

# The importance of reflecting on the *commons*

## *On the Nobel Prize being awarded to Elinor Ostrom*

Sergio Ristuccia

President of Consiglio italiano per le Scienze Sociali

It is now twenty years since Elinor Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* came out. The recognition that has come to her with the Nobel Prize may appear belated. In actual fact, it comes at a time when the train of thought on the question of the *commons* has taken on a central role, at the crossroads between sustainable economy and knowledge economy. The Nobel Prize constitutes significant recognition for a field of studies that has become crucial for the contributions it has made, and the contributions that may be made in the future, to policies in the sphere of sustainability and the development of knowledge. Recognition, let us say straight away, for a *field of studies* and not for a particular, hyper-specialised discipline. A field of studies in which, perhaps more than any other, many social scientists have worked and continue to work, adopting an exemplary interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary method. When I decided to have Elinor Ostrom's most important work translated into Italian, this very fact appeared to me to be a sufficient reason, convinced as I am – and not only for official reasons – that the role of the many disciplines making up the broad range of social sciences hinges on the adoption of such a method. In addition to this, another reason was pushing me to promote the Italian translation: the great understanding that had been established between me, Elinor and Vincent, her husband, at the time I was in charge of the Adriano Olivetti Foundation. A couple of scholars in close intellectual symbiosis, they have become a frame of reference for many scientists, in the USA and other continents. The main reason of course was that I agreed with many aspects of Ostrom's theory and analyses. I shall go into this in more detail further on. First though, I would like to give a brief overview of the collaboration arising from the understanding I have mentioned above.

### *A school of thought*

Elinor Ostrom is a scholar from California who has lived for many years in Indiana with her husband Vincent, a lucid and passionate expert of the political and constitutional model of the

United States known as *compound republic*<sup>1</sup>. In the years of the Adriano Olivetti Foundation, I had planned to publish a book on local powers in the United States. The idea was to commission Elinor and Vincent to write a new book on the subject. This led to one of the «Quaderni di Studi Regionali» that the Foundation published through Edizioni di Comunità. It was called *Il governo locale negli Stati Uniti* (1984), and only came out later in English<sup>2</sup>. The Ostroms' interest in local government, based on the original traditions of the United States and following on from Alexis de Tocqueville's classic view of democracy in America, founded on passion and on the "science of association", goes to explain the concerns expressed in the concluding pages of the book. After having illustrated the dangers and tensions that local governments faced because of the local *bosses* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and then the party apparatus put into place through the legislation of single States, the Ostroms pointed out the dangers arising from the era of federal transfers and *grantsmanship*, in other words from the deformation of local government depending on their ability to procure funds from the federal centre. And that was before the close ties forged between local finance and financial "derivatives", which became part of the problem of consequent speculative bubbles. In short, the book was not descriptive, but presented a thesis which appeared to me to be of great interest, even when I did not fully agree with the views presented.

The 1984 book is important for appreciating the sources and the inspiration behind Elinor's subsequent work on the *commons*. The experience of the *commons* offered many fine examples from Europe's social and legal history.

Later the Ostroms called me to sit on the Advisory Committee of the *Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis* which they had created at the Bloomington branch of Indiana University. I recall the missionary spirit with which Vincent stirred up the discussions, which were always attended by scholars from all over the world. The main concern was always the centrality of *citizens* in local governance. From this point the Ostroms promoted studies on the subject of public services, contributing to the conceptualisation of distinct notions of *provision* and *production* of these services. In the mid-1980s these notions inspired work performed by a working group of the *Advising Commission on Intergovernmental Relations* (a "bipartisan" body created by Congress in 1959, which was active until 1996). In 1987 the Report *The Organization of Local Public Economies* was published. This made a considerable impact in literature in this area of research. This work fully developed the distinction between *provision* (usually translated in Italian by

---

<sup>1</sup> V. Ostrom, *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic: Designing the American Experiment*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> V. Ostrom – R. Bish – E. Ostrom, *Local Government in the United States*. Institute for Contemporary Studies, San Francisco, 1988

