

REVIEW

The Bloomington School,
as seen from Virginia:
Levels of Analysis;
Social Ontology; Schools
of Thought; and Policy
Implications

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1. INTRODUCTION

The literature on the work of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom, and on the broader Bloomington School they founded, continues to grow. Recent years have seen the publication of several book-length studies (Aligica and Boettke 2009, Wall 2014, 2017, Tarko 2017, Nordman 2021) and edited volumes (Aligica et al. 2017, Herzberg et al. 2019) as well as a number of special issues of academic journals, including the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation* (2005), *Public Choice* (2010), *The Good Society* (2011), and the *Journal of Institutional Economics* (2013). The volume under review here, namely *Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School: Building a New Approach to Policy and the Social Sciences*, which has been ably edited by Jayme Lemke and Vlad Tarko, is another recent addition to this burgeoning body of work (Lemke and Tarko [eds.] 2021). It consists of a brief introduction by the editors followed by nine chapters covering various aspects of the Ostroms' work and its relations to other traditions of thought. As the editors make clear in their Introduction (chapter 1), and as also indicated by the volume's subtitle, their goal was "to highlight the creative potential of the approach developed by Elinor Ostrom, Vincent Ostrom, and their colleagues in the Bloomington School", both substantively and methodologically (p. 2).¹ They sought to do so by soliciting contributions that would assist in "building disciplinary bridges by highlighting some of the most important ... connections" between the work of the Bloomington School and other approaches to economic and social analysis, including—as discussed below—Austrian and new institutional economics, constitutional political economy, behavioural economics, and the new economic sociology. By initiating a dialogue between the work of the Ostroms and other approaches to social science, the editors sought to imitate the Ostroms' willingness "to learn from a variety of different perspectives across the social sciences" (p. 2).

As the aforementioned list suggests, the interlocutors with whom the essays in this volume strike up a conversation tend mostly to be drawn from the Austrian, public choice and constitutional political economy traditions on which the Ostroms themselves drew. This no doubt reflects the backgrounds of the contributors to the volume, most of whom are closely associated with George Mason University, a prominent centre for Austrian economics, public choice theory and constitutional political economy.² Other schools of thought, such as radical political economy, complexity-theoretic approaches, and evolutionary perspectives, are not prominently represented, even though some of their

exponents have engaged seriously with the Ostroms' ideas (and notwithstanding also the fact that Elinor Ostrom in particular utilised and contributed to some of them).³ This is less a criticism of the volume than an attempt to highlight the opportunity cost of the choices made by the editors, as well as the benefits they have produced. The selection of essays for edited volumes almost invariably involves trade-offs, for example between variety and coherence, and the volume under review here displays the benefits of a coherent set of perspectives, not least the way that the various chapters usefully complement each other (with points mentioned briefly in one being developed at length in others). The price that has been paid is, perhaps, a narrower set of conversations than might have been possible. The quality of the essays suggests overall that the price can be regarded as one worth paying.

The review is organised by reference to themes that are shared by the chapters discussed in the various sections found below. Section 2 focuses on two chapters that concentrate on the relations between the work of the Ostroms and that of Nobel Laureate James Buchanan. Section 3 explores how two of the chapters draw attention to the ontological presuppositions of the Ostroms' work (i.e., what their work presupposes about the nature of social reality). Section 4 considers two chapters that focus on the relations between the work of the Ostroms and other schools of thought, in particular behavioural and new institutional economics. Section 5 examines three chapters that focus on the relevance of the Ostroms' work for policy, focusing in particular on public administration and environmental issues. Section 6 concludes.

2. JAMES BUCHANAN AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

In 'Public Choice Theory: Reuniting Virginia and Bloomington' (chapter 2), Emil Duhnea and Adam Martin explore the connections between the work of James Buchanan and Elinor and Vincent Ostrom. In doing so, they provide very helpful summaries of several important aspects of the Virginia and Bloomington Schools, setting the scene for several of the chapters that follow. Noting that the Ostroms have long acknowledged taking inspiration from Buchanan's work, in particular *The Calculus of Consent* (Buchanan and Tullock 1962),⁴ and also that they were founder members of the Public Choice Society, Duhnea and Martin focus on several key areas of common ground.

