The following memorial appeared in *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, 4 (October, 2012): 792-795, copyright © 2012 American Political Science Association. It is reproduced with the permission of Cambridge University Press. One of the memorial’s authors, Professor Barbara Allen, was a student of Vincent Ostrom’s in the Workshop in Political Theory & Policy Analysis. The other, Professor Roberta Herzberg, was a colleague of Vincent Ostrom’s in the Workshop and Department of Political Science. My colleagues and I offer their memorial in behalf of the Department of Political Science at Indiana University Bloomington.

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Vincent Ostrom

Vincent Ostrom (1919–2012) began a career in public administration that initially established him as a leading scholar of natural resource policy, but his 60 years of scholarship and teaching have had an impact on our thinking about much more. Growing up on a farm in western Washington State, five miles from the US border with Canada, Vincent was accustomed to the waterways and forests of the Puget Sound. Travels by car along the Oregon coast and through the California deserts to attend Los Angeles City College in 1937, led to a lifelong interest in the many ways people in vastly diverse physical environments sustain life together. He saw that institutions develop from the individual up, within the potential of nature. While human beings could put “nature” to their use—as his father had done by domesticating minks and breeding them for their specifically colored coats—the natural world was a partner in such enterprises, and not to be subdued. Such lessons impressed him deeply. From his job teaching at Chaffey Union High School in Ontario, California (1943–1945), Vincent observed the Imperial Valley “miracle” orchestrated by engineers George and William Chaffey, whose irrigation projects brought forth a half-million arable acres from the California desert—acres farmed by migrants of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. The contrast between nature’s devastation and man’s creative potential could not be more clear. A lifelong quest to understand institutional design was born.

Vincent’s position as an assistant professor in the University of Wyoming political science department (1945–1948) revealed other ways of life particular to the arid west, specifically the property rights institutions spurred by cattle drives through unfenced prairie. The collegiality of his three-person department, combined with opportunities to collaborate with specialists in agriculture, medicine, and engineering, enabled Vincent to create transdisciplinary working groups of graduate students and faculty to study natural resource problems and advise the state’s legislative committees. While there, Vincent hoped to start research for a dissertation on the “politics of grass,” the roundup and system of brands recognized by stock growers associations. Instead, he resigned his position in protest, publishing an open letter, co-authored with department chair E. S. “Bert” Wengert (1912–1964), that explained their resistance to the university president’s demand that Vincent and his working groups stop their “political” activities: conducting research for state and local officials. The resignation and public statement were typical of Vincent’s
commitment to truth and to his profession, which often demanded hard choices to advance understanding, even at the expense of his own narrow security. At times, it seemed nothing beyond this search for understanding mattered, except his love and respect for his life partner, distinguished Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom.

For Vincent, the quest focused on the critical distinction between constitutional choices that facilitated or hindered subsequent collective choices intended to address social dilemmas. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Vincent learned first-hand about the constitutional foundations of institutional design. After completing his PhD at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1950—on water service, not grasslands—Vincent was asked to consult on numerous commissions and conventions charged with constitutional level decisions that would affect resource use and the livelihoods for generations. He drafted a water policy for Tennessee and consulted on the Territory of Hawaii’s bid for statehood. During his tenure as an assistant and associate professor at the University of Oregon (1949–1958), Vincent, who served as the vice-chair of the Oregon State Water Board (1957–1959), initiated a critical study of the Middle Snake River. The study enabled the state to evaluate and, at the time, contest various private and federal hydroelectric dam projects. As he and Wengert had said in their open letter of resignation, “the first approach to any public problem must be through information;” only research, study, and interpretation from within the given context can “bring facts to light” (Wengert and Ostrom 2012 [1948]). Such experiences convinced Vincent that diverse solutions are possible, even in comparable settings, and how important it was to understand the context of each institutional design.

