

## Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012)

Roberta Herzberg · Barbara Allen

Received: 2 October 2012 / Accepted: 4 October 2012 / Published online: 25 October 2012  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2012

There are few people whose life and work has the capacity to change an entire profession. Elinor Ostrom was one such person, which makes her loss on June 12, 2012, such a great blow to the discipline she loved. Her work changed how we think about institutions of governance. She taught us to be careful about generalizations and to embrace complexity rather than avoid it in our models. To those who knew this work, it was not surprising when the Nobel committee recognized those contributions by awarding her the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics (The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel) with Oliver Williamson. It was her greatest professional recognition, but it was not sufficient to recognize the myriad ways she shaped all around her through collaboration, contestation, and love. Even less surprising was the fact that Lin would be the first woman to be so recognized in economics. Lin was always a path-breaking role model for women in her field. There was no better guide for young women than simply observing how Lin conducted her own career. From her beginning at Indiana University in 1965, Lin maximized every opportunity and never let the clear injustices she faced in those early years keep her from the work she loved. Instead, she worked so successfully that even the doubters were forced to recognize the quality of the work.

With every passing year and the accumulation of a trophy room of recognitions, her response was to continue to pursue her work enthusiastically—even to the last days of her life. The Nobel Prize brought opportunities to speak on every continent—not only to fellow academic specialists but also to practitioners working on many of the world’s seemingly intractable problems of resource sustainability. Lin obliged these requests in appearances throughout Europe and Asia in her last months and in interviews filmed only a few weeks

---

R. Herzberg (✉)

Department of Political Science, Utah State University, UMC 0725, Logan, UT 84322-0725, USA  
e-mail: [bobbi.herzberg@usu.edu](mailto:bobbi.herzberg@usu.edu)

B. Allen

Department of Political Science, Carleton College, Weitz Center for Creativity 239a, Northfield, MN, USA  
e-mail: [ballen@carleton.edu](mailto:ballen@carleton.edu)

before her death. To the colleagues with whom she long had worked and the colleagues who met her in these final appearances there was no greater inspiration than her energy, enthusiasm, and smile. The world now recognizes what many of us have known for decades: Lin was unsurpassed as a scholar, teacher, mentor, and, for us, friend.

Lin Ostrom was born Elinor Claire Awan in 1933 in Beverly Hills, California amidst the trials of the Great Depression. She recalled her father, Adrian Awan, an award-winning Broadway set designer and impresario of the Hollywood Bowl, working as a day laborer—and indeed happy for any work—during these difficult days. Her mother, Leah Hopkins, a talented musician who, as a high school junior, had traveled on her own by train from the family home in South Dakota to attend the Boston Conservatory of Music, accomplished her own path breaking work as manager of the San Francisco Opera. Circumstances of the time shaped Lin's perspective. Participation in the Depression and World War Two-era self-help "victory gardens" taught this "urban kid," as she called herself, what communities can do to solve serious social problems.

Lin attended Beverley Hills High School where she joined the debate team in hopes of overcoming a childhood stutter and painful shyness. She not only mastered debate, but also became an outstanding member of the school swim team. In a day when the division between amateur and professional athletics was more keenly maintained, Lin was forced to leave competitive swimming behind to work as a swim coach in order to put herself through college at UCLA.

Lin completed her degree in three years in time to marry her high school sweetheart, Charles "Chuck" Scott. Immediately after college, in 1954, they moved to Cambridge, MA so Chuck could attend Harvard Law School. Lin supported them by working first as a secretary and soon, after making a position for herself in what today is called "human resources," in administration at the electronic test equipment manufacturer, GenRad. Following Chuck's graduation from law school, they returned to Beverley Hills where Chuck began a practice in entertainment law and Lin began to think about graduate school for herself. However, when Lin returned to UCLA, it was not as a graduate student, but as a secretary. She began taking classes in public policy and in economics as time allowed. Lin was not admitted into the economics department graduate program and there were many in the political science department who opposed her acceptance into their Ph.D. program. Her family likewise did not support her plan to pursue a career, but she persevered. She and Chuck Scott divorced amicably and Lin went on to the life we all knew.