The first is self-governance, which Duhnea and Martin describe as "the key normative commitment and the central social-scientific object of inquiry that underwrites both traditions" (p. 13). Elinor Ostrom regarded her work on how communities are sometimes able to craft rules that enable them to avoid the tragedy of the commons as an attempt to follow the strategy used by biologists studying complex processes, namely that of "identifying for empirical observation the simplest possible organism in which a process occurs in a clarified ... form" because "the processes of self-organisation and self-governance are easier to observe in this type of organisation than in many others." By doing so, she believed, she would be able "to contribute to the development of an empirically valid theory of self-organisation and self-governance ... of relevance to a somewhat broader set of environments" (1990, pp. 26-29; also see p. 216). Her work on the commons was, therefore, an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the larger-scale problem that featured so prominently in the work of Vincent Ostrom, namely "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection or choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force" (Vincent Ostrom, quoted in Duhnea and Martin, p. 13).⁵ Duhnea and Martin highlight the parallels between this approach and that adopted by Buchanan. In his 1959 essay on 'Positive Economics, Welfare Economics, and Public Policy', Buchanan inveighs against the common interpretation of welfare economics as a form of social engineering and argues that economists should think of themselves as advancing hypotheses about policies whose merits can be assessed only by their being put to the democratic test. Similarly, in his 1963 Presidential Address to the Southern Economic Association, "What Should Economists do?", Buchanan contends that the economist's field of study extends beyond market exchange to encompass the political exchanges through which people impose rules upon themselves in order to seek to enjoy mutual gains (Buchanan ([1964] 1979, pp. 31-34). In short, as Duhnea and Martin write, for Buchanan "economists should be citizens rather than technocrats"

(p. 14). The parallels with the Ostroms, for whom democracy involves people governing together rather than having a cadre of experts rule over them, are clear (V. Ostrom 1997, pp. 59-60, 84-86).

A second area of common ground lies in a shared emphasis on institutional choice (pp. 15-16). One of Elinor Ostrom's key criticisms of earlier analyses of common property resources, especially those which modelled such situations as a prisoners' dilemma, was that they portrayed people as passively accepting their circumstances. They therefore ignored the possibility that people might seek to transform their situation by devising sets of rules or institutions that would facilitate successful self-governance (Ostrom 1990, pp. 6-7). In developing this point, as Duhnea and Martin rightly note, Ostrom drew on the Buchanan and Tullock's distinction between different levels of analysis—whereby constitutional choice *over* the rules of the game is distinguished from the collective choices that take place *within* given rules—so as to devise her tripartite distinction between operational, collective choice and constitutional choice rules (1990, pp. 50-55).⁶ This enabled her to analyse how certain kind of constitutional and collective choice rules facilitate, or impede, people's efforts to craft the operational rules needed for successful self-governance. For Duhnea and Martin, this distinction between different levels of rules is “the most distinctive *analytic* moves that separates Bloomington and Virginia from other schools of thought” (p. 16).