In addressing these practical political puzzles of constitutional and collective choice, Vincent facilitated citizens’ design of constitutional rules to manage common resources. His work in helping to draft Article VIII on Natural Resources for the Constitution of the State of Alaska is perhaps the best example of this collaborative approach. Rather than design for the constitutional convention delegates as “the expert” of public administration, as they had asked, Vincent asked them questions and wrote their answers on a blackboard in the College of Fairbanks classroom where they met. He helped them set their own aims into a constitutional language. Later, after the convention recessed for delegates to take their draft constitution to the people of Alaska, he helped them revise this language to fit the circumstances of the culturally and environmentally diverse territory. He showed local participants how to design for their own way of life, within a legal framework as diverse as the compound republic of which he would later write. As he observed the capability of citizens working together to resolve shared dilemmas, he became increasingly convinced of the importance of experiences in constitutional choice, not simply for the outcomes produced, but for the experience and shared understanding they could create. Collaboration, creativity, and practical experience became “essential foundations,” as he would say, in his brand of public administration.

Vincent’s most important collaboration began as he and his wife, Lin, embarked on their lifelong love story. Their interests reinforced and complemented each other, and intellectual
contestation became the language of their love. To anyone who met them, theirs was a unique union of private and public expressions of value. They shared not only work, but enjoyed “working” together: building their cabin on the Manitoulin Island and their home on Lampkins Ridge (both of which they designed together), making most of the furniture in each home, and helping start-up artists and crafters, and in the process gained an enviable collection of Native American art and jewelry, much of which they bequeathed to the original artisans. Together, their work was stronger as they listened to each other, combining their skills and artisanship to craft ideas as well as tools. As he put it, “Instead of arguing, we were inquiring and this course of inquiry has been a part, not only of our life together as a married couple, but as collaborators in the Workshop.”2 The quest for understanding and commitment to contestation which Vincent and Lin made over a life time resulted in co-founding the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis and laid the groundwork for fundamental change across several disciplines.

At UCLA, Vincent, working with Charles Tiebout and Robert Warren, advanced new understandings of public economies as vital complements to market economies. They challenged the prevailing view of municipal government dominated by a single dominant center of decision making, “Gargantua,” (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961, 831). The analysis sketched the foundation for what became Vincent’s lifelong preoccupation: the concept of polycentricity.

Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren rebutted a central premise of bureaucratic administration: that mature, effective organization must have a single locus of administrative control. According to this characterization, “overlapping jurisdictions” were a symptom of administrative failure. In contrast, they offered insights about the potential benefits of “polycentricity” in their analysis of the effective, efficient delivery of public goods in metropolitan Los Angeles. This theoretical contribution on metropolitan government, widely translated and reprinted, is today considered among the most influential works that contributed to the emergence of non-market decision making or public choice. In the 1970s and 1980s, Vincent provided an inspiration to Lin and her students to extend this analysis of metropolitan governance to urban service delivery and followed the progress of this work as it gained national and international recognition.

The founding of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis with Lin in 1973 represented not only a culmination of two decades of research and his service to the profession as the editor of Public Administration Review but also expressed his commitment to bringing together people, ideas, and practices. The Workshop provided the context for an alternative paradigm for understanding public affairs, as reflected in The Political Theory of a Compound Republic (1971, 1987, 2008) and The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration (1973, 1974, 1989, 2008). In each work, Vincent contested the paradigm associated with the administrative science of Woodrow Wilson which advocated centralization and an orientation that looked to experts able to separate “politics” from administration. “Democratic administration,” as Vincent Ostrom labeled the general idea of an engaged citizenry, challenged “bureaucratic administration” and its corresponding attitudes toward expertise, command, and control.
Rather than simply countering “bureaucracy” or hierarchy with “markets” and conflating organizational forms with the degree of voluntarism implied by a given structure (e.g. bureaucratic coercion against free markets), Vincent asked readers to consider a broader level of design, comparing the constitution of monocentric and polycentric frameworks in which a particular organization may function. He accepted the approach of political economy, methodological individualism, and recognized diverse types of “goods” or events as the subject of administration. But he went on to challenge some of the conclusions reached by Buchanan, Tullock, and other members of the Public Choice Society (of which he was a founding member). He suggested that whether a given organizational form “worked” (as a short-hand for various evaluative criteria including claims of efficiency, efficacy, effectiveness, and equity) had to do with the nature of the good to be administered and with the broader framework of constitutional choice in which a good—and the understanding of goods or events—was embedded. Public goods and common pool resources could become subjects of a collective action dilemma, but whether “tragedy” ensued depended as much on the constitutional framework surrounding collective choice and the corresponding shared understandings of goods and events that ultimately inspired individual and collective action. Self-organization and self-governance were possibilities; if scholars and practitioners hoped to make such civic virtues likely, they should consider the important differences between levels of collective, constitutional, and epistemic choice.

Transcending his early work on collective choice, Vincent examined systematically the constitutional choices that provide the foundation of federal systems. At the heart of his argument is the polycentric logic of Madison’s design discovered in his careful reading of the federalist papers and his own observation working with the delegates to the Alaska constitutional convention crafting an article on natural resources. The exposition of institutional development articulated in The Federalist, coupled with the institutional analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville, resulted in The Political Theory of a Compound Republic, published by the Public Choice Society in 1971. Encouraged as well by insights from James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s Calculus of Consent (1962), Vincent insisted that we step back to consider the constitutional choices that frame collective action situations. Both the The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration and the detailed analysis of American federalism in Compound Republic marked a turning point in public choice theory, as well as in public administration.

These examinations of polycentricity and democracy helped to renew contacts with other centers of federalism, including the Center for the Study of Federalism at Temple University headed by Daniel Elazar (1934–1999). A fellowship at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld University to take part in a year-long research group organized by Franz-Xaver Kaufmann (1932–) on Guidance, Control, and Performance introduced Vincent to the work of German economist Walter Eucken (1891–1950) and the economic thought of the Freiburg School. Lin joined him for a semester to study game theory and formal modeling with Reinhard Selten, and the Bielefeld experience suggested to them how visiting scholars could take part in the Workshop effort. Soon they were placing a portion of their salaries into scholarship opportunities to fund scholars.
from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Vincent spent his life contesting the trend in political science toward oversimplification and consolidation, and worried about the implementation of these simplified policies in democratic communities. These concerns culminated in the *Meaning of Democracy and Vulnerabilities of Democracies*. Here he argued that analysts had confounded voting with the civic learning experienced in the activities of self-government. As a result they often ignored the loss of social capital that accompanied the reduction in opportunities for meaningful self-government. Without these experiences, Vincent argues, democracy’s very existence is threatened. The ideas were of more than “academic” interest. Without a science of association, learned by actually associating, “democracy” understood as self-governance, could not endure.

Vincent’s contributions were recognized and honored many times throughout his career, including his Bentley chair in political science at Indiana University, recognition by Alaska for his contribution to constitutional design, the Daniel Elazar prize for federalism, Martha Derthick prize for best book in public administration, and the Gaus lecture at APSA meetings. What is most striking is the range of fields that have recognized Vincent Ostrom—natural resources policy, civic education, economics, federalism, constitutionalism, public administration, and more generally, political theory and policy analysis. It is testimony to the breadth of Vincent’s contribution and interests that his work bridges and transcends the boundaries of so many disciplines.

Vincent’s serious commitment to contestation shaped his relationships, and at times, was known to intimidate young graduate students. But, the many who were challenged came to cherish his kindness and respect for the as partners in a common enterprise. This respect did not attach to titles or professions, but, instead from work and commitment. Vincent met every person as he found him or her. He once suggested that while he enjoyed doing what he did (the Bentley Chair in Political Science at Indiana University), he always knew that if he could not do that, he would be happy contributing to society by making furniture and being a part of his community in that way. For Vincent, work was work, and if you worked, you contributed. This is a rare perspective shaped his relationships as much as his scholarship. What drew him to others was his desire to improve the circumstances and situations that we commonly faced as humans; what draws us to him is the importance of his quest to understand human affairs, not only for Vincent Ostrom, but for all people who aspire to self-governance.

NOTES
1. And an interview by Barbara Allen with Vincent Ostrom January 9, 2005, Bloomington, IN.
2. Interview by Barbara Allen with Vincent Ostrom May 10, 2006, Bloomington, IN.

REFERENCES


—Barbara Allen, Ada M. Harrison Distinguished Teaching Professor of the Social Sciences, Professor of Political Science, Director of Women’s and Gender Studies, Carleton College
—Roberta Q. Herzberg, Associate Professor of Political Science, Utah State University