

Historicizing Elinor Ostrom: Urban Politics, International Development and Expertise in the U.S. Context (1970-1990)

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The goal of this article is to write a social and political history of the now preeminent approach to the ‘commons’ institutions, by focusing on Elinor Ostrom’s contributions to its development. My methodology is that of Science and Technology Studies (STS). I focus here on the materiality of E. Ostrom and her team’s research practices (fieldwork, data collecting, indexing and analysis), on their intellectual and institutional strategies, their networking practices, how their research was funded, and their interactions with administrative and academic institutions and actors (USAID, NSF, National Academy of Sciences). I analyze the history of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, the research center that E. Ostrom and her husband Vincent founded and animated for some 40 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. By doing so, I hope to be able to analyze the close ties between the form and content of the Ostromian theories on the commons and the main lines of tension in the U.S. society of the 1970s and 80s that saw their emergence: urban crisis and “neighborhood revolution”, increasing distrust of modernization and centralization ideals, mutations in U.S. development policies and doctrines, rise of neoliberalism.

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INTRODUCTION

The “commons” political model has become a central issue in contemporary debates.¹ It is the subject of discussion everywhere — from international organizations to NGOs, and from state administrations to counterculture circles. If reference to the “commons” may sometimes be superficial and become mere sloganeering, it often partakes in conceptually well-structured proposals. Commons theories, of various origins and inspirations, are many.

Today, however, one approach has become preeminent worldwide, among academic circles and beyond. As we will see, it emerged in the U.S. context, from both academic research and expert knowledge elicited for public policy. This approach, multidisciplinary but heavily influenced by political science and economic approaches, was initially promoted by a group of researchers and development experts. A single figure, Elinor Ostrom, played however a crucial role in the development of this new perspective on the commons institutions. Her book *Governing the Commons*, published in 1990, was a landmark in the history of theories of commons governance and is still very influential today.² By combining a vast meta-analysis of case studies of historical and contemporary commons with insights from rational choice, game theory and economics, she was able to make two central points. First, she refutes the famous conclusion of Garrett Hardin in his 1968 article on the “tragedy of the commons” that they are inherently incompatible with a sustainable exploitation of resources.³ The critiques of the Hardinian argument are a starting point in E. Ostrom’s writings on commons governance, and they are repeated so often as to become almost ritualistic. Second, she produces a set of criteria of success (or failure) of forms of commons governance, based on extensive empirical data. Besides these theoretical contributions, Elinor Ostrom also played a crucial role in the institutional structuring of the research

1 This research was supported by the French National Research Agency project GOVENPRO (ANR-14-CE03-0003). Text translated from French by Christine Colpart.

2 ELINOR OSTROM, *GOVERNING THE COMMONS: THE EVOLUTION OF INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION* (1990).

3 Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 162 *SCI.* 1243 (1968). On Hardin, the “tragedy of the commons” and its reception, see Fabien Locher, *Les pâturages de la guerre froide: Garrett Hardin et la ‘tragédie des communs,’* 60 *REVUE D’HISTOIRE MODERNE ET CONTEMPORAINE* 7 (2013) (Fr.), translated in Fabien Locher, *Cold War Pastures, Garrett Hardin and the ‘Tragedy of the Commons,’* *CAIRN-INT* (2013) https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_RHMC_601_0007--cold-war-pastures-garrett-hardin-and.htm).

on the topic, notably via her action within the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC).

The goal of this Article is to write a social and political history of this now preminent approach to the commons, with a focus on E. Ostrom's contributions to its emergence and rise. My methodology is that of Science and Technology Studies (STS), applied here to the production of knowledge on the dynamics of human societies.⁴ Rather than focus on the history of concepts,⁵ my inquiry aims to apprehend the history of the concrete knowledge production practices behind the creation of the Ostromian commons paradigm.⁶

I will focus on the materiality of scholars' research practices (fieldwork, data collecting, indexing and analysis), on their intellectual and institutional strategies, their networking practices, how their research was funded, and their

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- 4 See Michael Mair, Christian Greiffenhagen & William Sharrock, *Social Studies of Social Science: A Working Bibliography* (NCRM Working Paper No. 8, 2013), http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3219/1/soc_studies_of_soc_science.pdf; Theodore Porter & Dorothy Ross, *Introduction*, in 7 *CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF SCIENCE 1* (Theodore M. Porter & Dorothy Ross eds., 2003). On social sciences, economics and expertise, see THEODORE M. PORTER, *TRUST IN NUMBERS: THE PURSUIT OF OBJECTIVITY IN SCIENCE AND PUBLIC LIFE* (1995); ALAIN DESROSIÈRES, *GOVERNER PAR LES NOMBRES: L'ARGUMENT STATISTIQUE II* [GOVERNING BY THE NUMBERS: THE STATISTICAL ARGUMENT II] (2008); PHILIP MIROWSKI, *MACHINE DREAMS: ECONOMICS BECOMES A CYBORG SCIENCE* (2001). On STS in general, the bibliography is huge. For an introduction, see JAN GOLINSKI, *MAKING NATURAL KNOWLEDGE: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE* (1998); SERGIO SISMONDO, *AN INTRODUCTION TO SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES* (2004); *THE HANDBOOK OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES* (Edward Hackett et al. eds., 3d ed. 2008).
- 5 For studies dealing with the conceptual analysis of Ostrom's work and how it was received, see DEREK WALL, *THE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMICS OF ELINOR OSTROM: COMMONS, CONTESTATION AND CRAFT* (2014); VLAD TARKO, *ELINOR OSTROM: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY* (2016); Craig Johnson, *Uncommon Ground: The 'Poverty of History' in Common Property Discourse*, 35 *DEV. & CHANGE* 407 (2004); Carol M. Rose, *Ostrom and the Lawyers: The Impact of Governing the Commons on the American Legal Academy*, 5 *INT'L J. COMMONS* 28 (2011).
- 6 In this respect, eyewitness accounts by the protagonists themselves are priceless: Frank van Laerhoven & Elinor Ostrom, *Traditions and Trends in the Study of the Commons*, 1 *INT'L J. COMMONS* 3 (2007); Thomas Dietz et al., *The Drama of the Commons*, in *THE DRAMA OF THE COMMONS 3* (Elinor Ostrom et al. eds., 2002); Charlotte Hess, *Tracking the IASCP: Crafting an Organization: The Early History of IASCP and the Workshop Connection*, 6 *POLYCENTRIC CIRCLES* 1 (1999).

interactions with administrative and academic institutions and actors.⁷ I will analyze the history of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, the research center that E. Ostrom and her husband Vincent founded and animated for some 40 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. By doing so, I hope to be able to analyze the close ties between the form and content of the Ostromian theories on the commons and the main lines of tension in the society that saw their emergence. One of my main arguments is that for understanding the Ostromian approach to the commons and its emergence in the 1980s, it is crucial to analyze the research practices invented at the Workshop during the preceding decade, in the context of E. Ostrom's works on urban policing, consolidation and community governance.

I will use different scales of analysis. I will very closely observe Ostrom and her teams' daily work. I will look at the construction of networks that made the Workshop the nerve center of research on the commons. I will sometimes leave Bloomington to understand the dynamics operating within large U.S. public and quasi-public institutions.