A third key area of common ground concerns polycentricity. Vincent Ostrom emphasised the importance of polycentric systems in some of his earliest writings (Ostrom et al. [1961] 1999), highlighting how the autonomy enjoyed by citizens and providers within federal systems of governance characterised by overlapping jurisdictions and fragmented authority can set in train a process of discovery that generates the information and incentives required for a better performance (in the provision of public services, for example) than is possible within more centralised (monocentric) systems (also see V. Ostrom [1991] 2014). Duhnea and Martin (p. 18) note the parallels with Buchanan's work on federalism, which he portrays as a system in which citizens and firms can move between competing jurisdictions in ways that serve to limit the government's potential to engage in predatory taxation (see, e.g., Buchanan 1995).⁷ An awareness of the benefits of polycentricity is, of course, readily apparent in Elinor Ostrom's work on the commons; this emphasises the importance for the possibility of self-governance of constitutional and collective choice rules that afford people the autonomy to experiment with different combinations of operational rules until they discover those that enable them to manage the resource (Ostrom 1990, pp. 133-42, 182-216). The need for experimentation in the choice of operational rules reflects Elinor Ostrom's view that people seeking to identify such rules face a decision problem that is so complex that they will be unable to maximise their expected utility. They should therefore be portrayed as being boundedly rational and engaging in a trial-and-error effort to identify a set of rules that works well enough for their purposes (E. Ostrom 1990, pp. 34, 38, 58-59; 1999, pp. 496, 508-09).

This brings us to the fourth area of common ground between the Bloomington and Virginia schools, referred to by Duhnea and Martin under the heading of ‘complex agents’ (pp. 19-21). “Using rational choice models to understand politics is a *sine qua non* of public choice,” Duhnea and Martin (p. 19) write. “But neither Bloomington nor Virginia apply these models in a mechanistic or uncritical fashion.” In what is perhaps his most sophisticated analysis of the model of human nature required to understand constitutional choice, Buchanan (1979) draws on Vincent Ostrom's (1980) discussion of artisanship, and also on the work of Frank Knight (1947) and G. L. S. Shackle (1976), to portray people as artifactual beings who impose rules on themselves in order to cultivate new preferences and thereby forge a new sense of identity.⁸ This is a striking departure from the standard rational choice account of people as seeking to satisfy given preferences. In her account of how people craft new rules, Elinor Ostrom also departs from the standard model of rational conduct; but her account sets much greater store on notions of bounded rationality than does Buchanan.

Vincent Ostrom arguably departs furthest from rational choice, when in his discussion of constitutional choice (not mentioned by Duhnea and Martin), he contends that “[a]greements about enduring human relationships are not simply exchange relationships but open-ended commitments best characterised as covenantal in nature” (V. Ostrom 1997, p. 285; also see V. Ostrom [1997] 2012, p. 101). Covenantal rea-

soning involves people recognising an obligation to consider the interests and goals of others in deciding how to behave (V. Ostrom 1997, p. 188), a feature of decision-making that leads to a significant shift away from the standard model of man as a utility-maximiser: “Maximising utility ... does not apply to epistemic choice or constitutional choice in the same way that such calculations might be thought to apply to the choice of substitutable alternatives in one-to-one comparisons of distinguishable but similar items. To rely on a single specifiable criterion of choice, such as Utility, is to treat human societies as one-dimensional realms in which the forest cannot be seen for all the trees that obstruct one’s view” (Vincent Ostrom 1997, p. 279; also see pp. 98, 102).⁹ What all this suggests is that potentially significant differences emerge both between Bloomington and Virginia, and also within Bloomington, as they adapt rational choice theory so as to apply it to issues of constitutional choice.¹⁰

Rosolino Candela’s essay, which forms chapter 10 of the book, offers an insightful discussion of the Ostroms’ views on the relationships between design and evolution and between polycentricity and federalism. Central to his argument is the point that while for the Ostroms “the institutional conditions of federalism are a human artifact, based upon choice and deliberation”, they also acknowledged “a bi-directionality in institutional analysis” whereby a federal framework “facilitates learning and the adaptive potential of human beings, leading to unintended innovative institutional changes to reinforce social cooperation” (pp. 153-54).

