

Book Review

Wall, Derek. 2014. *The Sustainable Economics of Elinor Ostrom: Commons, Contestation and Craft*. New York & London: Routledge.

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When I was asked to take on this review, I was hesitant at first. If I agree to review a book, I want to bring to the task my most open mind. Having worked with Elinor Ostrom for a decade, I was afraid I would find it difficult to have a fresh look and find new ideas in a book with the title “The Sustainable Economics of Elinor Ostrom.” I accepted nonetheless and when I started reading the book I was pleasantly surprised and relieved. This book is much more than an interpretation of the Ostrom’s work. It is a fun, insightful journey into the lives of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom and the ideas of many other scholars that shaped their work. At the same time, it provides a concise description of the key intellectual contributions of the Ostroms with insightful commentary along the way.

I think the book will appeal to two audiences – scholars close to the Ostroms (so-called Workshopers) and those outside this inner circle – in different ways. I would guess Workshopers will appreciate reading Chapters 1 (An accidental life) and 2 (Signs and wonders) while filling in gaps in their knowledge about the Ostrom’s life and the sources that influenced their ideas. Of course, many Workshopers will know parts of this story but will likely have experienced Elinor or Vincent refer to an event or reference in response to a question that cause the listener to think, “hmmmm. I wonder where that comes from, or how does that fit in this discussion....” Chapters 1 and 2 answered many such questions and filled in many gaps in my knowledge. For example, the importance of Tocqueville in the Ostroms’ intellectual lives is well known, but the discussion of the impact of Ernst Mayr on Elinor Ostrom’s thinking helped me place the origins of her interest in complex adaptive systems in a richer context.

Chapter 3 is a lively, concise description of the range of methods. Ostrom brought to bear in her work – a roadmap through the sometimes bewildering

collection of methods available to the interdisciplinary social scientist. It is both a nuanced discussion for the initiated and an excellent introduction for scholars new to the field. This chapter (and book) would be a great companion reader for “Governing the Commons” and “Understanding Institutional Diversity”, especially for graduate students entering related fields.

Chapters 4–6 explore the core intellectual content of the Ostrom’s work. Chapter 4 is a careful exploration of the notion of the “commons” – in terms of its application to characterizing a biophysical resource and to characterizing a regime to govern such resources. This is an important discussion, as the different meanings of the term “commons” are often conflated. Chapter 5 illustrates how Ostrom embedded the governance question in the relevant biophysical context (i.e., the ecology) through the development of the notion of Social-Ecological Systems. Chapter 6 focuses on the Knowledge commons, and takes a nice excursion away from the work of Ostrom in a section titled “A short history of the future”. This section details the emergence of open source software through the efforts of Richard Stallman and Eric Raymond. Wall notes the “copyleft” notion developed by Stallman here. Ostrom, a knowledge commons champion, has used the creative commons license to “copyleft” the common-pool resource system data she gathered in the 1980s in addition to the *Digital Library of the Commons* and *International Journal of the Commons* mentioned in the book. This data has been made freely available at seslibrary.asu.edu as part of an NSF funded collaborative project between the *Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity* at Arizona State University (csid.asu.edu) and the *Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis* at Indiana University. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of an *Institutional Analysis and Development* (IAD) view of the knowledge commons through the work of Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess and the work of Charlie Schweik who used the IAD to study the success of open source software projects.

Chapters 7–9 explore the broader implications of the Ostrom’s work including fun topics like power and conflict. The book concludes with Chapter 9 which presents challenges from other scholars to the Ostrom’s body of work. Five themes, dear to the Ostroms, run through the book: 1) knowledge generation as craft, 2) practical problem solving, 3) the tension between top-down structure and bottom-up self-organization in governance, 4) the interaction of (and tension between) different types of knowledge, and 5) contestation in knowledge generation. Wall weaves these themes together in a very interesting narrative about the Ostrom’s work and its impact on the prospects of governing for a sustainable future.