Lin's professional interest in institutions began in graduate study with Vincent Ostrom at UCLA. Although she took only one class with Vincent, the ideas of public service industries and polycentric governance, which he worked out with Charles Tiebout and Robert Warren, laid a foundation for her examination of special metropolitan water districts. Lin's work on the West Basin Water District opened a window on a challenging form of property rights assignments that others grouped into the broad class of public goods: common-pool resources. In this case, it was the water commons of the L.A. West Basin. She asked, was the "commons" really a public good at all? Or, were common pool resources perhaps a different matter, requiring a different approach to establish effective and efficient governance? That first puzzle suggested to her something of the diverse environmental exigencies humans face and the diverse institutional options that humans create when faced with serious social dilemmas. This was the beginning of a lifetime of empirical analysis in which Lin carefully sorted through complex human institutions using the growing body of analytics from public choice.

She married her lifelong love, and collaborator, Vincent, in 1965, and the couple moved to Bloomington, Indiana to join the Department of Political Science at Indiana University.

Although some members of the university may have seen Lin's appointment as an assistant professor as a courtesy to her esteemed husband, Lin and Vincent never thought of their collaboration in such terms. Their dream was to work together to build an intellectual community on a foundation of teamwork, equality, and the deep personal regard for each other that allows for intellectual debate, reflection, and change. Their work began with developing models of public goods and public choice that built on a logic of polycentric forms. Vincent's work suggested the importance of constitutional design, while Lin brought attention to the emerging institutions discovered in the empirical arena. Together they reinforced each other's strengths, while emphasizing the importance of understanding the different levels of human interaction. They shared simple interests based in artisanship and natural order. Whether finding an emerging pattern in wood as they handcrafted furniture or appreciating the design in the Native American art that filled their home, they lived their beliefs in human potentiality and invited others to join them in this experience.

From the beginning, Lin and Vincent recognized that their work and lives would forever be intertwined and at Indiana they built the Workshop that would be their family. In their first year at Indiana, Lin began to extend her metropolitan service analysis more systematically. Despite her temporary status on the faculty, Lin worked to prove herself. She confidently pressed for grants and support that would fund the scope of empirical analysis needed to substantiate the argument that diverse institutional forms could successfully serve the needs of self-governing communities. Soon, she was leading teams of graduates and undergraduates, unleashed on service delivery systems around the nation. Plenty of theory undergirded the study, but testing required methods to measure quality beyond self-reporting. Our early days at the Workshop were filled with stories of odd equipment such as the "Rough-o-meter," designed to measure potholes and street repair. It was truly a time of new behavioral approaches, and Lin and her team discovered multiple measurements. While some were undoubtedly remembered bigger than life in those early Workshop days, they seemed completely consistent with the qualities Lin brought to her research—creative, yet fully utilitarian. When you listen to members of the Workshop team discuss this time, what stands out is the hands-on quality of Lin's research leadership. What they mention is the fact that Lin was always on the frontline. She never asked any research associate to do what she had not already done herself. Part of her confidence in the results could be traced to this personal interaction with data collection. Intimate involvement with the tools of measurement, knowledge and use of multiple indicators and methods, a deep understanding of the particular—of scale and scope—and a profound appreciation of the artisans we studied and the artisans we became as social scientists, these were the abiding principles she taught.

The Ostrom research program, conducted over that decade, resulted in articles and books on metropolitan design and service delivery that eventually changed understandings in public policy, urban politics, and many other fields. These studies gave concrete meaning to the theoretical concept of polycentricity. The Ostroms became a force in the 1970s debate regarding metropolitan consolidation. While reformers saw chaos in the thousands of small, overlapping governments, Lin and her team demonstrated that there was a complex logic to these emergent structures. In works co-authored with then graduate students Roger Parks, Gordon Whitaker, Stephen Mastroski, William Baugh, Stephen Percy, Richard Guarasci, Lin demonstrated that urban services could most efficiently and effectively be delivered through polycentric institutional designs and that consolidated police and other services were often less effective and more costly than the "overlapping," "fragmented" services they were meant to replace.