Candela sets the scene for his discussion of the Ostroms by considering the contrasting views of James Buchanan and Friedrich Hayek on the significance of design and evolution in the development of an institutional framework that can sustain individual freedom and mutually beneficial interactions between people. As a contractarian, Buchanan sets great store by the deliberate choice of constitutional rules. He was correspondingly sceptical of Hayek’s growing commitment after 1960 to the view that social rules develop through a spontaneous, evolutionary process (Hayek [1968] 2014), arguing—in a letter to Vincent Ostrom—that his and Ostrom’s view that institutions can be designed “face[s] opposition” from exponents of evolutionary thinking such as Hayek (Buchanan, quoted by Candela, p. 155; also see Buchanan [1977] 2001). However, as Candela (pp. 155-56) rightly notes, the differences between Buchanan and Hayek can be over-stated, because—as Buchanan ([1986] 2001, p. 313) observed—Hayek continued to acknowledge a role for design in the development of an appropriate institutional framework:

Government is of necessity the product of intellectual design. If we can give it a shape in which it provides a beneficial framework for the free growth of society, without giving to any one power to control this growth in the particular, we may well hope to see the growth of civilization continue (Hayek 1979, p. 152).

The distinction between different levels of rules is again important here. For whilst emphasising in his analysis of the common law the importance of evolutionary forces in shaping the *operational* rules governing people’s interactions, Hayek continued to allow an important role for reasoned choice and the design of an over-arching constitutional framework that would make it possible to harness the forces of spontaneous order for the common good. In arguing for his model constitution, for example, Hayek attempted to identify a set of higher-level, constitutional and collective choice rules within which the forces of spontaneous order would work to good effect at the operational level.¹¹ In this way, to paraphrase Candela, “distinguishing between different levels of analysis ... allows [Hayek] to incorporate both exogeneity and endogeneity to understanding institutional change that is *both* evolutionary and deliberative”, thereby providing “a distinct analytical framework that bridges James Buchanan’s emphasis on institutional choice over the rules of the game ... and F. A. Hayek’s emphasis on institutional evolution” (pp. 157, 155).¹²

Candela further explores the relationship between design and evolution in his discussion of the Ostroms’ views on the relationship between polycentricity and federalism (pp. 158-64). For Candela, “federalism, as understood by the Ostroms, is a particular manifestation of polycentric order that is institutionally contingent on adherence to predefined constitutional rules”. It “facilitates spontaneous-order pro-

cesses, generated by evolutionary competition” that yield mutually beneficial (“positive sum”) outcomes (pp. 160-61). However, in polycentric systems where because of the absence of federalist institutions the requisite “conditions of civil association” (p. 154) do not hold, however, negative-sum outcomes can arise, a possibility Candela illustrates to good effect through a case study of the impact of Italian unification on Sicily (pp. 164-70). Once again, the similarities between Hayek and the Ostroms are apparent because, like them, Hayek sought to identify an over-arching institutional framework that would enable people living in modern societies, whose complexity is such that they “cannot acquire the full knowledge which would make mastery of the events possible”, nonetheless to exploit the forces of spontaneous order so as to “make circumstances more favourable to the kind of events we desire” (Hayek [1975] 2014, p. 371; [1955] 2014, p. 201).¹³

3. SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

In their essay on “Foundations of Social Order: The Ostroms and John Searle” (chapter 6), Adrian Miroiu and Adelin Dumitru contribute to the small but growing literature on the ontological presuppositions of the Ostroms’ work (that is, what their work presupposes about the nature of social reality).¹⁴ As Miroiu and Dumitru observe (pp. 88-92), the Ostroms viewed the social world as being composed of ‘institutional facts’ in the sense in which that term is used by Searle (1995) (E. Ostrom 2006, pp. 6, 8; V. Ostrom 1987, pp. 235-36, [1991] 2012, pp. 260-62 and 1997, pp. 25-26). Institutional facts are created through speech acts that see groups of people assign collectively-accepted functions to people and/or objects. It is through such speech acts that we, the members of a particular community, collectively accept that certain people will be accorded the status of ‘authorised user’ or ‘monitor’ of a common property resource, and that as a result their behaviour will be governed by certain collectively agreed rules. If the institutions thereby created are well-designed, then people will be afforded the incentives and the information needed to avoid the tragedy of the commons (Ostrom 1990, pp. 19-20, 91-100, 136-42, 185-88; 1999, pp. 508-19).

