



**Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012)**  
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## RETROSPECTIVE

# Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012)

Rick K. Wilson

Elinor (Lin) Ostrom, Distinguished Professor at Indiana University, died on 12 June 2012 at the age of 78. Her husband and intellectual partner, Vincent Ostrom, died on 29 June 2012 at the age of 92. Lin was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a member of the United States National Academy of Sciences. In 2009, Lin was awarded (with Oliver Williamson) the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, the first (and only) woman to win the prize. Doubly interesting is that she was not an economist, but a political scientist. While proud of her discipline, at heart, she considered herself a social scientist.

Lin was from Los Angeles, California, and received her undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her early career began with a study of water resources in Southern California, where she addressed the puzzle of why some water districts were able to self-organize to stanch the depletion of an aquifer, while others failed. The answer was in the institutional detail of how groups organized. Soon thereafter, Lin and her husband Vincent sought academic positions. As she reminded me before my tenure, it was important to have a back-up plan. Theirs was to open a wood-working shop in Haight-Ashbury in 1965. What cabinet making lost, Indiana University gained by offering them positions, although Lin's was initially an adjunct position.

In 1973, Lin and Vincent founded the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, which welcomed students and faculty alike from all social science disciplines, as well as the occasional mathematician and anyone with an interest in theoretical reasoning about policy problems. Two words characterized the Workshop: collaboration and co-production. Students were included on projects on equal footing with faculty. If you thought you had a contribution to make, you were listened to and were expected to defend your position. Lin's boisterous laugh and the sparkle in her eye made it easier to accept the fact that your new model was going nowhere. When you made a contribution, she welcomed it with open arms and quickly pressed you to do more.

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Out of the Workshop came an amazing array of projects with Lin at the center. In the 1970s, she questioned whether centralized, consolidated governments could better provide basic citizens services than a decentralized, self-organized system she later came to call "polycentric." To test her ideas, she undertook a major study of police services across different jurisdictions. In her usual fashion, Lin assembled a large group of students, built comprehensive measures, made friends with everyone, and rode into the field with on-duty police officers. The data supported her insight: Smaller police departments in more fragmented jurisdictions provided better services than large consolidated departments.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Lin returned to the problem of the "tragedy of the commons." This is a well-known dilemma in which no one can be prevented from appropriating a resource (e.g., fishing), but when appropriated, the resource disappears. This gives everyone an incentive to take as much as possible, and it leads to the resource crashing (e.g., overfishing). The usual solution appeals to a central authority to solve the dilemma. Yet the track record for centralized solutions has been abysmal. Lin's work pointed out that local users are in the best position to solve such a dilemma. This is accomplished by adopting social, political, and economic institutions that match the local culture, embody local norms, and fit the resource. She amassed thousands of case studies and explored systematic regularities by developing formal models and testing them with laboratory experiments. That work turned the common wisdom on its head.

In the 2000s, Lin traveled farther afield, working with different groups on a wide variety of dilemmas, including farmers in Nepal and foresters in Nigeria and Kenya. The Nobel Prize gave her a marvelous soapbox on which to stand. She admitted that, while she once spent time convincing low-level

The only woman to win the Nobel Prize in economics studied the problem of the "tragedy of the commons" for the betterment of mankind.



bureaucrats, now she spoke to heads of agencies, and they listened. Even after she became ill with pancreatic cancer, Lin continued a rigorous travel schedule. Weeks before she died, she was the keynote speaker for the International Association for the Study of the Commons held in Mexico City. Everywhere her message was the same: There is no universal panacea; encourage the development of local institutions. Although the tragedy of the commons can be solved, there is no set formula, and the right solution means

choosing carefully from a rich array of institutional solutions.

Her colleagues and friends wondered how she managed to accomplish so much. There were three answers. Lin was awake and working by 3 am. She and Vincent escaped every summer to their remote cabin on Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron, devoting their time to writing. And Lin read voraciously, far beyond the confines of her discipline. When she tackled a problem, she enlisted a team of students and staff to assemble a huge bibliography, which she then read and synthesized. Emblematic of the scope of her scholarship was her 1998 Presidential address to the American Political Science Association, in which she urged the community to move beyond standard boundaries and embrace important findings from biology and neuroscience.

Lin's legacy will continue through the workshop and through her many students and collaborators. Her students will remember the lessons that she taught us about doing science. Visitors to the workshop will remember the excitement of the intellectual exchange. Co-authors will remember her inspiration and exacting standards. Those fortunate enough to have met her will remember a kind, generous person who sought answers to many questions with the goal to improve policy choices. She will be sorely missed. 10.1126/science.1227725