

# Beyond the Tragedy of the Commons

## A Discussion of *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*

**Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action.** By Elinor Ostrom. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 298p. \$25.99.

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doi:10.1017/S1537592700000320

The awarding of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Elinor Ostrom has made a huge splash, and rightly so. Ostrom is the first woman ever to win this recognition. Perhaps even more important from an intellectual perspective, she is also a political scientist and not an economist by training or disciplinary affiliation. And while she is surely a practitioner of “rational choice” analysis, she has developed this approach in unconventional ways, supplementing formal analysis with ethnographic and experimental methods, and underscoring the ways that individual choice is always embedded in social and cultural contexts. Her widely-cited book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* crystallizes this work and presents an important theorization of how “self-governing” local institutions and forms of social capital can help individuals to surmount collective action problems and sustainably manage such “common-pool resources” as fisheries, forests, water resources, and farmlands.

The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Ostrom for this work has thus called attention to a broad set of questions about the nature of the economics discipline, the adequacy of its rationality assumptions, and the proper relationships between economics and political science.

With these questions in mind, I have invited a distinguished cast of social scientists to comment on *Governing the Commons* as a work of political science. The purpose of this symposium is to seize the opportunity presented by this exciting Nobel Prize award to encourage a broad conversation about the political science discipline and its possibilities and trajectories. One way to do this is to publish a range of reviews of this important book, written from a variety of perspectives. While Ostrom, a former President of the American Political Science Association, surely deserves much appreciation and honor, this symposium proceeds from the assumption that in political science

criticism is the sincerest form of flattery. This symposium is thus not a “tribute,” but an effort to promote sharp and critical discussion of a deeply important and influential book and of the research program of which it is a part. In what ways does *Governing the Commons* present a unique and innovative approach to questions of public choice and collective action? How comfortable are we with its synthesis of rational actor and culturalist perspectives? What problem domains does Ostrom’s approach to the management of “common pool resources” best explain? What are the strengths and limits of Ostrom’s approach to, and relative indifference to, the state and to much of what most political scientists consider “politics?” In the Popperian spirit of “conjecture and refutation” that Ostrom’s work exemplifies, commentators were asked to critically engage Ostrom’s contributions as a way of advancing our collective inquiries into important political questions.