Where a story starts is always, to a certain extent, left to the narrator's discretion. But still, nothing would have been possible if a certain type of analysis had not been becoming more and more influential at the time of E. Ostrom's early career, that is, rational choice theory.⁸

I. PUBLIC CHOICE, RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONS: RFF AND USAID

In the 1970s, rational choice theories became increasingly popular in U.S. political and administrative circles. They gained more and more influence

7 On the practical, material and institutional dimensions of the STS research agenda, see *supra* note 4. On financing of post-WW2 social sciences and humanities, see Hunter Crowther-Heyck, *Patrons of the Revolutions: Ideals and Institutions in Postwar Behavioral Science*, 97 *ISIS* 420 (2006); Tiago Mata & Tom Scheiding, *National Science Foundation Patronage of Social Science, 1970s and 1980s: Congressional Scrutiny Advocacy Network, and the Prestige of Economics*, 50 *MINERVA* 423 (2012); MARK SOLOVEY, *SHAKY FOUNDATIONS: THE POLITICS-PATRONAGE-SOCIAL SCIENCE NEXUS IN COLD WAR AMERICA* (2013); Tim B. Mueller, *The Rockefeller Foundation, the Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the Cold War*, 15 *J. COLD WAR STUD.* 108 (2013); SCIENCE BOUGHT AND SOLD: ESSAYS IN THE ECONOMICS OF SCIENCE (Philip Mirowski & Esther-Mirjam Sent eds., 2002).

8 Ironically and paradoxically, rational choice approaches underlay the arguments of the so-called tragedy of the commons and of the free rider, and also paved the way for the Ostromian paradigm — but at the price of a certain distancing.

in federal administrations and public policy expert think tanks, particularly in connection with development and environmental governance issues. The dissemination of rational choice tools contributed to the highlighting of institutions and their “improvements” as the key to making progress on these two fronts. This evolution influenced the intellectual culture prevailing in administrative and political circles. It was particularly felt in two U.S. institutions of key importance to development and environmental issues: the think tank Resources for the Future (RFF) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 1975, a new manager was appointed to the RFF, Charles J. Hitch. One of Hitch’s objectives was to bring the research of the think tank closer to the realities of policymaking. He reorganized the organization into three sections, one of them devoted to the theme “Institutions and Public Decisions.” He wanted to extend the expertise of the think tank beyond the scope of its economic approach to the environment and resources (analysis of externalities, microeconomics, and taxation).

In this way, Hitch strove to make room for new approaches developed internally by political analyst Edwin T. Haefele. The latter’s research was based on the observation that common-property resources of water and publicly managed lands were subject to conflicts between competing users, and that these conflicts were increasingly arbitrated by experts of the state or federal executive branch.⁹ Haefele considered it essential to vest the legislative branch with decision-making powers with respect to these common resources. His work thus consisted of using concrete cases to devise new mechanisms of representative government in which common-property resources governance imperatives had been integrated.¹⁰ He used the tools of rational choice theory and drew upon its classic authors (William H. Riker, Lloyd Shapley, and Mancur Olson). In particular, he proposed to amend the U.S. Constitution by including an explicit provision “forcing private decision makers to take account of the costs they impose on other people” when using the nation’s common-property resources.¹¹ In January 1974, thanks to a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Haefele organized a large forum on governance mechanisms of common-property resources (air, water, public land), convening both RFF administrators and outsiders.¹²

9 Edwin T. Haefele, *Decision-making in Common Property Resources*, 26 J. SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION 132 (1971).

10 EDWIN T. HAEFELE, REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT (1973).

11 *Id.* at 12.

12 THE GOVERNANCE OF COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCES (Edwin T. Haefele ed., 1974).

When Haefele joined the University of Pennsylvania, he was succeeded at RFF by economist Clifford S. Russell. In 1977, Russell launched a program aiming “first, to focus on institutions themselves rather than on technical problems concerning specific resources; and second, to go beyond description and informal speculation in order to apply the methods and models of public choice theory, a developing field concerned with problems of making collective decisions which are binding on all.”¹³ In 1978, he organized a forum on this topic supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.¹⁴ Thus, in the 1970s, funding obtained from or directly granted by RFF contributed to the development of the rational choice approach in U.S. political science and resource economics. In particular, these funds made possible via a grant a long-term research project that became a classic, Russell Hardin’s book *Collective Action*.¹⁵

In this book, Russell Hardin followed in the footsteps of Mancur Olson.¹⁶ Like Olson, he concluded that full participation in collective action is not rational. However, since environmentalist and pacifist mobilizations did take place in the 1970s, he looked beyond rational choice to explore what he called “extra-rational motivations” for collective action. In the foreword to the book, Clifford S. Russell explained that “the major spur to [RFF’s] undertaking and supporting of collective choice research came from observing how frequently sound economic and engineering reasoning about environmental problems led to prescriptions for policies and public institutions that came to nothing in the real world of public decisions.”¹⁷ Analysis and reform of decision-making processes guided by rational choice could, he hoped, help ward off the inefficiency of management and representative institutions.

At the same period, RFF turned to a new field of activity, development, in response to a request by USAID, which had the same new focus on institutions. In a 1978 memorandum, one can read that

in its development efforts A.I.D. has consistently had to confront problems of institutional mechanisms for reaching the poor, stimulating their participation, mobilizing local resources, or assessing local needs and demands. [...] we generally lack a clear understanding of how to design and stimulate effective participatory structures. [...] in the

13 Resources for the Future, Annual Report for the Year Ending September 30, 1977, at 20 (RFF Documentation Center, RFF, Washington, D.C.).

14 COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING: APPLICATIONS FROM PUBLIC CHOICE THEORY (Clifford S. Russell ed., 1973).

15 RUSSELL HARDIN, *COLLECTIVE ACTION* (1982).

16 MANCUR OLSON, *THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: PUBLIC GOODS AND THE THEORY OF GROUPS* (1965).

17 See HARDIN, *supra* note 15, at xi.

analysis of comparable problems within the United States, applications of political economy theory have played an increasing role in dealing with problems of representation, policy implementation, the design of welfare programs, and the allocation of resources for ‘public goods’ [...]. We need better understanding of the processes of institutional collective choice.¹⁸

USAID addressed this challenge in two ways. First, the agency collected case studies from two of its regular partners, Cornell University’s Rural Development Committee (run by Norman Uphoff and John M. Cohen) and the consulting firm Development Alternatives, Inc. Second, it partnered with RFF to strengthen its institutional analysis capacity. These two institutions cooperated on the application of public choice theory to rural development challenges under the coordination of Russell and USAID Administrator Norman K. Nicholson.¹⁹ The collaboration led to a conference and published proceedings²⁰ about the “design of an institutional framework which minimizes costly free-riding, while guaranteeing more efficient provision of public goods.”²¹ The public goods in question here were local infrastructure — roads, dams, and irrigation systems funded and/or managed by Third World states and development institutions.