There are three key elements to the creation of such institutional facts (Miroiu and Dumitrou pp. 88-90). The first centres on people’s capacity to assign functions to other people or objects. For example, the members of a community may assign to certain individuals the function of ‘monitor’, charged with the task of checking that the users of the CPR comply with agreements governing consumption of, and investment in, the resource. Second, this assignment of function is achieved collectively, by the members of the community acting together. A lone individual cannot unilaterally declare herself to be a monitor; that status must be bestowed by the other members of the group. Searle captures this point through the notion of ‘collective intentionality’, whereby the members of a community declare that a particular person will act as a monitor. Social facts, for Searle, are those involving such collective intentions. Third, institutional facts are a particular kind of social fact, namely those whose existence depends upon *constitutive* rules (Searle 1995, pp. 40, 43-51). Such rules typically take the form “X counts as Y in context C”, where X might be a particular person, Y is the status or function of being a ‘monitor’, and C is ‘a particular community’. That a particular individual taking on certain duties and enjoying particular powers counts as a monitor in a certain community is an institutional fact. For Searle, therefore, and for Elinor and Vincent Ostrom, institutional facts arise through particular kinds of speech acts whereby a group of people agree to follow certain (constitutive) rules specifying the functions to be (collectively) assigned to particular people (Ostrom 1990, p. 185; 2005, pp. 132-33, 144; also see Lewis 2021, pp. 630-31).¹⁵

What this account of the creation of institutional facts also indicates, as Miroiu and Dumitru (pp. 98-101) observe, is the foundational role of language in the Ostroms’ account of self-governance: “the political artisan ...is concerned with the use of language to order relationships among human beings”, Vincent Ostrom (1987, p. 19) writes, so that language becomes “the fundament of order in all human societies” (Vincent Ostrom 1997, p. 86, quoted by Miroiu and Dumitrou p. 101): “languages are the most fundamental institutions in human societies” and, because they are the medium in which the rules that bind people together into societies are expressed, they “serve as the essential matrices in all systems of social and po-

litical order” (V. Ostrom 1997, p. 63; also see pp. 151-74) Another implication is that the degradation of our language can quickly lead to the erosion of the basis of self-governing societies, whereby “glittering generalities, slogans and sonorous phrases are used to ... create the illusion that people can be spared all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living” (V. Ostrom 1997, pp. 55, 56-57; also see pp. 61-87, 162-63, 167). The relevance of all this to our current predicament is too obvious to require elaboration here.

Ontological issues also feature prominently in Alice Calder and Virgil Storr’s essay on “New Economic Sociology and the Ostroms” (chapter 5), albeit without being explicitly described as such. Storr and Calder seek to explore the parallels between the Bloomington School and the new economic sociology (see, e.g., Granovetter [1985], Swedberg [2003] and Burt [2004]). They highlight several areas of common ground, of which three will be mentioned here. First, both approaches portray people as social beings who are embedded (Granovetter 1985) in networks of social relations that shape, without entirely determining, how they act (pp. 72, 77-78). Thus, like the Ostroms, advocates of the new economic sociology seek to navigate a course between “an over-socialised conception of economic actors who are entirely beholden to the norms and values of the social system they exist in” and portrayals of actors as “socially isolated creatures” and “under-socialised decision maker[s] using utilitarian calculus to determine every choice” (p. 72; also see pp. 77-79).¹⁶