“fornitura”) as the sphere of decision making of the *citizenship*, and *production* as an area of intervention of the productive system, be it public or private. This distinction is perhaps not overly applicable outside the American context, as it is presented in the reconstruction work of the Ostroms and of the school of thought they belong to. Yet this distinction, and above all the applicative models, have been important frames of reference in European contexts too. Without going into too much detail here, one should stress the important role attributed to citizens-users regarding decisions on quality, control and above all forms of coordination of the various local and functional organisations operating in the sphere of local public services. The Report’s authors say if there is coordination they do not fear the “fragmentation” of organisations, and do not believe that the costs of fragmentation would be higher than those caused by simplification through the creation or merger of organisations, something that is so popular in the culture of local government in Italy, for example. Such a policy, moreover, even beyond the run-down “municipalisation” framework, has lost its bearings. Seeking the right direction only within the market logic, something that *public utilities* cannot do fully. Yet the general lines of the Report, whose authors appeared to adhere to the Ostrom school, were sufficiently interesting and provocative as to convince me to publish it as the second half of the book *Il triangolo dei servizi pubblici (The public services triangle)*, with contributions from Daniele Archibugi, Bernardo Pizzetti and others, which came out in 1999 as the first volume of the collection promoted by the journal *queste istituzioni*<sup>3</sup>.

*Governing the Commons. Is Hardin’s The tragedy of Commons really true?*

With the conciseness typical of Nobel motivations, the prize was awarded to Elinor Ostrom “for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons”. The work in which Ostrom draws conclusions to the extensive research conducted is *Governing the Commons*. Published in 1990<sup>4</sup>, it immediately attracted a lot of interest. I remember Vincent writing to me – back in 1995 – saying that his wife’s book “continues to receive considerable attention in both Europe and North America”, telling me that at that point “Lin’s primary efforts” were focused on creating and developing a database regarding the role of “communal institutions in the use and sustainability of forests in various parts of the world”. And he stressed that it had been “a rather heroic effort” putting together such a database with the modest financial resources she had at her disposal. As Elinor had written in the foreword to the book, the research had to continue. For Elinor the book was an “interim report” of a research activity that continued by alternating empirical observation

---

<sup>3</sup> AA.VV. *Il triangolo dei servizi pubblici. L’organizzazione economica dei servizi fra governi locali, imprese erogatrici e cittadini-utenti*. Marsilio, Venezia, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge University Press, 1990

with attempts at formulating a theory. An activity, she wrote, that could have gone on for at least another decade. The fact is that when I was able to promote its Italian translation, Elinor Ostrom's book could be considered a veritable «modern-day classic» (as Internet data on the number of quotes in scientific articles testified<sup>5</sup>).

So, the *commons*. This term chiefly refers to common property of the land (above all meadows and forests) which, being undivided, is left to the population of a village, town or given territory, as was the case in feudal times, for the purposes of supporting the same resident population. The term *open fields* derives from the experience in Britain and in other countries. In Italy's past, these properties were defined as being for "civic uses". Ample reference was made to this – developing the *open fields* experience – in one of the introductions to the Italian edition, referring particularly to the Italian examples of "regole ampezzane" and "partecipazioni emiliane"<sup>6</sup>.

These are forms of property which, after withstanding the more or less violent forms of individual appropriation in the post-feudal period, have stood the test of time. And they have been examples of long-term social organisation. The term *commons* has gradually been extended to include in this notion all natural resources that belong to given communities (e.g. fishery resources at the disposal of fishermen in a given area, and so on). The notion has been liable to expansion, especially since there has been in the collective consciousness a strong ecological awareness regarding the importance of natural resources, which belong to many if not to all. In this expansion of the concept, problems of varying nature are naturally bound to arise, if only due to the dimensional scale.

Durability over time, especially in the case of success in protecting and regenerating resources, forces us to consider mechanisms of survival and the vitality of practices and behaviour that form strong ties from generation to generation in different ages. This explains a certain attraction that these forms of property have always had in various areas of the social sciences (law in particular). In Ostrom's case, the attraction is based not on mere curiosity about forms of property that are rather marginal, at least in the Western world, but on two main reasons: one more ethical-political,

---

<sup>5</sup> Cristiano Andrea Ristuccia takes up this point in his foreword to the Italian edition, cit., consulting websites and search engines: "...through early January 2006 this book had been quoted in 1,587 articles published in academic journals covered by the *Social Science Citation Index*; in 275 books scanned on *Google book search* using «Ostrom (1990)» as keyword and in 214 books in the same database using as keywords «Governing the Commons». In the 350 circa academic journals fully scanned in the jstor archive «Governing the Commons» appeared 181 times; «Ostrom (1990)» 131 times and «Elinor Ostrom» 647 times. With regard to simple, general Google engine searches, the results for the same period were as follows: «Governing the Commons» 444,000, «Elinor Ostrom» 29,400. Being even more meticulous, and searching only for results that combine both of the above terms, there were 31,000 *hits*. Finally, a search for «Ostrom (1990)» generated 36,600 results. Of course, these figures do not automatically make Elinor Ostrom's book a «modern-day classic», but they certainly help to consolidate the view."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. A. Ristuccia, "Alla ricerca di un buon modello per l'uso delle risorse comuni. Una verifica storica fra *open fields system*, regole ampezzane e partecipazioni emiliane", cit., pp. IX-XXVII; G. Vetrutto and F. Velo, "Una lezione per le politiche pubbliche: il governo delle realtà sociali complesse tra «pubblico» e «privato»", cit., pp. XXIX-XL

regarding the importance that the *commons*, in its meaning as joint property of land, can have – if governed correctly – in developing countries; the other, purely scientific, regarding a test of the presumed “uniqueness” of the two theoretical models formulated and applied to the management of common properties. Properties – it is asserted – that have to be governed by the State or by the private sector. The first reason can clearly be seen from the many studies conducted by the Ostrom group in developing countries. The second is declared and clearly illustrated, and derives from a criticism, in terms of the empirical inductive method, that is totally non-ideological, of models leading to the sharp alternative between state management or privatisation. It is not true that everything in the social reality of the economy has to be placed in the orbit of the State or the market, or that in the latter sphere everything has to be competition and not also cooperation. And this is not to go looking for theoretical or ideological “third ways”, but to understand and test in the field the broad range of other experiences and identify the conditions in which these are or could be successful.

So, a strong cognitive tension. Prompted, if not dictated, by the need to go and tangibly check the legitimacy of the prediction that the commons were destined to be drastically depleted, as predicted by those talking about the “tragedy of the commons”<sup>7</sup>. The tragedy would derive from the fact that everyone having free access to resources tend to exploit them until they are completely depleted, according to a logic of unbridled *free riding*. This leads to the invitation to nationalise or privatise the commons. But is this a realistic picture, or is it simply a deduction from a theoretical model that is not sufficiently backed up by empirical examples? On this point, Ostrom observes that the supporters of these ideas do not usually consider a careful reconstruction of the ways in which institutions overseeing collective properties operate in practice. In reality, one needs to know how these institutions, naturally different from one another, have worked or work, as well as the specific realities they refer to. By institutions we mean those sets of formal rules (statutory and contractual) and informal rules, interpersonal conduct and supervisory and disciplinary mechanisms (including those of their agents) without which common properties would certainly no longer exist.

In short, without adequate empirical testing on a large sample of cases (made possible by the historical experience of collective properties), we are left with precepts that “are nothing more than metaphors”. And policies based on the metaphoric use of models can be dangerous. Therefore, a study is needed that seeks to find the keys of both success and failure. In the first chapter of the book, Elinor Ostrom cites among success stories that of the fishing zone of Alanya in Turkey, whose use is governed by very strict rules that are subjected to continuous checks depending on internal factors (i.e. in relation to the *commoners*) and external factors that have a bearing on fishery

---

<sup>7</sup> Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, Vol. 162, No. 3859 (December 13, 1968), pp. 1243-1248..

resources over time. We discover in another chapter of the book that this case, although continuing to be a success story, has its weak points.

Taking such an empirical analytical approach means, for Ostrom, entering “one of the most exciting areas of the social sciences”, where many disciplines are always called upon to work jointly and in dialogue, while continuing to use their own analytical tools<sup>8</sup>.

### *Study criteria and results*

Ostrom is well aware that a good empirical study requires well-defined objects of study. She thus declares that her work does not refer to situations in which the title of collective property is potentially and generically usable, but focuses on cases of joint resources that are well identified in the territory and such as to involve a population generally not exceeding 15,000 people. A rigorous study on such a scale “has a greater chance of resolving the complexities that are under analysis, of going beneath the surface and identifying similarities and basic processes”<sup>9</sup>. The cases to which it will apply will be marked by the fact that common resources are long term and that, over time, they have seen institutional transformations without completely solving the problem of the continuing existence of the resources in question.

They must also be cases to which the “subtractability” of resources on the part of individual *commoners* is applicable when resource units are appropriated.

This implies that a distinction be made between resource units, the object of appropriation and the resource usage system that is capable of regenerating resources.

All of this of course to seek the conditions necessary for the correct organisation of the self-government of common resources. A crucial point is the organisation of self-government, i.e. setting up institutions, as per the meaning given above, that make such self-government possible. Mancur Olson wrote that: “if a given number of individuals has a common or collective interest (...), an *unorganised* individual action will not be able to further this common interest, or at least not further it adequately”<sup>10</sup>.

Upon the conclusion of research into cases of *commons* governance used as references for studying this subject, the considerable fragility of governing institutions emerged. Out of 15 cases examined

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. Ostrom, “Riflessioni sui beni collettivi”, *Governare i beni collettivi* (Reflections of the commons, Governing the commons), cit. pp. 11-49

<sup>9</sup> *ibidem*, p. 44

<sup>10</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action. Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965. It. Ed.: *La logica dell'azione collettiva: i beni pubblici e la teoria dei gruppi*. Feltrinelli, Milan, 1983, p. 7

in depth, 8 were ascribed to the failure tray, or 'high fragility' tray, and 7 to the success tray. The difficulty of self-government is confirmed, but among the causes of such difficulty there is above all a dearth of knowledge about significant aspects of the management of common resources. This lack of knowledge does not help dialogue among *commoners* as regards joint choices to be made.

The research done by Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators, of which *Governing the Commons* is the final report, ends by insisting on the method to be adopted for analysing the common resources to be governed. No precise model is proffered, but indications are given on relevant issues that need to be suitably resolved in order to avoid inefficiency. One of these is that of calculating with precision the costs of a system of self-government. This matter is usually neglected, in part or wholly, when choosing the route of both nationalisation and privatisation. The invitation is in any case to study different aspects of the institutional construction of self-government and of the paths that can facilitate changes and adjustments. In a way, government of the commons requires first of all a thorough knowledge of the social reality involved. In this sense, Elinor may reiterate her initial belief that the management of the commons is a challenge for social science scholars.

#### *New commons and the future of the commons culture*

The success in many academic spheres of the analytical work done on the *commons* has naturally led to an increase in the number of researchers involved in this field of study. There has also been a growth in the search for solutions to safeguard the planet's major natural resources. To what extent can lessons be learned from the logic and the method adopted by the Ostrom school for issues on a much greater scale? The change in scale indeed alters many things. It brings to the centre of the arena, for example, subjects such as national States, albeit within a logic that moves beyond the national and towards a decided multilateral internationalism. And here one comes into contact with the phenomenon of *global law*, a subject studied in depth in recent years by Sabino Cassese<sup>11</sup>. In this sphere, only very partially can a method of analysis be developed directly from research conducted on local *commons*. The risk of developing such a model would be that of falling into the trap of creating simple metaphors. What may be useful, in any case, is the proposing and modification of analytical schemas for problems that might benefit from the highlighting of critical points of the governance of common resources on a local scale.

We might add that the exponential growth of the Internet and its undisputed supremacy over other means of communication has led to the possibility of many new *commons*. Resources in this case would not be natural but virtual and intangible. For the most part, resources making up the contents and the connections of knowledge. One may thus talk of *knowledge as a commons*, as per the title

---

<sup>11</sup> S. Cassese, *Il diritto globale. Giustizia e democrazia oltre lo Stato*. Einaudi, Turin, 2009

of the recently published book edited by Elinor Ostrom, now translated into Italian<sup>12</sup>. In the great dispute on access to Internet contents – whether fully open or subject to “enclosure” restrictions – the idea of the *commons* naturally favours unrestricted access. But apart from the substantial differences between natural resources and those of the Web, this subject still has to be studied in depth. It is hard to believe that the problem of governing the Internet and its countless uses might easily fit into the system of notions and methods relating to the commons, as described above. These notions and methods may probably be pertinent in the case of given sets of virtual resources created jointly by many individuals. But the struggle that is now under way between those demanding and defending *property rights*, and for tight restrictions on the Internet, and those fighting against such enclosures does not appear to be solvable only in terms of a *commons* approach. Moreover, in the cited book, Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess – who together wrote the introduction and other essays – are careful to indicate methodological criteria for the identification of commons also within the Internet ambit. The so-called IAD (Institutional Analysis and Development framework) paradigms<sup>13</sup> serve to demarcate the field, and are valid markers for preventing talk on *commons* from degenerating into pure rhetoric. Which, paradoxically, is exactly the risk, as mentioned above, when making metaphorical use of models.

---

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Hess - Elinor Ostrom (ed.), *La conoscenza come bene comune. Dalla teoria alla pratica (Understanding knowledge as a commons. From theory to practice)*. Mondadori, Milan, 2009

<sup>13</sup>“(…) a diagnostic tool that can be used to investigate any broad subject where humans repeatedly interact within rules and norms that guide their choice of strategies and behaviors. The framework can be used to analyze static situations crafted by existing rules and relating to an unchanging physical world and relevant community. The framework can also be used to analyze dynamic situations where individuals develop new norms, new rules, new physical technologies... The IAD framework has been developed to facilitate the development of a comparative method of institutional analysis.” Cf. Hess-Ostrom, cit., chap. 3 “A framework for analysing the knowledge commons.”, pp. 46 ff.