINOR OSTROM, NOBEL PRIZE, RESILIENCE

2 COMMENTS:

cheap said...

Its really a honor of the president obama..

16 OCTOBER 2009 10:21



Nathan Oxley said...

@cheap: I'd say it's much more in honour of Elinor Ostrom and Oliver E. Williamson, as they were the people that were awarded the Economics prize, but I'd be interested to know why you think that...

19 OCTOBER 2009 09:08

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