Among the contributors to the volume were Robert H. Bates and Samuel L. Popkin and a young scholar, James T. Thomson, who addressed the issue of the environmental risk incurred by deforestation related to domestic or handicraft use of wood. Thomson’s research was rooted in dissertation fieldwork conducted in Nigeria between 1970 and 1972.²² Analysis of development

18 Memorandum from DS/RAD Kenneth Korhner to DAA/DS Marjorie Belcher (USAID, Apr. 4, 1978) (unpublished memorandum), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdaaq835.pdf.

19 Proposal for a working conference on possible contributions of public choice theory to rural development programs from Resources for the Future to Agency for International Development (USAID, Apr., 1978) (unpublished proposal); Project Implementation order/technical services. Political Economy Seminar (USAID, June 19, 1978) (unpublished report), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdaaq835.pdf.

20 PUBLIC CHOICE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT (Clifford S. Russell & Norman K. Nicholson eds., 1981).

21 Dave N. Laband, *Public Choice and Rural Development*, 37 PUB. CHOICE 381 (1981) (book review).

22 James T. Thomson, *Law, Legal Process and Development at the Local Level in Hausa-Speaking Niger: A Trouble Case Analysis of Rural Institutional Inertia* (1976) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University) (on file with the Herman B. Wells Library, Indiana University).

processes within a political science framework led him to focus on tree management methods in a region where sedentary farmers coexisted with nomadic herders. In the 1970s, this issue of deforestation was much discussed because it was identified as one of the roots of the ongoing socio-ecological crisis in the Sahel, an issue which I will address in Part II.

Using the framework of public choice theory, Thomson sought to identify which institutional mechanisms were best able to ensure “sustainable yield management of the local woodstock.”²³ He emphasized the fragility of the latter, which, as a *de facto* unregulated common property resource, was bound to experience the tragedy of the commons described by Garrett Hardin.²⁴ He expressed a nuanced view on the efficiency of private property as a good management mode, and was decidedly negative about state regulations inherited from the colonial period. Above all, his conclusions were supportive of forms of management by communities: “Reforms should give villagers greater incentives to participate in woodstock management by authorizing local communities to make and enforce management rules necessary and relevant in light of local conditions.”²⁵ “Only if villagers act as coproducers helping to maintain and manage common property resources systems,” he stated in 1978, “will the effort be pervasive enough to prevent environmental ruin in the Sahel.”²⁶

II. USAID AND SAHEL PASTURES: THE ROOTS OF THE “COMMONS” ACADEMIC MOVEMENT

In November 1982,²⁷ the Board on Science and Technology in International Development (BOSTID) of the U.S. National Research Council sent one of

23 James T. Thomson, *Public Choice Analysis of Institutional Constraints on Firewood Production Strategies in the West African Sahel*, in PUBLIC CHOICE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, *supra* note 20, at 121.

24 *Id.* at 133-36.

25 *Id.* at 149.

26 James T. Thomson, African Villages and Public Services 6 (Oct. 27, 1978) (unpublished draft, Indiana University Digital Library of the Commons), <https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/4305> (last visited Mar. 31, 2018).

27 We have provided a detailed analysis of the material covered in this section in an earlier study about the relationship between the commons and development: Fabien Locher, *Third World Pastures: The Historical Roots of the Commons Paradigm (1965-1990)*, 151 QUADERNI STORICI 303, 303-09 (2016).

its program officers, Jeffrey Gritzner, on a mission to Switzerland.²⁸ BOSTID was a development institution specialized in producing expertise on science and technology applied to energy, agriculture, conservation and resource management.

Gritzner's mission consisted of seeking collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, whose headquarters were in Gland, Switzerland. But he took advantage of his stay to meet with a man with an interesting field experience, Omar Draz. Draz had devised and implemented a very specific range management system, first in Saudi Arabia (1962-1966) then in Syria. This system was based on a pre-Islamic set of rules governing access to and use of rangelands known as *hema* (or *himā*).²⁹ Draz revived this system, thinking that its falling into disuse explained the ecological degradation observed in Near Eastern arid ecosystems. Starting in 1970, he implemented his ideas within the framework of the National Range Development Programme launched in Syria by the government, the U.N. Development Programme, FAO, and the World Food Programme. He established rules of access to pastures modeled on the *hema* system for each village, tribe, and lineage. Inspired by vernacular practices, his system also took part in an agrarian modernization project establishing cooperatives for acquiring modern equipment and sharing costs of fattening of cattle.

This model, which sought to combine tradition and modernity, made a certain splash in the development community and particularly caught Gritzner's interest. The BOSTID program officer was also a scientist specialized in the Sahel.³⁰ There he had observed in the field vernacular rules of land management similar to the *hema* system, and known as *herima*. When he came back from Switzerland, Gritzner was convinced that what Draz had done in the Syrian steppes could be applied in the Sahel.³¹ Draz's project also tied in with

28 BOSTID, Trip Report, National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., Nov. 16 – Dec. 9, 1982 (unpublished report), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdaam662.pdf, (last visited Mar. 31, 2018).

29 OMAR DRAZ, THE HIMA SYSTEM OF RANGE RESERVES IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: ITS POSSIBILITIES IN RANGE IMPROVEMENT AND CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST (1969); Omar Draz, *Revival of the Hema System of Range Reserves as a Basis for the Syrian Range Development Programme*, in 1 PROC. INT'L RANGELAND CONGRESS 100 (Donald N. Hyde ed., 1978).

30 JEFFREY GRITZNER, THE WEST AFRICAN SAHEL: HUMAN AGENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE (1988).

31 Looking back, it turns out that the results are much more ambiguous. In addition, the system installed by Draz appears to be a form of "recreation of tradition" not quite in line with local realities. Jonathan Rae et al., *Tribes, State, and Technology Adoption in Arid Land Management* (IFPRI, CAPRI Working Paper

Gritzner's institutional concerns: the latter was looking for ideas that would help launch a new collaboration cycle between BOSTID and its main funder, USAID, on the Sahel.

Since the late 1960s, the Sahel strip had undergone a series of deep social and environmental crises, which inspired a strong interventionism on the part of Western development institutions in the 1970s and 1980s. Humanitarian as well as strategic concerns motivated this mobilization: the region had to be stabilized in order to counter Soviet influence and local Marxist movements. The United States became deeply involved starting in 1973, particularly through USAID initiatives. From the outset, the agency subcontracted BOSTID to perform an assessment of the situation in the region. It went on with funding the activities of an Advisory Committee on the Sahel created in 1978 within the Board and in charge of studying solutions combining economic development and resource conservation. However, the year 1983 marked the end of this institutional cycle when the USAID contract expired. The Board then pondered what new initiatives could be launched in the Sahel.

It was then that Gritzner was contacted by three junior scholars, James T. Thomson, Margaret McKean, and David Feeny.³² They had met in April 1983 at a conference on the history of deforestation in the twentieth century.³³ Their exchanges gave rise to the idea of a large multidisciplinary inquiry on forms of management of what they called "common property resource."³⁴ Thomson, who was familiar with the development community, wrote a draft proposal that he sent to Gritzner. The offer was timely and tied in perfectly with the latter's reflections on *hema* and *herima*.

A brainstorming meeting was held at BOSTID in September 1983.³⁵ The "institutional design" issue was central to the nascent initiative, as the Board's quarterly report read:

No. 15, 2001), <https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/3730>, (last visited Mar. 31, 2018); Jonathan Rae, *Getting in Steppe: The Evolution of Participatory Institutions for Rangeland Management in the Syrian Arab Republic*, 2 LAND REFORM, LAND SETTLEMENT & COOPERATIVES 72 (2000).

32 Hess, *supra* note 6.

33 See WORLD DEFORESTATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (John F. Richards & Richard P. Tucker eds., 1998).

34 This term was largely used by the actors, E. Ostrom included, in the 1980s, and therefore we use it in our own narrative. This doesn't imply that we support or criticize this analytical categorization.

35 Summary – Planning Meeting for Proposed Workshops Concerned With Common Property Resources and Environmental Management (National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., file "International Relations. 1984. Bd

Growing social instability, expanding populations, and diminishing resources in many developing countries make it critically important that laws and institutions governing the management of common property resource be better designed so that these resources – trees and shrubs, grasslands, soils, water and wildlife – can be exploited on a sustained-yield basis. Access to information concerning effective institutional design would help developing country and donor government personnel as well as other individuals in planning, implementing, and evaluating environmental rehabilitation and management efforts.³⁶

Institution analysis using public choice theory was at the heart of the project, but with two major nuances. First, the approach purported to be interdisciplinary and open to contributions from anthropology, sociology, and soil and life sciences. Second, the public choice tools had to be used without dogmatism or rigid application of a strict rational-strategic actor model. For that matter, the need to break from the view that resource users were unable to self-organize and manage commons — described as commonly held by practitioners of public choice theory — surfaced during discussions.

The project of rethinking “common property resource” management in connection with the Sahel was part of a larger historical context. As I have already shown in detail,³⁷ in the 1970s, the Sahel crisis was at the center of fierce theoretical and political debate on the question of the commons. It all started when MIT produced a USAID-commissioned expert assessment modeling events in the language of system dynamics. The conclusions by project manager William Seifert and Anthony Picardi, a graduate student of Seifert’s in charge of the “pastoral” dimension of the analysis, were radical. The main cause of the crisis was the “tragedy of the commons” described by Garrett Hardin, whereby Sahelian herders destroyed their own soils. As Picardi put it, this degradation mechanism “is the exact problem syndrome of the herdsmen in the Sahel.”³⁸ Seifert and Picardi’s thesis, which they sought

on Sc & Tech for Internatl Development Com on Sahel: Adv,” Sept. 8-9, 1983) (unpublished report).

36 BOSTID Quarterly Report to the Board 15-16 (National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., file “International Relations. 1983. Bd on Sc & Tech for Internatl Development Quarterly Reports: Jul”, July–Sept. 1983) (unpublished report).

37 Locher, *supra* note 27.

38 Anthony Picardi, *A Framework for Evaluating Long-Term Strategies for the Development of the Sahel-Sudan Region: A System Analysis of Pastoralism in the West African Sahel*, 78 USAID REP., pt. 5 (1974).

to publicize,³⁹ was challenged by a number of development anthropologists, such as Michael Horowitz, who stressed the environmental efficiency of vernacular rules governing the use of common pastures. What had actually caused the current crisis, they insisted, was the destabilization of these rules. Their position was dominant at BOSTID, where Horowitz took part in research work on the Sahel. Thus the Board was since the mid-1970s a favorable environment for a “positive” approach to commons governance institutions.

The September 1983 meeting initiated by Thomson, McKean, and Feeny brought together the latter, BOSTID and USAID program officers and four researchers recruited for their expertise in the topic.⁴⁰ Four decisions were made: to ensure the continued existence of the research group; to organize a large interdisciplinary conference on common property resource management; to create an international network of researchers working on the topic; and to apply for USAID funding.⁴¹ They received the grant money in August 1984 thanks to the decisive action of Norman K. Nicholson, who had worked towards acclimating public choice theory to USAID during the previous decade.

The synergy between the group’s enthusiasm and the financial and political means of BOSTID and USAID worked wonders. It led to the creation of the Common Property Resource Network, which had 800 members in July 1985 and 2200 two years later.⁴² In 1989, it became the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP), now central to promoting multidisciplinary research on commons governance at an international level (known today as the International Association for the Study of the Commons).⁴³ Another great outcome of the initiative was a large conference held at Annapolis

39 See, e.g., Anthony C. Picardi & William W. Seifert, *A Tragedy of the Commons in the Sahel*, 78 *TECH. REV.* 42 (1976).

40 Jere Gilles, Ronald Oakerson, Pauline Peters and C. Ford Runge.

41 A Proposal to the Agency for International Development to fund an Advisory Committee on the Sahel, 3-4, 14-16 (National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., file “International Relations. 1984. Bd on Sc & Tech for Internatl Development Com on Sahel: Adv”, 1984) (unpublished proposal).

42 Report from the Working Group on Common Property Resource Management Conference on Advances in Institutional Analysis, Dubrovnik (Library of the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University Bloomington, file “Common property resource project – advisory group,” Oct. 23, 1987) (unpublished report).

43 On the “Common Property Resource Network” and its composition, see Locher, *supra* note 27, at 324-25.

in April 1985, considered today as groundbreaking in the history of commons research.⁴⁴

III. GOVERNING URBAN COMMUNITIES: THE WORKSHOP AS “CENTER OF CALCULATION”

Elinor Ostrom was not associated with the early stages of the BOSTID initiative. Only in September 1984 was she asked to join the nascent Common Property Resource Network.⁴⁵ One explanation is that E. Ostrom had not worked on natural resource economy since the late 1960s. In her PhD. dissertation, submitted at UCLA in September 1964, she had studied groundwater management in Southern California’s West Basin.⁴⁶ However, at the time she did not conceive her case study in terms of a commons or collective action dilemma. Her dissertation work was already influenced by the early stages of what would become public choice theory via her reading of Buchanan and Tullock’s *The Calculus of Consent* (1962).⁴⁷ But Mancur Olson and Garret Hardin had not produced their classic works yet. Reading Hardin’s in 1969 immediately raised her skepticism. As a matter of fact, as she later explained, she knew of at least one case in which Hardin’s reasoning did not fit in with empirical evidence — and that was the case she had studied in her dissertation.⁴⁸ Her reaction was then to write a critical discussion of the argument of the “tragedy of commons,” which outlined an alternative to the Hardinian model in a few pages.⁴⁹ However, immediately afterwards, she moved away from natural resource issues for more than a decade.

44 PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE ON COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (Apr. 21-26, 1985) (1986).

45 Letter from Jeffrey Gritzner to Elinor Ostrom (Elinor Ostrom Archives, box 097/067-6, June 1, 1984).

46 Elinor Ostrom, *Public Entrepreneurship: A Case Study in Ground Water Basin Management* (Sept. 29, 1964) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA).

47 JAMES BUCHANAN & GORDON TULLOCK, *THE CALCULUS OF CONSENT: LOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY* (1962).

48 Interview by Margaret Levi with Elinor Ostrom, Co-Founder and Co-Dir. of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Ind. Univ. (2010), www.annualreviews.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1326999553977/ElinorOstromTranscript.pdf.

49 Elinor Ostrom, *Collective Action and the Tragedy of the Commons*, in *MANAGING THE COMMONS* 81-173 (Garrett Hardin & John Baden eds., 1977). See also Vincent Ostrom & Elinor Ostrom, *A Theory for Institutional Analysis of Common Pool Problems*, in *MANAGING THE COMMONS* 157 (1977) (1969).

And yet, for understanding the emergence of the Ostromian commons paradigm, it is crucial to analyze the research practices that Elinor Ostrom and her team invented at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis in the 1970s. The specific material, cultural and intellectual context constituting this site of knowledge production played a crucial role in fashioning the methodology, language and even the perspective of what would be identified as Ostrom's theory of self-government. At the time, however, the Sahel and Nepal were not at the heart of her reflections on communities' political capacities. The streets of Saint Louis, Chicago and Los Angeles constituted Ostrom and her team's physical and conceptual research field.

The Workshop was founded by E. and V. Ostrom in 1973 as an independent research unit in Indiana University's Political Science Department. The Ostroms' objective was to promote public choice approaches in the analysis of public and governmental decision-making arrangements. They had not only a theoretical but also — if not as much — a practical ambition: "Major public policy implications," they wrote, "will follow as well. Alternative solutions will be available for dealing with problems associated with the so-called 'urban crisis' and other critical policy issues."⁵⁰ Analyses must serve to diagnose "social pathologies," propose institutional reforms, and evaluate their impacts. This emphasis on political science as applied science went along with an idiosyncratic operating model. The Workshop's income was almost exclusively derived from research contracts obtained by the Ostroms and from the couple's graciously donated honorariums.

The 1970s witnessed increased public financial support for solicited projects targeted at responding to the great challenges of U.S. society: security, pollution, transportation, energy, urban planning and health.⁵¹ Emblematic of this scientific mobilization was National Science Foundation (NSF)'s Research Applied to National Needs (RANN) program. Between 1971 and 1977, it spent some 750 million dollars (2017 value) to fund short-term, one- to two-year applied research projects.⁵² The social sciences greatly benefitted from this financial inflow. They were viewed by political and administrative authorities as likely to develop possible solutions to the great problems of

50 Workshop Annual Report 1973-75 (Library of the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University, Bloomington, May, 1975) (unpublished report).

51 OTTO N. LARSEN, *MILESTONES AND MILLSTONES: SOCIAL SCIENCE AT THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION, 1945-1991* (1992); Mata & Scheiding, *supra* note 7.

52 Herbert A. Simon, *History of RANN's Style, Purpose, and Criteria of Managing Research* (Carnegie Mellon U., 1969 (unpublished memorandum), <http://doi.library.cmu.edu/10.1184/pmc/simon/box00045/fld03519/bdl0001/doc0001> (last visited Mar. 31, 2018)).

the moment. What needed to be particularly addressed was the “urban crisis” of U.S. cities, which found expression in violence, a worsening of living conditions, and social disintegration.⁵³

The *modus operandi* of the Workshop gave it great autonomy *vis-à-vis* Indiana University, but also made answering calls for projects a permanent necessity. It suited the Ostroms’ way of doing research, combining empiricism, theorization, and application to endeavors of social reform. But this choice can also be explained, at least during the first years of the Workshop, by the political science community’s hostility to public choice, and the Ostroms’ desire to protect their independence through self-reliance. Along with Buchanan and Tullock’s Center for the Study of Public Choice at George Mason University, the Workshop was one of the only academic structures to adopt this approach in the field of political science.⁵⁴

By the early months of 1984, after 11 years of existence, the Workshop had brought 32 contracts to completion on forms of organization of local public administrations for a total of close to 3.8 million dollars. They were financed by the NSF/RANN program, NIMH, the Department of Justice, and the State of Indiana. It was an astounding success: in comparison, during the period 1970-1979, in all the United States, the NSF’s cumulative budget relative to political science funding amounted to 18 million dollars.⁵⁵

During the 1970s, E. Ostrom no longer worked on her dissertation topic, natural resource management, but focused on metropolitan policing. Her interest in the topic started as a syllabus extension to her classes at Indiana University, where she had been an associate professor since 1969. In the spring of 1970, she decided to complement one of her seminars on fieldwork research.⁵⁶ She instructed her students to conduct a survey in six Indianapolis neighborhoods, of which three were under the city’s jurisdiction and three were incorporated communities with their own police forces. The study concluded that autonomous police forces performed better. The following year, the survey was pursued in two majority African-American neighborhoods in Chicago. The conclusions were similar: locally organized small-scale police forces received better subjective evaluations and were less costly. These

53 Crowther-Heyck, *supra* note 7.

54 Vincent Ostrom particularly had very close ties with them. For a history of public choice focusing on Buchanan and Tullock, see STEVEN G. MEDEMA, *THE HESITANT HAND: TAMING SELF-INTEREST IN THE HISTORY OF ECONOMIC IDEAS* (2009).

55 National Science Foundation, Federal Funds for Research and Development, Fiscal Years 1970-2003, Detailed Statistical Tables, [l.academicdirect.org/Management/education/us/nsf04335.pdf](http://academicdirect.org/Management/education/us/nsf04335.pdf).

56 On E. Ostrom’s experiences in teaching and research, see Elinor Ostrom, *Ventures in Teaching and Research*, 16 A&S THE REVIEW 10 (1974).

experiments led to a teaching/research program funded by the NSF and NIMH in spring 1972. This time, the Saint Louis Metropolitan Area was selected for its institutional diversity, and the scope of the study was expanded to include 45 residential areas. Two thousand citizens and two hundred police officers were interviewed by Ostrom and her graduate and undergraduate students. Central to the study was the “consolidation” issue. Urban growth and the “urban crisis” context raised the question whether communities should be consolidated, i.e., merged into one jurisdiction — a solution thought to be more efficacious than non-consolidation.

This question was at the heart of another research contract, which occupied Ostrom’s attention during most of the 1970s. The “Police Services Study” was funded by NSF/RANN and aimed to compare a series of institutional arrangements for the provision of police services in metropolitan areas. It tied in with one of RANN’s priorities, reducing urban violence.⁵⁷ It also was a key issue in the consolidation vs. decentralization debate. Launched in June 1974, the police study was conducted by E. Ostrom, Roger B. Park and Gordon Whitaker. It went on for six years with a huge grant amount of 2 million dollars (2017 value: 8 million dollars).⁵⁸ The investigation covered 200 urban areas throughout the country.⁵⁹ The researchers interviewed police officers, neighborhood residents, and city government officers. They observed police shifts, produced questionnaires and statistics, then modeled and analyzed the data. They also engaged in managerial activities, recruiting interviewers and subcontracting certain tasks to firms or other departments.

The vast police study was decisive in turning the Workshop into what Bruno Latour called a “center of calculation”: a place gathering and accumulating a great number of “inscriptions”, whose processing produces both the formulation of theoretical discourses and social legitimization of these discourses as “scientific” statements.⁶⁰ In the case of the Workshop, the study of sociopolitical organizations motivated the production and analysis of a vast amount of structured information accumulated in the form of databases and document storage and retrieval systems.

57 Crowther-Heyck, *supra* note 7, at 99.

58 This calculation is based on a conversion to current value of the three funding installments (1974-1976, 1977, and 1977-1979).

59 ELINOR OSTROM ET AL., *POLICING METROPOLITAN AMERICA* (1977); ELINOR OSTROM ET AL., *PATTERNS OF METROPOLITAN POLICING* (1978).

60 BRUNO LATOUR, *LA SCIENCE EN ACTION [SCIENCE IN ACTION]* (1989) (Fr.); Bruno Latour, *Comment Redistribuer le Grand Partage* [redistributing the Great Divide], 110 *REVUE DE SYNTHÈSE* 203 (1983).

Designing and implementing paper-based or digital databases at a time when there were no available turnkey tools was an essential aspect of Ostrom's work in the 1970s. This also meant that ways of modeling field observations and interviews had to be invented. This form of scientific practice shaped the "Police Services Study" and, more generally, structured the life of the Workshop. Together with the study, an exhaustive database documenting U.S. city services was produced. This served both scholarly and institutional purposes: behind scientific motivations, there was a long-term strategy of accumulation aiming to establish the Workshop as a national center for urban studies. E. Ostrom was hoping that the NSF would finance a national urban studies center at Bloomington, as it did for the American National Election Studies at the University of Michigan.⁶¹

Research undertaken in the 1970s was also a continuation of V. Ostrom's work at UCLA. In the late 1950s, he had been in charge of the Metropolitan Study of Los Angeles. In a famous article published in 1961, he and the economist Charles Tiebout argued that a mosaic of municipalities forming a "polycentric political system" could be more effective and democratic than a single dominant center — a "Gargantua."⁶² E. Ostrom was trained as a PhD student in this intellectual atmosphere, where urban issues, theoretical effervescence, and promotion of small-scale government intermingled.

E. Ostrom's convictions regarding "good" community management modes first crystallized in her Californian work and became firmly established in her research on urban policing. Central to them was her conviction regarding the absence of political "panaceas," especially when they involve large-scale consolidation and a "Gargantua" state or municipalities. In the 1970s, her focus on the political capabilities of urban communities led to her rapprochement with activists militating for new forms of "neighborhood government." She grew closer to Milton Kotler, a very active theoretician and practitioner of what he called the "modern revolution of local control." Kotler's position was very radical at first, applying the framework of imperialism analysis to the downtown-periphery relationship. In a 1969 manifesto, he urged urban communities to break free from large cities' bureaucratic and oligarchic power

61 Letter from Elinor Ostrom to Dean Homer A. Neal (Elinor Ostrom Archives, box 19-110/06. Nov. 17, 1978).

62 Vincent Ostrom et al., *The Organization of Government in Metropolitan Areas: A Theoretical Inquiry*, 55 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 831 (1961).

and stand up for their political, social, and economic rights.⁶³ “Liberty,” he wrote, “lies in a self-governing community.”⁶⁴

In 1976, E. Ostrom and Kotler launched the Neighborhood Organization Research Group (NORG). It aimed to encourage research on neighborhoods. The endeavor was short-lived, but it shows E. Ostrom’s will to be engaged with nonacademic actors in order to ally understanding and the transformation of society, in the context of the “Neighborhood revolution” of the 1970s. This movement, which was very dynamic in the United States, championed neighborhood life, in which it saw a crucible for new sociopolitical subjectivities, for the struggle against city establishments, and for resistance to urban planning and “modernization.” Socially and politically diverse, it advocated a whole series of community organization models, of which Ostromian polycentrism, with its emphasis on economic efficiency and satisfaction of citizens’ individual needs, was a variant.

III. THE WORKSHOP IN THE EARLY 1980S

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Ostroms’ research took a turn that placed them very close to the themes emerging at the same time at BOSTID.

In 1981 and 1982, the Bielefeld *Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung* (Center for Interdisciplinary Research) brought together internationally recruited scholars in residence on the theme “Guidance, control and performance evaluation for public systems.” E. and V. Ostrom spent several months there, from January 1982 and October 1981 respectively to August 1982.⁶⁵ This residence marked a turning point in the Workshop’s scientific orientation. Upon their return from Bielefeld, the Ostroms charted a new course in its activities towards greater internationalization of research themes and collaborations.⁶⁶ This international perspective was quite novel in the Workshop, where research had so far focused on the United States — city public services for Elinor, and federalist political tradition for Vincent.

The change involved, first, the creation of a new seminar coordinated by V. Ostrom and devoted to the “comparative study of public institutions.”

63 MILTON KOTLER, *NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNMENT: THE LOCAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL LIFE* (1969).

64 *Id.* at xii.

65 Vincent Ostrom contributed to editing the group’s final report: *GUIDANCE, CONTROL AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION FOR PUBLIC SYSTEMS* (Franz-Xavier Kaufmann, Giandomenico Majone & Vincent Ostrom eds., 1986).

66 The Workshop’s simultaneous move to a new location on the Indiana University campus added a symbolic dimension to these transformations.

The objective was, on the one hand, to compare public-choice and game-theory approaches with those of classical authors such as Hume, Smith and Tocqueville, and on the other hand, to use them in a comparative analysis of worldwide — i.e., Western, socialist, and Third World — public institutions.

In 1983, the Ostroms also envisaged applying for USAID funding for the first time. In a report on the creation of the seminar, they wrote: “We anticipate that the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) may be a source of funding of post-doctoral fellowships from the Third World and mid-career training fellowships for persons involved in international assistance programs.”⁶⁷ In the spring of 1983, V. Ostrom applied for a \$244,000 grant for a “Research, training and dissemination program in institutional analysis and design.”⁶⁸ The money was to finance the new seminar, designed as a discussion forum for international visiting scholars. Production of a *Handbook on Institutional Analysis and Design* was also planned. The handbook was to serve as a field analytical framework for USAID officers. The award of the grant in 1984 sealed an unprecedented partnership between the Workshop and USAID. Agents from the institution were sent to Bloomington as visiting scholars to attend the comparative study seminar.⁶⁹ E. Ostrom was invited to serve on the evaluation team of a USAID educational project in Kenya.

The topics of the international seminar revealed the new trends at work in the Workshop: global approaches; development; and a comeback of the natural resource and resource governance issue. Its syllabus opened with a text devoted to the Sahel crisis, emphasizing the need for institutional solutions.⁷⁰ However, E. and V. Ostrom continued, we can implement these solutions only if we fully understand how certain institutions contribute to the failure or success of development. We have at our disposal, they argued, a great variety of empirical cases generated throughout human history. “By identifying what is universal in human experience we have the basis for reasoned calculations and rational choice about creating social forms instead of depending entirely on blind chance.”⁷¹ So far, they suggested, we have limited the range of possibilities by seeing the market and the state as the only alternatives, but we need abandon that binary choice: “Kinship structures, clans, voluntary

67 Workshop Annual Report 1982, 3-4, Library of the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University, Bloomington, Mar 1983 (unpublished report).

68 Workshop Annual Report 1983, 14, Library of the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University, Bloomington, Feb 3, 1984 (unpublished report).

69 Workshop Annual Report 1984, Library of the Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop, Indiana University, Bloomington, Feb 16, 1985 (unpublished report).

70 *Id.* at App. A (Seminar on Patterns of Order and Development in Human Society Syllabus, 1984/1985).

71 *Id.*

associations, and community organization need to be conceptualized as having a fundamental place in the political economy of human societies.” The Ostroms’ stated purpose was *not* to enforce top-down social engineering, but rather to facilitate the emergence of efficient institutions *produced by the actors themselves*. The conceptual framework was to be public choice theory, the “Law and Economics” paradigm, as well as game and economic anthropology theories.

During those years, E. Ostrom (re)turned her attention to the common property resource issue. In 1983, she applied for and received a grant of nearly \$70,000 from the NSF for a project entitled “Modeling Institutional Arrangements and Their Effects.” The money financed the work of her doctoral student William Blomquist.⁷² His PhD focused on the impact of institutional arrangements on the exploitation of interdependent groundwater basins in southern California. For E. Ostrom, the project represented a return to her PhD research topics. “Water producers utilizing these basins,” she wrote, “have faced classic ‘common dilemma situations’ and negotiated changes in property and other institutional rules that have enabled them to manage their basins relatively successfully.”⁷³ Blomquist’s dissertation analyzed the emergence of this (relative) institutional efficiency by particularly looking at the role of lawsuits. As Blomquist stated in his dissertation, “The cases demonstrate that, where users are able successfully to complete a resolution process, destruction can be averted, and efficiency of resource use can even be improved, without converting the commons to individually-held private property or centrally-controlled public property.”⁷⁴

This dissertation was but one aspect of E. Ostrom’s growing interest in these issues. During the first year of existence of the Workshop’s international seminar (1984-1985), half the time was devoted to the theme of “commons, collective goods, and community,” emphasizing common pool resources and management of “commons dilemma situations.” Participants not only discussed articles by Garrett Hardin and James T. Thomson, but also a new theoretical contribution on the commons by Ostrom and Blomquist.⁷⁵

72 William Blomquist, *Getting out of the Trap: Changing an Endangered Commons to a Managed Commons* (Aug. 17, 1987) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University). This dissertation was complemented by four other case studies and became a book: WILLIAM BLOMQUIST, *DIVIDING THE WATERS: GOVERNING GROUNDWATER IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA* (1992).

73 Workshop Annual Report 1983, *supra* note 68, at 24.

74 Blomquist, *supra* note 72, at xi.

75 It was published shortly thereafter: William Blomquist & Elinor Ostrom, *Institutional Capacity and the Resolution of a Commons Dilemma*, 5 POL’Y STUD. REV. 383 (1985).

E. Ostrom was invited to join the BOSTID group on common property resource as late as April 1985.⁷⁶ Granted, her renewed interest in the topic was recent and she had never worked on the Third World, but this could also be explained by the hostile reception she was given by certain National Research Council officers. In the polarized political context of President Ronald Reagan's second term, she looked like a Trojan horse of neoliberal thought. Her responsibilities as president of the Public Choice Society and her long intellectual fraternity with James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock — two great figures of U.S. neoliberalism — undoubtedly produced distrust. As an internal Council letter reads, "She is [...] a theoretical scientist as far as I can tell perhaps *not* the kind we should 'export' to third world discussions."⁷⁷ BOSTID Director John Hurley had to defend her recruitment in a memo in which, while acknowledging that E. Ostrom's work had so far dealt with the United States, he also insisted on her ability to transpose her analyses to new fields.⁷⁸ It was also USAID's and particularly Norman Nicholson's decision to include E. Ostrom (who already had an agency's financial support) in the project to strengthen the place given to public choice theory in the common property resource initiative.

She soon took the lead in the group, never to relinquish it. She was active at different levels, first, with intense theoretical thinking on issues related to the commons and collective action institutions.⁷⁹ In particular, she developed her reasoning thanks to game theory, which she had learned and started to use at Bielefeld.⁸⁰ She also conducted a prospective study, trying to identify actions to take in order to structure the common property resource field of study. Concomitantly, she applied her unmatched skill at finding research

76 Letter from the National Research Council to Elinor Ostrom (Elinor Ostrom Archives, box 97/067-11, Apr. 20, 1985).

77 Letter from Phil Smith to Frank Press (National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., file "International Relations. Bd on Sc & Tech for Internatl Development Workshops: Common Property Resources & Environmental Management Systems", Apr. 19, 1985).

78 Memorandum from John Hurley on Appointment of Elinor Ostrom to Common Property Resource Management Panel to Victor Rabinowitch (National Academy of Science Archives, Washington, D.C., file "International Relations. Bd on Sc & Tech for Internatl Development Workshops: Common Property Resources & Environmental Management Systems", Apr. 29, 1985) (unpublished memorandum).

79 Ostrom presented her reflections at BOSTID group meetings, workshop seminars and political science lectures.

80 Interview with Elinor Ostrom, *supra* note 48.

support and received a new two-year grant from USAID.⁸¹ At the same time, BOSTID discontinued its support for research on the commons (apparently due to in-house criticism). This situation, together with E. Ostrom's intellectual and personal authority, contributed to making the Workshop the new center of "common property resource" studies in the U.S. This was reinforced by the comparative study invitation program of the Bloomington seminar, which attracted international scholars year after year.

One cannot understand the "Bloomington School" if one does not look beyond its academic production to analyze its inquiry, data processing, and dissemination practices. This holds particularly true for the research on commons governance. This program hinged on collecting, reading, modeling, and carrying out meta-analysis of a huge amount of data from "common property resource" case studies described in the available scientific and technical literature. In a USAID grant proposal, E. Ostrom wrote: "Unmined resources exist in the extensive case study literature written by anthropologists, rural sociologists, human ecologists, political scientists, and others describing specific resource systems and human use patterns."⁸²

However, as E. Ostrom explained, these specialists did not read each other. For this reason, it was necessary to conduct a large-scale meta-analysis in order to identify general rules making it possible to predict which commons governance institutions would succeed or fail. To that effect, a complex data modeling process was necessary. Ostrom compared it to the process used by physicians facing the various existing pathologies: "We need," she wrote to David Feeny in June 1985, "to develop a common enough language that we can write some of our case studies as clinicians write their cases [...]. Until we get enough N of cases which are similar in this and this variable but different on this and this variable, we will never advance very much."⁸³

Fenton Martin, a professional bibliographer working at Indiana University, was in charge of identifying and getting the books and articles describing cases of commons — which, before the advent of the Internet, was no small task. The inquiry benefitted from the project's institutional ecology: Common

81 Elinor Ostrom, A Proposal Submitted to USAID to Support a Research Project on Institutions and Common-Pool Resources in the Third World: What Works?, Indiana University Digital Library of the Commons, Apr. 29, 1986 (unpublished working paper), <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/4062> (last visited Mar 31, 2018).

82 *Id.* at 4-5.

83 Letter from Elinor Ostrom to David Feeny (Elinor Ostrom Archives, box 97/067-11, June 21, 1985).

Property Resource Network members provided references and Workshop visiting scholars were invited to signal cases and provide publications.⁸⁴

The functioning of the Workshop as a “center of calculation” of a vast amount of data concerning sociopolitical institutions and the focus on meta-analysis of a series of case studies were both inherited from the police studies of the 1970s. These works on policing and consolidation shaped E. Ostrom and her team’s research practices on the long run and deeply influenced the form and content of their production on the commons. The objective of producing criteria for success (or failure) of the commons institutions was one of the main motives for this large-scale approach, in connection with the expectations of the sponsors (USAID above all).

