

Award Ceremony 11 September 2008 – Elinor Ostrom

Rector Digernes, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to introduce to you Elinor Ostrom. Today she will be awarded the honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU).

There are many reasons for doing so. Let me start by emphasising one: her persistent and brilliant efforts to develop cross-disciplinary understandings of real world, long term problems facing human society such as the sustainable use of renewable resources.

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology emphasises cross-disciplinary cooperation both in teaching and research. For our university it is entirely appropriate to honour Ostrom's achievements.

Elinor Ostrom was born in 1933 and celebrated just a month ago her seventy-fifth birthday. She received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1965 and came to Indiana University at Bloomington where she has stayed since. She is currently the Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science, and Co-Director of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. She is also Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity at Arizona State University.

Elinor Ostrom is considered an expert on collective action, trust, and the management of resources that are shared or held in common by a group of users. This is often referred to as "the commons". She has over the years developed her own approach to political economy and public choice, maybe most clearly seen in her book "Understanding Institutional Diversity" from 2005. However, undoubtedly, her best known book is "Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action" from 1990. In this book she summed up a more than 25 years long debate around the conditions for sustainable use of resources held in common. In 1968 Garrett Hardin's article "The Tragedy of the Commons" had made the topic popular among politicians and public servants. Ostrom's 1990 book transformed the debate.

Let me quote from Agnar Sandmo's book from 2000: "The Public Economics of the Environment". I will quote Sandmo at length, not only because he knows what he is talking about, and a Norwegian, but also because he is far from The Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis. It is doubtful that he has ever met Ostrom. I take his evaluation to be unbiased. Ten years after Ostrom published her book he wrote:

"The Coasian approach to the solution of the tragedy of the commons would be to establish property rights in the resource base so as to create better incentives for its long-run preservation. However, one should be careful about identifying such property rights exclusively with private property as usually conceived. It is tempting to conclude that in the absence of private property there is no one who takes an ownership interest in the common resource. But it has been well documented, notably by Ostrom (1990), that there exist a variety of institutions for regulating the use of common property, so that the absence

of private property rights does not automatically imply that the resource in question will be overexploited. When this happens, it may well be that the best reform is not privatization, but rather the development of better institutional forms for collective management.”

Besides attesting to Ostrom’s seminal contribution, Sandmo’s reference is interesting in another way. All disciplines share the aversion against quoting from people outside the tribe. And if anyone does, it is usually with a qualification pointing to the less than perfect pedigree of the author. Not so with Sandmo’s use of Ostrom. She is quoted just like an economist.

That is crossing the disciplinary boundary.

In collaboration with economists from Indiana University Ostrom became a pioneer in another field: laboratory experiments designed to explore game theoretic models of decision making. This is a field where diverse disciplines meet to expand the research frontier faster than any one discipline could do on its own. In 1994 Ostrom and her colleagues published a seminal contribution to this developing field by using experimental settings to study the conditions for overcoming the social dilemmas in the exploitation of a common pool resource. In the conclusion to this book, social capital was introduced as bedrock for developing cooperation and overcoming social dilemmas. Following up on this, in 2003, she co-edited a major book on the “Foundations of Social Capital”.

It would be easy to go on listing Ostrom’s contributions to our understanding of fundamental problems in collective action, in economic development, in public policy, etc. She has authored, co-authored, edited and co-edited 29 books on last count. Let me instead emphasise the two most persistent topics of her activities: the building of infrastructure for research and the study of social-ecological systems.

One long term effort, not very visible from Ostrom’s CV, has been the building of infrastructure for research. From her base in the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, which she and her husband Vincent Ostrom founded in 1973, she has consistently worked to build up library resources of relevant research, making both grey literature and published works available, first as an ordinary library, but now increasingly available on the web. One very visible result is the Digital Library of the Commons. When *Science* writes about the commons (e.g. 12 December 2003), or more recently, when *The Economist* writes about it (August 2, 2008), they refer to the Digital Library of the Commons. Ostrom’s emphasis on library resources is not coincidental. Commons are found not only in the exploitation of common pool resources, but also in knowledge. The theoretical aspects of knowledge and its use are explored in a co-edited book from 2007: “Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: From Theory to Practice”.

The Workshop has over the years been host to a long line of visitors from all over the world, including quite a few Norwegians. Visitors come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and stay from a few days up to several years, some returning several times. The cutting edge discussions in an open and supportive atmosphere are addictive. Out of this grew the Workshop on the Workshop (WOW) conferences.

These are convened every 5 years and target old visitors to the Workshop. It has become another important venue for cross-disciplinary discussions.

Other types of research infrastructure Ostrom has nurtured are the International Association for the Study of Commons and the International Journal of the Commons. It is in the context of the conferences of the Association (the International Association for the Study of Commons) that most of her Norwegian friends have learned to appreciate her, and not only as a brilliant researcher, but also as a generous and supportive mentor. In 1995 Norway hosted the 5th conference of the Association (the International Association for the Study of Common Property as it was called then). The conference was organised by people from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, and Bodø University College.

Another part of the research infrastructure Ostrom has fostered is a databank collecting consistent and comparable data over time of changes in ecosystems and their usage. This is also part of her second long term interest: the study of human activities and organisations in the management of natural ecosystems. For Norwegians it is nice to know that part of the inspiration for pursuing these research problems came from the 1987 report, “Our Common Future”, by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland report. The study of Social Ecological Systems is now a big and growing field crossing the disciplinary boundaries of the natural and social sciences. This field of interest is carried forward not least in the Stockholm Resilience Centre where she is on the board of directors.

In reality Ostrom’s interest in these phenomena goes back to her Ph. D. dissertation in the 1960s. In her dissertation she studied the management of the groundwater in the Los Angeles area. The line from this study to her current studies of panaceas in the management of natural resources is not difficult to see. She will tell you more about her current research later today.

We are celebrating Elinor Ostrom’s achievements. Yet, I suspect, she wants to correct me, and remind you: she did not do this alone. And Lin, we know. We know of Vincent, and we know of a host of others. But we also know that if there ever was a scholar more committed to collaboration and cooperation both in theory and practice, we certainly have not heard. We also know that in cooperation and collective action of all kinds, the catalyst is the key. Without the catalyst nothing happens. It is an honour for us to celebrate you here today.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention.