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The Ostroms' Commons Revisited

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Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, The Workshop and The Bloomington School: A Polycentric Knowledge Commons¹

Abstract

Elinor and Vincent Ostrom spent most of their careers working in fields other than third sector studies. Even so, a significant amount of their work has implications for our field. Together they founded the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy at Indiana University and with students and colleagues built a large body of research and theory on a range of topics including self-governance, collaboration, co-production, polycentrism, federalism, and commons. The Ostroms, the Workshop and their networks of students and colleagues, also constitute an interesting example of one of their latest and most recent contributions, the knowledge commons. Their highly regarded contributions to interdisciplinary institutional theory are largely compatible with the third sector model, especially in the focus on governance, voluntary action and associations. The emphasis on institutions in their work is driven by an important shift from act utilitarianism, with an emphasis on decisions, to rule utilitarianism and a fundamental role for rules in institutional structuring. The research design they labeled Institutional Analysis and Design (IAD) has been fundamental to shaping an already large and coordinated body of research.

¹ This manuscript is the pre-print version of “The Ostroms’ Commons Revisited” as submitted for the special issue of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*. Prior to publication the article was retitled and shortened significantly for publication. It is accompanied by a companion table, “A Comparison of Two Different Approaches To Commons.”

Introduction

In this brief article, I seek to introduce readers to the theoretical lifework of not one, but two important scholars, the group of colleagues, students, and acolytes who coalesced around them but have since scattered to the winds, and the real institution they left behind (identified here collectively as The Bloomington School) in light of a new, somewhat amorphous, field of study (termed third sector studies) in which neither formally participated but still have contributed to in important ways. In doing so, I adopt a consistent point of reference or critical perspective that I refer to as third sector studies, defined operationally to include topics that have been presented in papers at ARNOVA conferences or been the subject of articles published in this journal.

The two scholars are Vincent and Elinor Ostrom.¹ The list of their students and colleagues is long and distinguished and includes all three organizers/guest editors of this symposium of papers and the pre-conference colloquium that preceded it, as well as other figures cited below. Each one of them deserves, and can undoubtedly withstand, individual scrutiny of their own work. However, since the intent here is merely to introduce them to readers unfamiliar with their work, they and the institution they co-founded will be introduced rather superficially together in a single article. The institution is the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy at Indiana University, referred to below as the Workshop (see <http://www.indiana.edu/~workshop/>). Finally, the field with which they were not formally identified but have major implications for is third sector studies.²

I approach this topic with the seeming objectivity of an interested outsider and none of the intimate familiarity of an insider.³ The various lists of colleagues, students and friends detailed below does not include the author. My comments are offered as a preliminary overview of their contributions to our field by a sympathetic critic.⁴ One important caveat to note is that while I have long been aware in a rather casual way of the work of the Bloomington School, I have only recently dived into the Ostrom *oeuvre* and what follows is necessarily of a somewhat preliminary cast. It is worth pursuing, however, if only to break the ice on an important but largely neglected topic. Any journal article-length assessment of the collective contribution of the Bloomington School at present will, of necessity, be fragmentary, since the total output of books, articles, conference papers, speeches, classes, seminars and other contributions by this group is enormous and growing and it is likely that very few in our field have yet taken the opportunity to read all or even large portions of it. In particular, what is arguably Vincent Ostrom's most important work, *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic*, (first published in 1987), will not be considered here.⁵

Background

The topic that looms largest in the background of this article is collective choice; a term that refers to selection of rules by a plurality of deciders and in the case of the third sector, especially decisions to guide collective action by a plurality of actors. The critical decision here is to find a general way to adequately summarize the collective contributions in this area of what has become known as The Bloomington School and the continuing university institution that is the Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis. For Vincent Ostrom, the core of his interest is largely focused on the study of constitutions and constitution making; a theme that also embraces his work on Tocqueville. For Elinor Ostrom, the core interests are the Institutional Analysis and Design framework, local public economies and most importantly common pool resource theory. Other members of the Bloomington School show a vast variety of particular interests and foci, many of which overlap significantly with the interests of third sector scholars and this journal.

Organized third sector studies got under way with the founding of AVAS (the nominal predecessor to ARNOVA) in 1971. Two years later, in 1973, Vincent Ostrom, a professor of Political Science at Indiana University and his wife and colleague, Elinor, first convened the collective academic enterprise that became the Workshop. This development alone should be of interest to third sector scholars. The Workshop like other, similar efforts within the context of modern universities, including the Center on Philanthropy at the same university, can be framed within the theoretical frames of collaborations, co-production (an early Ostrom coinage), and social enterprise.⁶ When the Workshop was first organized, Vincent Ostrom had already made important marks with a co-authored article on polycentrism and a term as editor of *Public Administration Review*.

At that time, the idea of an interdisciplinary project to approach the problems of metropolitan government was very *au courant* for an American political scientist specializing in public administration with an interest in the institutions of the bureaucracy or the fourth branch of government. The discipline/profession of public administration was hamstrung by its own polycentric nature: an historicism of macro institutional and historical perspectives dating from Woodrow Wilson, U.S. President, university president and founder of the view of public administration as a government institution. Also important in addition to the still-fresh explosions of 1960s radicalism and urban riots; were the progressive “good government” legacy of Herbert Croly, et. al.; formalist economic institutional perspectives dating from the Wisconsin School of Richard Ely and John R. Commons; the distinct and then-novel pluralist perspectives of a group of political behaviorists and urbanists; the “water mains and street sweepers” practicality of public administration practitioners; and the growing influence of rationalistic and mathematical

approaches of economics and the decision and system sciences, and a variety of other perspectives.

As a student of public administration at the time (MAPA, 1970) it was my impression that the field was much taken with concrete case studies on the one hand and highly abstract models on the other (e.g., systems analysis; Bertalanffy, Boulding and other systems theories applied to organizations and institutions; formal, abstract and mathematical decision theory; etc.) with little or no theoretical glue to hold these diverse things together. The institutional model of the Bloomington School, (the IAD is discussed further below) viewed in that light, can be seen as a much needed turn both toward bringing order to the growing body of empirical case study research as well as movement toward evidence-based theory. In the Bloomington view, institutions are more than their decisions, which are historical, contingent and impermanent. They are also their rules, designs, and the actions and consequences flowing from those rules. In this regard, it is highly consonant with the evolution of institutional theory in third sector studies, flowing gradually from an economic and legal core outward to encompass the interests of many disciplines and professions.

The Workshop

The greater importance of the Bloomington School is not just found in the fact that it succeeded organizationally in the contemporary university environment where so many similar workshops, institutes and centers have failed once their external funding dried up.⁷ It is found in a series of genuine intellectual contributions of broad scope and importance. The theoretical contribution of greatest interest is found in the way it brought a unique synthesis to the solution of diverse problems, threads and ideas and the harnessing of collective intellectual horsepower that has flowed from that synthesis. In a manner that parallels the evolution of third sector studies and involves some of the same disciplines, except centered at a single university, the Workshop has for more than three decades provided a forum for the exploration of problems and issues of collective choice, governance, commons and related questions that transcend the boundaries of existing disciplines and conventional academic departments. The main focus in this article, however, is not on the institution of the Workshop and its University, but on the ideas and theory that it spawned.

Self-Government, Polycentrism & Federalism

Vincent Ostrom began his career roughly five decades ago with a number of publications on the practical problems of local urban government – coordination of police

activities with regard to juvenile crime in a metropolitan region. Most of the themes and issues that are most central to the Bloomington School were already implicit in that focus, including the all important foci of self-governance in civil society, polycentricity and federalism, each of which has distinct implications for third sector theory.

Self-Governance

From the beginning, the Bloomington School approach was not merely upon local government, but also upon problems of self-governance. This alone should be enough for all those researchers and practitioners working on issues of board governance to sit up and take notice. Retrospectively, it is not hard to see in that frame very deep ties to basic issues in American political theory, as well as ties to enduring concerns in third sector studies. An extended quotation from a 1991 book gives the flavor of this interest as well as the important ties of the Bloomington School approach to self-governance to third sector studies through voluntary associations, civil society, limited government, and other more subtle themes:

“The constitution and operational autonomy of the institutions of civil society thus turn critically upon inalienable rights of persons and citizens, with correlative limits upon the authority of the instrumentalities of government as specified in a limited national constitution, state constitutions, and local charters. Many of the institutions of civil societies, including families, business firms, trade unions, and all voluntary associations, are organized through what amount to governable contracts. Such contracts provide for revision, resolving disputes, and penalties for breaching the rules of association that are enforceable either under the rules of civil procedure or by arbitration. Voluntary associations have an autonomous standing based upon the authority of individuals to contract with one another and to hold property as shares in the assets of that voluntary association. Religions institutions and the press have an autonomous standing based upon freedom of the press and the free exercise of religion. These institutions are also organized through rules of voluntary association (V. Ostrom, 1991: 208-9).”

From its earliest origins, one can detect similar common themes linked to the interests of third sector scholars in the approach of Ostrom and other actors in the Bloomington School.

Polycentricity

Polycentricity was introduced by Vincent Ostrom and two colleagues more than five decades ago (Ostrom, Tiebout and Warren, 1961) to deal with some specific

problems in metropolitan governance. From the start it was a concept of political economy, a notion useful in understanding nation states at least since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* but seldom previously applied to local government (McGinnis, 1999A; McGinnis, 1999B). It has proven to be one of the most enduring concepts of the Bloomington School approach to institutions, and a notion that has a broad array of possible applications is the governance of nonprofit organizations and other third sector institutions as well as for the relations between the third sector and government. As a concept, it brings together connotations of pluralism, diversity, multiple decision-points, and a range of actors, decision-makers and rules. "Polycentric governance requires a complex combination of multiple levels and diverse types of organizations drawn from the public, private, and voluntary sectors that have overlapping realms of responsibility and functional capacities (Wright, McGinnis & Ostrom, 2012: 15). In another vital third sector connection stemming from the Bloomington School approach, polycentricity is seen as a pre-requisite of self-governance, conceived as the ability of groups to work out solutions to problems by themselves (McGinnis, 2005).

Individualism vs. Collectivism: Surveying The Intermediate Position

Another important Bloomington School dimension is the approach of leading Bloomington School principals on the importance of polycentricity and related questions that arise about the nature of rationality and collective choice. In a 2005 article, Michael McGinnis wrote "In his most recent book, V. Ostrom (1997: 102-114) has begun articulating an alternative to Hobbesian individualism and Durkheimian holism that he originally called methodological communalism but now prefers to label *Tocquevillian analytics*" (McGinnis, 2005: 170). A deeper understanding of what Ostrom had in mind with this intriguing phrase can be gathered piecemeal from a recent volume entitled "Conversations with Tocqueville" authored by a number of members of the Bloomington School (Cræaiutu & Gellar, 2009). Co-editor Sheldon Gellar suggests two closely-related dimensions that we might term comparative multivariate analysis: First, in a multivariate approach reminiscent of the IAD, with attention to mores, legal structures, history, physical geography, local politics and other factors woven throughout Tocqueville's writings. Secondly, use of this complex set of variables to comparatively analyze democracy in different countries.

Although the basic Bloomington model is quite generic (concerned as it is with universal problems of institutional analysis), we might begin to see these by applying them to the third sector: Nonprofit organizations and other third sector institutions are usefully conceived and analyzed as configurations of rules (e.g., products of previous choices serving as guides for future conduct), made at multiple critical decision points (that is, they are polycentric), and involving collective or shared concerns as well as shared resources held in "common pools" and collectively allocated by allocation rules and principles arrived at through self-governance. Such contrivances can be designated in the Ostroms' lexicon as "commons" and are discussed further below. Such a formula fits

not only local and regional governments, but also third sector institutions quite handily as Lohmann (1992) and others have argued.

Institutionalism & The IAD Framework

We can also ask what questions are most useful in understanding the workings of such institutions, whether as institutions of local governance or in other instances of self-governance, such as nonprofit and voluntary organizations? Such questions lead us to the Institutional Analysis and Design (IAD) framework, an interesting research protocol developed by the Ostroms and the Bloomington School. (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982; Ostrom, 2005; Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971; Approaching the challenge of designing and coordinating the findings of a large body of case studies, surveys, and other research results as itself a problem in collective choice, we can further unravel the complex threads of the Bloomington School approach through the set of research topics and questions posed by the Institutional Analysis and Design (IAD) Framework.

“In the IAD framework”, Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess wrote “we posit three broad clusters of variables that are basic underlying factors of institutional design and the patterns of action occurring within action arenas.” (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, p. 44) One schematic of the model shows the topoi shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Topics of the IAD

Underlying factors

- Biophysical-Technical Characteristics
 - o Ideas
 - o Artifacts
 - o Facilities
- Attributes of the community
 - o Users
 - o Providers
 - o Policymakers
- Rules-In-Use

- o Constitutional
- o Collective choice
- o Operational

Action Arena

- Action Situations
- Actors

Outcomes

- Patterns of interaction
- Evaluative criteria
- Outcomes

In terms of social science research methodology, the IAD appears to be a fairly conventional quasi-experimental approach to categorized variable analysis divided into categories of independent, dependent and intermediate (or mediating) variables (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The IAD further identifies those three general categories of institutional characteristics labeled Underlying Factors (independent variables), an Action Arena (intermediate variables) and Outcomes (as dependent variables). As Ostrom and Hess characterized it, “The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework is 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 behavior*” (Ostrom and Hess, 2007: 41). The added italics in the preceding quotation serve as one tolerably good definition of institutions in the Ostrom approach. Two years earlier, Elinor Ostrom offered

another more explicit definition of institutions in the same vein: “the prescriptions humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, neighborhoods, markets, firms, sports leagues, churches, private associations and governments at all scales.” (Ostrom, 2005, 3) This illustrates one of the hallmarks of the Bloomington School approach: tying theory, specific hypotheses and research strategies of institutional analysis together tightly (perhaps at times, too tightly) in a single package.

The first category of the IAD itself suggests it may be important to contextualize the manner in which strong theoretical concepts like self-government and polycentrism and a rigorous research frame like the IAD came together in the context of 1970s public administration, with its enduring but sometimes unfocused case study tradition, and the emerging policy studies perspective in political science which was at the time still searching for focus and direction. The IAD appears to have supplied both.

In the context of time and place, it seems likely that the IAD may have originated as a rather conventional systems approach that somewhere along the way acquired a substantive overlay complete with specific names for its inputs, processes and outputs categorization. The focus on the situations and settings of institutions is quite important (indeed, borrowed from earlier iterations of institutional analysis). It is not its genesis or logical structure, however, that is (or should be) of greatest interest, but rather what the Bloomington School analysts, notably the Ostroms themselves, have been able to do with the IAD over an extended period of time. As a pure formalism, it is fairly ordinary and holds little intrinsic conceptual magic. As a framework for systematizing literally hundreds of independent studies in dozens of separate topical areas, completed over a period of several decades, however, it holds great and continuing fascination. Indeed, it would seem to pose a powerful alternative to the random, scattershot character of too much variable analysis in social science research, with its tendencies to begin arbitrarily with questions of little or not obvious importance beyond their interest to the researchers, to find “statistically significant” but not especially strong or convincing relations between variables, and to end with conclusions of no enduring significance. In the Bloomington approach, multiple researchers addressing a great diversity of topics have managed to find intrinsic interest and coordinate their individual efforts with the collective effort over an extended period now reaching several decades. That seems to be the very definition of voluntary collective choice in institutional contexts. Thus, the IAD would appear to enable practicing what the Bloomington School preaches, and integrity in this sense is an important characteristic. Together, polycentrism and the IAD offer an intriguing basis that is both theoretical and methodological.

Bloomington Institutionalism

There is also an unusual depth to the model of rationality of the Ostrom-Bloomington School approach to institutions that requires brief examination. First, the situation: From the late 1950s, until at least the early 1980s, a small group of political science, public administration, management and planning scholars were writing for a broad professional audience concerned with questions of rational, collective choice in institutional settings (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Dahl & Lindblom, [1953] 1992; Dror, 1968; Lindblom, 1959; Lindblom, 1979). With little fanfare or public acclaim, the Ostroms and others including Lindblom and Robert Dahl embraced an approach, grounded in some of the work of the economists Frank Knight, Ludwig Mises and Frederick Hayek⁸ and also Mancur Olson that settled some of the most important of these questions. The approach emphasizes the embedded, institutional, contingent and impermanent nature of collective or institutional problem-solving and choice.

The Bloomington School approach, like much economically based public policy thinking is philosophically grounded in utilitarianism, but Bloomington School has yielded an unusual utilitarianism in two important respects. First, there is a clear focus on local matters and concerns, as opposed to the national approaches of so many others. Secondly, many, perhaps most, approaches to public policy are grounded in future (or goal oriented) act utilitarianism. Decisions, it is said, are made in the present but in anticipation of their consequences in the future. This is an approach that is particularly attractive for those who style themselves revolutionaries or change agents bent on institutional constitution or transformation. However, it can be quite insensitive to the institutional demands and constraints of those responsible for institutional management and leadership in the present. Such perspectives have frequently gotten tied up in the model of Weberian rationality with its view of tradition verses rationality. At least since the institutional studies of the 1940s, everyone has pretty much understood that context is important but until the approach outlined by the Ostroms in the IAD, collective choices were still pretty much framed by their methods rather than their consequences in the abstract, mentalistic terms of cognitive models dating to the 18th century, as adjusted by the “marginal revolution” of economists in the late 19th century.

The fundamental epistemic problem involved is that future-oriented act utilitarian approaches that concentrate only on goals and objectives abstracted from the situation typically leave no room for institutions. Thus, this approach cannot do justice to the actual demands and constraints inherent in the definition of situations inside existing institutions, or to the shaping effects of case law, precedent and established practices that are the particular domain of practice theories,

organization cultures and institutional memory. As scholars schooled in and sensitive to the day-to-day realities of policy making and implementation in local settings, the Ostroms were, it appears, like their near-contemporaries, Charles Lindblom and Robert Dahl, the economist Mancur Olson, and, at least partly, the historicism of the Austrian economists Mises and Hayek)⁹ not comfortable with decision-making perspectives that ignore definitions of the situation and the already-constructed social, economic and political realities in the manner of conventional economic rationalism and act utilitarianism. Instead, by the simple device of defining institutions as formalisms in terms of rules rather than goals, the IAD Framework and the Bloomington School approach to institutionalism were able to bring rule utilitarianism directly to bear on the matter.¹⁰

That this was not just the personal quirk of Vincent Ostrom or narrowly limited to polycentrism or one aspect or another of the IAD, but is a shared view of the Bloomington School is evident from this 2007 quotation: “We define institutions as formal and informal rules that are understood and used by a community. Institutions, as we use the term here, are not automatically what is written in the formal rules. They are the rules that establish the working ‘dos and don’ts’ for the individual in the situation that the scholar wishes to analyze and explain.” (Ostrom and Hess, 2007, p. 42) Although they do not discuss it, applying rules in this way to both the formal and informal structures of an institution not only broadens and deepens the study of formal institutions, like corporations, and bureaux, it also opens up the entire institutional analysis perspective to the analysis of less formal institutions like unincorporated associations, social movements, and certain types of philanthropy. A close inspection of the full range of case studies produced at the Bloomington School, particularly the large number of studies of commons, shows this to be one of the results of those efforts.

It may also be tempting to interpret that particular theoretical move in terms of the fashionable ideologies of the moment; to associate the Bloomington approach more or less exclusively with the libertarian economics of Hayek or to claim the Bloomington approach for contemporary American Conservatism. Before doing so, we ought to note carefully not only Vincent Ostrom’s career-long commitment to building a stronger public administration but also the caution expressed by another prominent member of the Bloomington School, Michael McGinnis (2005) that interpreting the Bloomington School reliance on Austrian Economics in too doctrinaire a manner is a mistake. The issues raised by the Bloomington School approach to rationality are significantly more complex than choosing up sides in a game of ideological dodge ball: pitting Hobbesian individualism against Durkheimian collectivism, as McGinnis characterized it. Among other things, that runs the risk of translating the robustly vigorous interdisciplinary Bloomington institutional perspective into the single-disciplinary terms of economics.

By shifting the focus from the atomistic, promethean individual decision-maker and the act utilitarianism of micro-economics to a more context-sensitive

approach, the IAD and the Bloomington School approach to institutional analysis offer a situationally-sensitive general approach to public and social policy-making that has already show itself to be highly useful in a wide variety of instances, including the particular challenges of at least one strain of third sector institutions. Third sector studies, particularly the interests of the public administration and political scholars interested in nonprofit organizations, could do worse than to follow this lead.

Tocqueville, Federalism and the Third Sector

The current model of the third sector as a nonprofit sector has many origins and scholars have sometimes been none to careful or generous in spelling out the sources of their ideas. Tocqueville used to get a lot of credit for the insightful comments made in two brief chapters on voluntary associations included within a much larger two-volume study of American government and society (c.f., O'Connell, 1987; Lohmann, 1992; et. al.). Judging by the paucity of citations to Vincent Ostrom's writings on Tocqueville in the literature, however, it would appear that third sector scholars may not yet have come to terms with what we might call "institutional federalism" or to recognize as an important interpreter of Tocqueville.

While there is little question that federalism as a principle of government and intergovernmental relations is a major concern in political science, the approach of the Blooming School allows for a broader and more interdisciplinary approach that might also encompass third sector institutions under that rubric (Ostrom, 1991). We can grasp this connection more fully by a slight adjustment in terminology. The term federalism, which has long had strong connotations of a public, governmental perspective, is actually closely related to at least two terms long used in the third sector. federations and federated financing. These are topics to which the Ostroms and other members of the Bloomington School deserve to be seen as major contributors.

While I can find no evidence of a structural focus on the third sector in the Ostrom *oeuvre*, the conclusion that the whole focus on self-governance trends that way seems inescapable. Thus, for example, in *The Meaning of Democracy and The Vulnerability of Democracies* (1997), V. Ostrom situated federalism in an open public realm that allows people to "constitute themselves into mutually respectful and productive working relationships" (Ostrom, 1997: 168). Is there a more concise statement of what people organizing voluntary and membership organizations frequently aspire to? This phrase points to a conception of a third sector as an extension of a broader configuration of self-government in society; perhaps not of national government institutions as they currently operate or of conventional macro-economics, but in some purer, more abstract Lincolnesque sense "of the people, for the people and by the people."

For the most part, national systems of representative democracy are on-going self-perpetuating institutions and people do not “constitute themselves” into “mutually respectful and productive working relationships” at the state and national levels, except in broad, abstract, symbolic social compact terms. They elect representatives who are the real political actors who form political associations. However, Ostrom’s language of constituting, mutuality, and respect are in fact accurate reflections of relations in local, urban and metropolitan communities in both governmental and third sectors. Thus, although the Ostroms and the Workshop may not have spelled out a third sector conception in a meaningful structural sense, the processes of actual mutual and respectful constitution of productive working relationships are present and articulate well with much of the work of the IU Center on Philanthropy and the rest of the contemporary field of third sector studies.

Austrian? Libertarian?

While there is no question that Vincent Ostrom had extensive interests in federalism and is considered by some to be an important Tocqueville scholar, the ideological perspective of the Bloomington School is less clear. Is the Bloomington approach more a matter of mainstream social science or libertarian ideology of the “Austrian economists including Frank Knight, Ludwig Mises and Frederick Hayek? A festschrift published in the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* on the topic of polycentrism at the Mercator Center in 2003, a journal article and book all seek to claim the Bloomington School for Austrian economics (Aligica & Boettke, 2009; Boettke & Coyne, 2005). However, such an interpretation has been challenged by a leading member of the Bloomington School, Michael McGinnis (McGinnis, 2005) who, while conceding the early Austrian economic influences concluded that “the Ostroms and the rest of the Workshop have made rather substantial departures beyond their intellectual forebears than may be evident from Boettke and Coyne’s overview” (McGinnis, 2005). In particular, McGinnis discusses the Austrian economic approach to methodological individualism and Hayek’s distinctive approach to spontaneous order.

While there are certainly important antecedents, any attempt to see the Bloomington School in either ideological or disciplinary terms may lead some to prematurely discount its importance. This would be an unfortunate error that appears to miss a good bit of the non-economic interdisciplinary aspects of this approach and overlook important aspects of the Tocquevillian character of many of the contributions. It is the shared link to Tocqueville that also supplies a good bit of the link to interdisciplinary third sector studies. Just as there have long been competing “left”, “right” and “center” ideological interpretations of Tocqueville, the Bloomington School perspective may be susceptible to the same fate.

The Water Case Studies

One of the most immediate, accessible interfaces between the Bloomington School and third sector studies is a large collection of case studies from around the world on the subject of the governance of local water rights, fishing grounds and other common resource governance questions.¹¹ These are found scattered across the Bloomington School *oeuvre*, unified by the focal questions of the IAD, and involve a range of governance questions and issues involving common resource questions for both formal and informal associations. It appears that it was out of these studies that the attentions of the Bloomington School first arose on issues of the commons.

Commons

The governance of common pool resources is one of the most distinctive and far-reaching concepts stemming from the Bloomington School, and an approach that was from the early 1990s guided in the main by Elinor Ostrom. It is reasonable to suggest, in fact, that all of modern commons studies arose along this pathway. In the lead essay in *Governing the Commons* (1990), she traces the convergence of three distinct perspectives in the Bloomington approach to common pool resources: Hardin's (1968) "tragic" model; Mancur Olson's small group model of collective choice (1965); and Albert Tucker's "prisoner's dilemma" game (Poundstone, 1992). The concept of the commons is, in its own way, as robust and charged with theoretical fascination as polycentricity and federation, and is equally relevant to third sector studies, especially association and voluntary action (Lohmann, 1992).

According to David Bollier "What makes the term commons useful . . . is its ability to help us identify problems that affect both types of commons (e.g., congestion, overharvesting, pollution, inequalities, other degradation) and to propose effective alternatives (e.g., social rules, appropriate property rights and management structures)." (Bollier, 2007, p. 28) By "both types of commons", Bollier refers to common resource pools (CRP) composed of either jointly held property or shared information; the two categories of CRP of greatest interest to Ostrom and her colleagues. It is rather curious that, although Vincent Ostrom's long-term Tocquevillian interests in the connection of voluntary associations to self-governance hold a central place in the Bloomington School perspective, there are few signs of specific interest in such questions in Bloomington School writings on commons, and then, only obliquely with no explicit acknowledgement of the differences signaled by the third sector idea. Hess (2008) recognizes interest in commons by third sector scholars (e.g., Lohmann, 1992), but there is little apparent recognition beyond this in the Bloomington School perspective of the role of formal and informal associations, organization and assemblies in the use of common resource pools (CRPs) of any sort. Meanwhile, a vast industry of commons projects and practices continues to grow on the internet and beyond largely devoid of theoretical guidance or

discipline.

Part of the Bloomington contribution to commons studies has been explicit acknowledgement of the vast dimensions of this topic, and the relatedness of seemingly unrelated topics: “The commons has too many variations to be captured in a fixed, universal set of principles. Each commons has distinctive dynamics based on its participants, history, cultural values, the nature of the resource, and so forth....(M)any different sorts of commons operating in American life today... illustrate how, despite significant differences, they embody certain general principles.” (Bollier, 2007, p. 28)

Knowledge Commons

Two particularly interesting outgrowths of recent Bloomington School work on the commons have been the twin concepts of the new commons and the knowledge commons. The idea of new commons (initially useful to note that there have been old commons) began as a way to differentiate the medieval European property commons in primary industries like agriculture and forestry from more recent information and intellectual property commons (Hess, 2007). Boyle (2003) associates the later with information technology and what he terms the second enclosure movement. Anyone who has experienced the open, public (even anarchic) character of electronic communication and observed attempts of large corporations and autocratic forces in governments around the world to control information access should easily understand what Boyle means by enclosure.

It is because of such efforts at control and limitation as they impact on openness of research and scholarship in our field and others that the second notion – the knowledge commons – assumes great importance. A knowledge commons is a distinctive approach to the sociology of knowledge that treats knowledge as a shared resource within a complex ecosystem (Hess & Ostrom, 2010: 3). One of the most fruitful avenues of exploration might be to redraw the lines of international copyright law so that the free, open dissemination of university based research in sciences, social sciences and humanities is not assumed to be on par with, and thus held hostage by, the interests of Disney, Amazon and other corporations including the publishing giants currently controlling academic publication and the authoritarian interests of governments, whether in China, Brazil or the U.S. The concept of the knowledge commons could be instrumental in making such a distinction meaningful. As another important off-shoot of this concept, the online Digital Library of the Commons (<http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/>), has already become an important repository for the placement of publicly-accessible manuscripts on commons topics in third sector studies.