While studying these cases of public economies and the delivery of urban services, Lin increased her formal relationship with Public Choice. The careful analytic framework of

public choice with its emphasis on social dilemmas became a logical fit with the interests and training of the Ostroms. As with every endeavor in Lin's career, she dedicated her energies to understanding and contributing to this significant new theoretical approach. From the beginning, she became a presence in the society and would serve as its president from 1982–1983. She worked to influence the society to understand the need for more complex models and an appreciation for diversity. She cautioned her colleagues against over-generalization and simplification in their models. Having been questioned about asking citizens directly about their perceptions and preferences (so much so that she invented tools like the Road Rough-o-meter to demonstrate the correlation between citizens' perceptions and physical realities), she emphasized methodological diversity and the necessity of teamwork, built on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to provide the depth necessary to view complex problems in a complex way.

Anyone who spent the time in the field that Lin had would understand the importance of variety in institutional forms and, as such, most would reject efforts to generalize using the precise models of public choice. But Lin did not take this route. Instead she took the middle way, looking for methods to merge the complexity she knew with the precise language and structure of public choice. Her approach resulted in the rich frameworks that would become her way of studying the commons and such matters as international development and sustainable resource use in work that spanned the next 30 years.

In the 1980s, Lin began what would become a complete transition from case studies on metropolitan governance and polycentricity to her more theoretical analysis of institutions with special focus on the commons. It was a critical time in her research agenda and watching her careful consideration as she developed her central theory of the commons provided the perfect example for young scholars. Her move toward abstracting what she had learned from empirical work remained grounded in the Workshop focus on multiple levels of institutional influence ranging from the constitutional to the operational arenas of choice. Central to this period of her intellectual development was the year Lin and Vincent spent in Bielefeld, Germany at the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF, The Center for Interdisciplinary Research), Bielefeld University, with Reinhard Selten and Franz-Xaver Kaufmann. As was her way, Lin worked tirelessly as a committed student of game theory and abstract models of the collective problems that occupied her.

On her return from Bielefeld, Lin's focus turned in two directions—one, the more abstract effort to model social dilemmas using the tools of game theory, and the second, a more global, yet still particular perspective that shaped her empirical efforts. These combined approaches would result in Lin's most famous work, *Governing the Commons* (Ostrom 1990), which analyzes the institutional rules underpinning long enduring commons around the world. Published in 1990, the work suggests the power of Ostrom's approach to analytic political analysis—careful theoretical design emerging from extensive empirical description. The framework distilled the critical features of any Commons dilemma to identify the Ostrom perspective on development theory and institutional design. The importance of this work is clear from the number of scholars across multiple disciplines who cite the work as foundational.

Lin's unique combination of rational choice theory, empirical study, and an analytical bent toward the complexity of human agents and agency is captured perfectly in the title of her 1997 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association, *A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action* (Ostrom 1998). Here she pressed analysts to look beyond the short term rationality in early work to a richer, more profound approach that centers on the reciprocity, reputation, and trust common to empirically successful commons across the globe.

From her recognition of the variety of successful institutions in societies across time and space, Lin and numerous collaborators refined the “institutional analysis and development” framework that would launch dozens of resource studies around the world. They used this approach first to understand the empirical realities—the arenas of actual choice—and only then to suggest strategies for those hoping to assist developing communities. One of the fears raised by critics of this effort was that an institutional approach to development was too paternalistic to be consistent with the Ostrom commitment to self-governance. Since part of the exercise was to identify the institutions that are most effective in a given setting, the approach lent itself to those who wanted prescriptive answers for developmental problems. But, such thinking ran counter to Ostrom logic. Lin argued that if a given institution was to survive and function successfully, it must emerge from the people themselves. She wanted to involve those who would be affected by these rules in the act of constituting a design that would function according to the self-understanding of those “on the ground.” To impose systems on them would miss so much of the knowledge embedded in these communities of self-interested individuals.