Years later, E. Ostrom described the material aspect of those scientific practices and their effect on the protagonists themselves: “What was wonderful about it was our field was a filing cabinet that we could all go to.”⁸⁵ But meta-analysis turned out to be long and complex. E. Ostrom later insisted on how difficult it was for her to reach expected conclusions. She eventually reached them when choosing cases of commons that had lasted at least a century.⁸⁶ She derived her well-known eight principles for (successfully) managing a commons from some of these cases, some of which she described in depth in her most famous book *Governing the Commons*.⁸⁷ In the subsequent decades, these principles elicited hundreds of empirical studies aiming to test their validity. Today, they form one of the pillars of the contemporary commons paradigm.

CONCLUSION

In 1990, the release of *Governing the Commons* marked a turning point in the research on the commons, by rousing an increasing echo among scholarly audiences and the general public. A year before that, the Common Property Resource Network had become the International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP). E. Ostrom played an active role there in the following decades. For scholars working on the commons, visiting the Workshop and Bloomington became a ritual and a must. The ties between the Workshop and USAID also strengthened. The research center and the agency sponsored a contract with the consultancy firm Associates in Rural

84 Letter from Jeffrey Gritzner to Elinor Ostrom (Elinor Ostrom Archives, box 97/067-6, July 15, 1987).

85 Interview with Elinor Ostrom, *supra* note 48, at 9.

86 *Id.* at 10.

87 ELINOR OSTROM, *GOVERNING THE COMMONS*, 58-102 (1990).

Development on “Decentralization: Finance and Management” (DFM).⁸⁸ The project aimed to identify the causes of failures in the installation of infrastructures such as roads and irrigation systems. It also sought to study solutions for decentralizing infrastructure and natural resource management. Ostrom took part in it, mainly working on Nepal, where she often travelled in the 1980s and 1990s. The Nepalese case allowed her not only to conduct research relevant to the DFM project, but also to study and assess successes and failures of numerous communal irrigation systems on the basis of different parameters.

During those years, the commons paradigm gradually spread through the development community. In 1992, the World Bank’s yearly *World Development Report* stated that community-based arrangements can enhance sustainable development.⁸⁹ The report came as an opening and self-criticism effort on the part of the institution following an initiative by Michael Cernea, a sociologist, rural specialist and executive at the World Bank. In the spring of 1988, Cernea had invited several commons specialists including Ostrom to share their results with executives of the Bank, then coauthored a discussion paper with Daniel Bromley in which he criticized the institution’s inability to consider community management modes.⁹⁰ *Commons* became one of the new keywords of the “green neoliberal regime” in the making at the Bank.⁹¹ Convergence also occurred between the commons paradigm and sociologist Robert Putnam’s “social capital” concept and his influential diagnosis on “bowling alone.”⁹² Today, 30 years later, the commons has become ubiquitous in the development

88 ASSOCIATES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT, INC., DECENTRALIZATION: FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT PROJECT – FINAL REPORT (Dec 1994), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABK610.pdf.

89 WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT: DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT 70, 142-44 (1992).

90 Daniel W. Bromley & Michael M. Cernea, *The Management of Common Property Natural Resources: Some Conceptual and Operational Fallacies* (World Bank Discussion Paper No. 57, 1989).

91 Michael Goldman, *Customs in Common: The Epistemic World of the Commons Scholars*, 26 THEORY SOC’Y 1 (1997); MICHAEL GOLDMAN, *IMPERIAL NATURE: THE WORLD BANK AND STRUGGLES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION* (2005). The influence exerted by the commons paradigm at the World Bank was a partial continuation of the neo-institutionalist approaches in place since the mid-1980s. Douglass North in particular (who edited *Governing the Commons* at Cambridge Press) played an important role in this “neo-institutionalist turn.” See COLIN LEYS, *THE RISE & FALL OF DEVELOPMENT THEORY*, 80-103 (1996).

92 ROBERT PUTNAM, *BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY* (2000).

community and beyond. This does not mean that the Ostromian approach is not contested, notably by legal scholars and political philosophers,⁹³ but no alternative paradigm seems about to replace it in the near future.

The Ostromian paradigm emerged from a specific historical moment marked by increasing distrust of modernization, big government and centralization ideals. On the left end of the political spectrum, the Nixon years, the Vietnam War and U.S. interventionism in Latin America durably discredited the executive branch. The urban crisis crystallized criticism of city halls perceived as inefficient or even oppressive. Denunciation of big urban and political machines was echoed by calls to relocate government to the communities, neighborhoods, and citizens' groups.⁹⁴ At the same time, the New Right denounced the New Deal Consensus and promoted a neoliberal credo that the welfare state and administrations are the problem, not the solution. In the 1970s and 1980s, community, neighborhood, and local autonomy had become keywords resounding from all sides, from claims for the revolutionary power of neighborhoods to Ronald Reagan's speeches. E. Ostrom could collaborate in a taskforce created by the latter⁹⁵ and with Milton Kotler, who came from the opposite end of the political spectrum. This also helps explain USAID's support for the commons program during those years of triumphant neoliberalism. Recourse to communities was (is) also viewed, by some actors, as a way of bypassing Third World governments in the context of development actions,⁹⁶ and as a tool for providing services that private firms found unprofitable (water

93 Carol M. Rose, *Ostrom and the Lawyers: The Impact of Governing the Commons on the American Legal Academy*, 5 INT'L J. COMMONS 28 (2011); PIERRE DARDOT & CHRISTIAN LAVAL, *COMMUN – ESSAI SUR LA RÉVOLUTION AU XXI^E SIÈCLE [COMMONS – ESSAY ON THE REVOLUTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY]* (2014).

94 Benjamin Looker, *Visions of Autonomy: The New Left and the Neighborhood Government Movement of the 1970s*, 38 J. URB. HIST. 577 (2012); DANIEL IMMERWAHR, *THINKING SMALL: THE UNITED STATES AND THE LURE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT* (2015).

95 Michan Andrew Connor, *Public Benefits from Public Choice: Producing Decentralization in Metropolitan Los Angeles, 1954-1973*, 39 J. URB. HIST. 79 (2013). On the Task Force, see Robert B. Hawkins, *My Association with Vincent and Lin Ostrom* (2014) (unpublished manuscript), https://ostromworkshop.indiana.edu/pdf/Hawkins_MyAssocWithOstroms.pdf.

96 As an example, the second of the "four pillars" cited by Peter McPherson (who headed the agency from 1981 to 1987) was: "Institutional development, focusing on decentralizing institutions and encouraging reliance on private and voluntary, rather than public, institutions." SAMUEL HALE BUTTERFIELD, *U.S. DEVELOPMENT AID – AN HISTORIC FIRST: ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, 199-201* (2004).

distribution in remote rural areas, for example). From the sidewalks of Los Angeles to the Nepalese countryside, E. Ostrom's trajectory embraced these tensions and these ambiguities: those of a 'commons' political model always open to interpretation and negotiation.