The following memorial appeared in *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, 4 (October, 2012): 791-792., copyright © 2012 American Political Science Association. It is reproduced with the permission of Cambridge University Press. The memorial’s authors were all professional colleagues of Elinor Ostrom, and one of them, Professor Aseem Prakash, was a student of Lin’s in the Workshop in Political Theory & Policy Analysis. My colleagues and I offer their memorial in behalf of the Department of Political Science at Indiana University Bloomington.

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Elinor Ostrom

Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012) began her academic career as a trailing spouse; she was not even interviewed when in 1965 Indiana University recruited her more senior husband and intellectual partner, the eminent and also recently deceased Vincent Ostrom. Within a year and a considerable amount of inadequately compensated work (including teaching an American Government class at 7:30 am), she established her place as a member of the faculty and went on to chair the Political Science department in the 1980s. In 1973 she and Vincent launched the Workshop, which Indiana University recently rechristened as The Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis.

Lin continued to establish her place in the many years that followed: She was president of the Public Choice Society (1982–1984), Midwest Political Science Association (1984–5), and American Political Science Association (1996–7). At the time of her death she held the positions of Distinguished Professor, Indiana University, Arthur F. Bentley Professor of Political Science and professor (part time) in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Senior Research Director, Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, and Founding Director, Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity, Arizona State University, Tempe. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1991, the National Academy of Sciences in 2001, and the American Philosophical Society in 2006. The recipient of the Johann Skytte Prize in 1999 and of more than ten honorary doctorates, she won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009—the first (and only) woman to do so and the second political scientist (following Herbert Simon). In 2012 *Time* Magazine named her as one the 100 most influential people in the world.

Lin’s scholarly productivity and impact are staggering. She authored or edited over
30 books and over 600 articles and book chapters. As per Google scholar, her work has been cited about 54,000 times, with *Governing the Commons* alone having 14,000 citations! Looking at the range of journals in which her work was published and cited, it is clear she was a rare scholar who contributed to and was recognized by natural, physical, and social sciences.

According to Lin herself, her work focused on “how to develop better analyses of how institutions affect behavior and outcomes in diverse settings” (2010). *Governing the Commons* (1990), her most famous book, documented cases throughout the world of community-based solutions to common pool resource problems and theorized the kinds of institutions and conditions that made it possible (or difficult) to govern the commons. She went on to build a more general framework of institutions (Ostrom 2005; Crawford and Ostrom 1995). Using that framework, she analyzed, often with co-authors, a wide variety of phenomena, including development aid (Gibson, Ostrom, Andersson, and Shivakumar 2005), trust (Ostrom and Walker 2002), and the most contemporary challenges to the commons (Dolšak and Ostrom 2003). In a fairly recent article in *Science* (2009a), she offers “A general framework for analyzing the sustainability of social-ecological systems.”

Lin built theories, she tested them, and she extended them. Her goal was to make progress in understanding a wide variety of collective action problems. She used rational choice theory informed by advances in cognitive psychology and behavioral economics to ensure the realism of her assumptions about human reasoning and its limits. Her most elegant expression of her intellectual approach is in her APSA presidential address in 1997 (1998).

Underlying all that she did and that made her scholarship so compelling were three commitments. The first was that the best solutions to complex problems were often polycentric. Polycentricity implies that different governance mechanisms are efficiently provided at different scales. This held whether one was talking of a centralized state or a centralized municipal body. Her early work in the 1970s challenged the then prevalent notion about municipal consolidation. She and her students delved deeply into this issue and found that consolidation of urban services was problematic both on theoretical and empirical grounds. In conducting the fieldwork on police organizations, she often rode in police cars to observe how police personnel performed on their jobs. Her claim that no other political scientists had spent so much time in police cars as she did was a source of bonding and friendly competition with Margaret Levi, one of the co-authors of this piece, whose dissertation was on police unions.

She did not believe in institutional monoculture that tends to privilege the market
or the state as the solution to governance problems. It used to infuriate her when the assumption was made that she was anti-government. She recognized that sometimes governments—and markets—were part of the problem, but sometimes they were a part of the solution. In her perspective diverse actors and stakeholders are always necessary albeit in different combinations and to different degrees, depending on the context and the problem to be solved.