Such an approach frustrated some who worried about the messiness of such methods. They worried about the inefficiency introduced by self-governance when the analyst “knows” a particular institutional design is wrong. They frequently asked, “If individuals have goals they seek, shouldn’t those with knowledge be able to direct them to ways to achieve those goals?” Such queries reflect one of the factors that separate Lin Ostrom from many other theorists. She always believed it was important to see working institutions, not simply to understand abstractly how an institution might work. She believed her insights might assist others in designing their own systems, institutions where individual interests and social interests could converge. Hers was not a quest for an idealized model, but for realized ways of life. She sought to identify the process of discovery and dialogue that might reveal the collective interest in the midst of any community dilemma. Discovery required communication and acceptance of the validity of others’ views with respect to their own goals—every person is the best judge of his/her own interest. She demonstrated that if individuals listened to each other, they could work out what is commonly accepted by them collectively.

Lin’s theory was heavily influenced by her fundamental belief in the capacity of “average” individuals. Or, better put, the artisans of a common life—who often turned out to be the leaders, social entrepreneurs, public and private actors of the quotidian experience. Lin worked to recognize and illuminate the institutions regular people created. Her respect for the average person went beyond her institutional analyses; she embraced it in her everyday life. She and Vincent built their own home on Manitoulin Island on the shore of Lake Huron working with inventive farmers and builders, Lyle and Sharon Dewer, and Vic Gaulter, who took the Ostroms into their community. Lin and Vincent designed their home in Bloomington and built it and most of their furniture with a well-known local craftsman, Paul Goodman. Lin respected every person for what he or she contributed, not from an ideal, but from recognizing what worked. This perspective, in contrast to the stereotype of elitist academics, also led Lin to celebrate the odd delights of everyday life. We remember the year Lin discovered one such wondrous new innovation, “Hamburger Helper.” She was amazed at the ability of this little box to turn a pound of hamburger so easily into a “delightful meal for company,” good enough to serve graduate students and their distinguished guest, Garrett Hardin. Such experiences reminded us that, despite her accomplishments, Lin was, in fact, Everyman. This made her many achievements all the more impressive—success was not pre-ordained, it was built on hard work, perseverance, and confidence in herself and others. Lin and Vincent encouraged their graduate students to know how “things work.” We came

to Lin from many disciplines and walks of life, as former engineering students, as former ranchers and craftsmen, as economists and mathematicians. When we had skills outside of academe, as many of us did—in the building trades, farming, woodworking, mechanics, and coppersmithing—Lin and Vincent responded with praise. All of our skills involved work, and as Lin frequently said, “work is good.”

This philosophy of scholarship shaped the Ostrom’s own self-governing institution—the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis (recently renamed the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis). Visitors to the Workshop were struck by how clearly the Ostrom’s approach to academics differed from the norm of the discipline. They lived the polycentricity and equality they studied each day. Every participant could (and was expected to) contribute, regardless of his or her “standing” in the broader arena beyond the Workshop walls. Lin was always open to new ideas from any direction and, as such, she lifted up those around her to share in and enjoy the glow created by her growing recognition. For example, when Lin started to be recognized by her associations and rose to be president or chair, she received the usual perks of leadership, such as large hotel suites. Most people would appreciate such opportunities for a more luxurious experience at a conference, but Lin thought of it as an opportunity to assist young colleagues or students to attend a meeting they might otherwise be unable to attend—a big room simply meant more roommates. Such was the unassuming generosity of Lin. She and Vincent have been directing their resources to others contributing to the work they loved for their entire careers. Under the auspices of the Tocqueville Fund they established at IU, the work that was their legacy will continue for generations.

After the recognitions of this past decade, Lin expanded her enterprise to a broader set of resource problems, eventually developing the SES (Social-Ecological Systems) framework to explore questions of sustainability with colleagues in biology, neuro-sciences, computation, and environmental science. As with her past efforts, Lin met this new commitment with the recognition of the problem and not with the limits of her own training. As such, she again became the careful student of new methods, while simultaneously coordinating and synthesizing knowledge and bringing all the necessary disciplines together. It is important to note that, even when faced with the most challenging problems of mankind, Lin’s approach focused on human capacity. How sad for all of us that her contributions to solving these dilemmas were cut short by her death. We have no doubt, however, that the many students and colleagues who worked alongside her will continue the journey she began.

## References

- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom, E. (1998). A behavioral approach to the rational choice theory of collective action: presidential address American Political Science Association, 1997. *American Political Science Review*, 92(1), 1–22.