Conclusion

I have tried in this brief space to make and support the claim that over the course of several decades Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, their colleagues, students and other associates compiled a large and still growing body of research evidence, concepts, and theory with inter-connecting implications not only for the study of politics, political economy and the field of public administration, but also for the interdisciplinary field of third sector studies. Their IU Workshop offers a rich seedbed for future research in third sector studies, a theoretical armature for linking together what at first appear to be a variety of distantly related topics, and an important exemplar for how that work can be centered at and grow from a single institution.¹² Faculty may long remain at a single institution and eventually die, while students are only on campus for a short time, and thus, the Bloomington School today is not just the activities of the Workshop. It is now a vast network of those imbued with similar outlooks and interested in related questions. Numerous questions about the impact of the Bloomington School cannot be answered yet. Some must be left to the intellectual historians. For example, the questions of what exactly Vincent, Lin, Mike, the organizers of this symposium and all of the others have contributed to the common good that is the collective product of the Bloomington School and the several polycentric knowledge commons to which its members contribute regularly including ARNOVA and NVSQ. Reflexively, we might easily conclude that the Bloomington School, as a network of colleagues and students is well on its way to becoming a polycentric knowledge commons.

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Notes

¹ Vincent and Elinor Ostrom died within months of one another in 2012. Prior to their deaths the Workshop was renamed in their honor.

² The term third sector studies is used here to include, but connote something broader than, the study of nonprofit organizations or civil society (Author, forthcoming; Hall, 2012; Wagner, 2012).

³ My interest in the broader aspects of this topic is quite recent; it dates primarily from the pre-conference workshop on “The Ostroms and Nonprofit Studies: Reflections and Future Directions” held in the seminar room of the Workshop in Bloomington, IN on November 15, 2012 prior to the 2012 ARNOVA conference in Indianapolis. As the title suggests, that session was organized by three graduates of the workshop to familiarize nonprofit scholars with the Ostroms and discuss possible ties to nonprofit or, as I prefer, third sector studies. Brent Nevers outlined polycentricism. Rob Christianson spoke on the IAD framework and its applications, and Brenda Bushouse outlined the Ostrom’s work on the commons. Prior to the workshop, I believed that I was interested in only one small facet of the broad agenda of the Workshop, but it helped me see a large number of interconnections, several of the most important of which I try to link in this article. It is my misfortune that I never took the opportunity to meet either Ostrom while they were alive although I am among those who have been influenced by their work over a much longer period of time than I had realized. While Elinor Ostrom is reported to have attended several ARNOVA meetings, I am unaware of any involvement more extensive than attendance at the same conference and a number of mutual colleagues and friends.

⁴ This approach has already frustrated at least one anonymous reviewer of this manuscript, and no doubt will prove frustrating to others already expert in the writings of the Ostroms, both because matters they consider important have been left out and because of the inadequacy of my interpretations.

⁵ Note to young scholars with an interest in political theory: Exploring the implications for third sector studies of Ostrom’s *Compound Republic* would make for an excellent – but highly challenging – thesis topic.

⁶ In this article I do not comment on the relations of the Workshop and the Center on Philanthropy at the same university. Simple application of principles of self-governance of the type analyzed by the Ostroms dictate that such concerns are matters for administrators, faculty, staff, and students at that institution to address.

⁷ For a different, purely economic, assessment of the contributions of the Bloomington School, see Aligesi & Boettke, 2009.

⁸ Mises and Hayek were second-generation members of the “historical” or Austrian School of Economics. Both are sometimes named with the Prussian appellation Von (Ludwig von Mises and Frederick von Hayek), as members of families that were part of the Prussian nobility (roughly akin to the British aristocracy) these were once appropriate, but are not included here following the banning of such hereditary titles for Prussian nobility in the 1919 peace settlement following World War I.

⁹ As someone trained in public policy and not in economics or intellectual history, I am not familiar in any detail with the exact pattern of influences here: with the historicist work of previous Austrian economists or Frank Knight, or even the exact nature of the connections to Dahl and Lindblom who were, until the past decade, my primary referents.

¹⁰ As a pragmatist with a strong inclination toward social constructivism, I see this solution as only a partial one. The real challenge is still how to move the field even further beyond rule utilitarianism to some more adequate modern epistemological basis. The detailed discussions of rules in several places and the most recent focus of E. Ostrom and Charlotte Hess on knowledge commons shows signs of positive movement in that regard.

¹¹ I owe this insight to a comment by Mike McGinnis at the November, 2012 pre-conference colloquium at the Workshop.

¹² There are, of course, numerous other examples of this same phenomenon, including many of the nonprofit and voluntary sector studies that have grown up in recent decades, but the IU Workshop clearly holds its own in any such comparisons, and may be less well known to many third sector scholars.