The second commitment was that good research demands a vast array of skills and methods. The tools she used included case study research, fieldwork, game theory (which she learned in her 40s), experimental methods and agent-based modeling (learned in her late 50s), and remote sensing technology (learned in her 70s). But she was the first to admit that her acquisition of the skills and her practice of them in the most sophisticated ways required collaborators, often students who had become experts in a substantive area or in a method.

Collaboration constituted her third commitment. Nowhere does she describe the intertwined commitments to multiple methods and collaborative work better than in her interview in *Annual Review of Political Science* (Ostrom 2009b) and in her recent co-authored book with Amy Poteete and Marco Janssen (2010).

All of the recognition and honors she received and all the major publications fail to capture how personally impressive, influential, and generous Lin was, and they certainly fail to capture the extent to which she created not only wrote about commons. She was and probably remains the person who served on the most committees at APSA. Her list of co-authors and students is immense.

Lin was a conscientious teacher. Students in her institutional analysis seminar were expected to write extensive memos on the assigned readings, and she would write a return memo, often handwritten, individually to all students. She always had time for her advisees, notwithstanding her arduous travel commitments. An invitation to drive with her to Indianapolis airport came with the promise of her undivided attention.

Lin chaired 70 doctoral committees and served as a member on 48 doctoral committees. She was a demanding mentor and expected high quality work. She attentively tracked the progress of her advisees, and she made sure that many had offices in the Workshop building. When she encountered a dissertating student, she would enquire with a smile, “Anything for me to read?” Beyond guiding their dissertation work, she invested considerable time socializing them into the norms and ways of the profession. No issue her students raised was trivial for her. Even when she was travelling (which she did a lot), her students could expect quick responses to their e-mails. Indeed, she remained in
touch even when students graduated and moved elsewhere. Past students who authored articles could expect to receive an e-mail with comments from Lin. At professional conferences, after the usual courtesies she would often ask, “What are you working on?”—and then engage in discussion about the ideas and methods.

Lin established several organizations to study institutions. The most prominent among these is, of course, the Workshop. Not long arriving in Bloomington in the late 1960s, Lin and Vincent decided to create a research center outside the departmental setting where students would work as apprentices and journeymen with opportunities to learn from and collaborate with one another. In part, the Ostroms were inspired by the experience of learning from and working with carpenters to build furniture for their home. The Ostrom Workshop is a unique place, from the art decorating its walls, to the people who populate it, and to the rules governing its operations. It hosts students and scholars from multiple countries and disciplines. Doctoral students connected with the Workshop, as both Dolsak and Prakash know from first-hand experience, are known on the Bloomington campus as the Workshoppers. Faculty, students, visiting scholar, and staff share responsibilities for several daily activities. Lin and Vincent established an endowment, the Tocqueville Endowment, to fund scholarly activities. It is testimony to her commitment to this organization that Lin donated honoraria and prize money, including the Nobel Prize, to the Workshop. The growing size of the Workshop family, which included beloved and loyal staff as well as scholars, led to the hosting of conferences, the Workshops on Workshop, to bring together alumni to share their research.

Lin and Vincent were devoted spouses. It was a relationship of extraordinary intensity. He had a profound impact on her intellectual trajectory. Vincent was her unsparing critic and outspoken admirer. She dedicated Governing the Commons to Vincent for “His love and contestation.” They also shared a taste for adornment. Lin used to wear colorful blouses embellished with unique and beautiful necklaces. When she received a compliment for her jewelry, she would tell you that the necklaces are actually Vincent’s property and that he selects one for her every day. Their home reflected their mutual love of craft, indigenous North American art, and friends, whose photographs abound.

Lin Ostrom was an extraordinary individual. Her legacy through her scholarship, her students, and the organizations she established will continue to inspire future generations. Here was a person who asked tough but fundamental questions about human behavior and was ready to learn appropriate techniques, collaborate with leading experts, and undertake travel to difficult terrains to explore these questions. Lin was inquisitive and open minded. She had a great sense of humor, and she took immense pleasure in the achievements of others. Above all, she taught us that humans have the
capacity and duty to function as self-governing actors, that we can control our destinies—if we are willing to work together to govern and contribute to our shared commons and communities.

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