Another common theme is an emphasis on the importance of social capital (pp. 79-83). Understood as “the resources that an individual can access through her social connections and the value and quality of those resources”, as well as norms in the sense of “rules that govern the behaviour of members of the social network” (p. 79), social capital is a resource upon which people draw in their efforts to accomplish joint activities, in particular by overcoming free-riding (pp. 81-82; also see Ostrom 1994). An insightful paper, which nicely complements Calder and Storr’s, is that penned by Chamlee-Wright (2008), who uses Austrian capital theory, in particular the work of Ludwig Lachmann ([1956] 1978, 1977), to develop a distinctive perspective on the nature and significance of social capital that builds on Ostrom’s work. There are clear parallels between Lachmann’s ideas on the complementarity of different kinds of capital goods and what Elinor Ostrom refers to as the configurational nature of operational rules, whereby “the way one rule operates is affected by other rules” (Ostrom [1986] 2014, pp. 108, 110; also see 2005, pp. 255–57). In both cases, elements—capital goods or operational rules—are viewed as forming complex structures possessing distinctive emergent properties (to facilitate enhanced productivity and the successful management of common property resources respectively).¹⁷

Chamlee-Wright highlights two important implications of these features of social capital, namely (i) the uncertainty associated with efforts to develop and utilise it to achieve desirable outcomes and (ii) the role of entrepreneurs in dealing with that uncertainty by experimenting with new combinations of the elements (e.g., the rules) of which it is composed. For Ostrom, one of the main merits of polycentric systems is that they enable people to deal with the epistemic (computational) problems posed by the configurational nature of social rules by experimenting with different rule combinations, and learning from the efforts of other groups to do so, thereby helping them to develop rules that are more conducive to self-governance than would otherwise be the case. This emphasis on polycentricity is, Calder and Storr (pp. 82-83) contend, a third area of common ground between the Bloomington School and the new economic sociology, being emphasised in the case of the latter by Granovetter’s (1973) well-known work on the strength of weak ties and by Burt’s (2004) discussion of structural holes.

One interesting and important point made by Calder and Storr concerns Elinor Ostrom’s “call for a more nuanced and real-world reflective approach to studying how people solve their problems” (p. 73). This requires social scientists to acknowledge and address various forms of complexity in the real world. In her Nobel Prize lecture, Ostrom contrasted her approach with the “earlier world view of simple systems” which sought to “fit the world into simple models” (E. Ostrom [2009] 2014, p. 168). The simplicity of those models manifested itself in their reliance on conceptual dichotomies that are in Ostrom’s view too crude to capture the richness of social reality. One, noted by Calder and Storr (p. 73), is the common reliance on the assumption that people are self-interested in the narrow sense of seeking to maximise their own narrow

material well-being (or are simply irrational). Another, mentioned in a later chapter by Aligica (p. 139), involves an exclusive reliance on the categories of ‘pure private goods’ and ‘pure public goods’. A third, also mentioned by Aligica (p. 145), is the use of the all-encompassing, mutually exclusive categories of ‘state’ and ‘market’. In all these cases, a satisfactory understanding of the diversity of phenomena in contemporary society requires the use of a “more complex” (E. Ostrom [2009] 2014, p. 167) set of categories that can do justice to: the complexity of people’s motivations, which extend beyond a concern for one’s own material well-being; to the variety of goods in the real world, which display to varying degrees the attributes of non-rivalry and non-excludability; and to the correspondingly varied institutional arrangements used to deliver public services and manage shared resources (E. Ostrom [2009] 2014, pp. 167-85). “To explain the world of interactions and outcomes,” Elinor Ostrom ([2009] 2014, p. 197) concludes, “we also have to be willing to deal with complexity instead of rejecting it.” This concern to adopt sets of categories that capture the complexity of the real world, to which both Calder and Storr and Aligica rightly draw attention, is arguably an example of what has been described as Elinor Ostrom’s ‘realist orientation’, that is her concern to adopt methods and concepts that do justice to certain key features of social reality (Lewis 2021).

4. SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Vlad Tarko (chapter 4) examines the affinities between the work of Elinor Ostrom and behavioural economics. In doing so, Tarko (pp. 48-50, 56-59) elaborates in an interesting and insightful way on a feature of Elinor Ostrom’s work briefly mentioned above, namely her belief that in order to explain observed instances of self-governance it is necessary to acknowledge that people have “complex motivational structures” ([2009] 2014, p. 167; also see E. Ostrom [1998] 2014, p. 123). As Tarko writes, Ostrom “argues that a broader concept of rationality is needed for understanding the complex reality of collective action” (p. 50). That broader conception of rationality entails that in deciding how to act, people take into account not just external material incentives, such as those provided by the prospect of consuming a particular quantity of a resource, but also the intrinsic satisfaction to be had from adhering to social rules and from promoting other people’s welfare (Ostrom 1990, pp. 35–36, 205–6; [1998] 2014, pp. 123, 129–38; 2005, pp. 109–13, 116–19). For Ostrom, people certainly can act opportunistically; but they can also possess attributes, such as intrinsic and other-regarding preferences, that enable them to overcome their propensity for opportunism and thereby sustain cooperative outcomes (Tarko pp. 48-50, 67). The lesson Ostrom gleans from her fieldwork on self-governance and from laboratory experiments is that “human beings are neither all-knowing saints nor devilish knaves ... humans have complex motivations including narrow self-interest as well as norms of proper behaviour and other-regarding preferences” (2005, pp. 132, 119; also see E. Ostrom [1998] 2014, p. 136).

Such pro-social motivations, which are of course intensively studied by behavioural economists, are important in encouraging people to moderate their consumption of shared resources and to invest adequately in them, thereby helping those people to solve the first-order collective action problem associated with managing the commons. But as Tarko (pp. 59-62) rightly observes, such motivations are also important in enabling people to enforce the rules upon which the possibility of self-governance depends. The monitoring and enforcement of those rules gives rise to a second-order collective action problems; opportunistic individuals may be tempted to free-ride on others’ efforts to sustain and implement the rules in question, leading to the possibility that inadequate monitoring and enforcement will undermine the potential for those rules to sustain successful outcomes (Ostrom [1998] 2014, pp. 134-36; Ostrom 2000, pp. 3-4). But the presence of some people who gain satisfaction from following rules, from punishing those who break rules, and from seeing their fellow citizens benefit from successful self-governance, can help to ensure that this second-order dilemma can be solved (Tarko p. 63).

In considering Ostrom’s use of behavioural insights, Tarko (pp. 49-50, 64-65) argues, similarly to Calder and Storr, that she sought to navigate a course between over-socialised approaches that simply assume that people will do whatever is required to solve collective action problems and under-socialised

perspectives that portray people as being motivated only by considerations relating to their material well-being. On Tarko's account, central to Ostrom's efforts to negotiate these extremes is the way that, while acknowledging the causal and explanatory significance of social-structural factors, she portrays them as influencing the possibility of cooperation only through their impact on people's conduct. This is an important point long emphasised by the Ostroms. An early statement can be found at the outset of Vincent Ostrom's *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*, where he urges social scientists to "distinguish between a determinate causal ordering and a quasi-causal ordering":

In a determinate causal ordering a cause impinges directly upon and determines an effect. A quasi-causal ordering depends upon the intervention of human actors who are capable of thinking, considering alternatives, choosing, and then acting ... In such circumstances we are required to take account of how individuals view themselves, conceptualising their situation, and choose strategies in the light of the opportunities available to them. Analysis in the social sciences requires recourse to strategic thinking in quasi-causal orders. The rule-ordered relationships that are constitutive of human organisation function as soft constraints that are themselves subject to choice (V. Ostrom 2008, p. 2).¹⁸

Similarly, Elinor Ostrom maintains that understanding the possibility of self-governance requires analysts to relax the assumption that the social world is a determinate or closed system (that is, one in which the relations between structural conditions and outcomes can be expressed as regularities of the form, 'Whenever these structural variables, then that set of outcomes'). For Ostrom, creative human agency of the kind that enables people to develop new social rules presupposes that the world is an open system, in which such regularities are few and far between. As Ostrom and her co-authors write, "If agency is taken seriously, we must allow for both creativity and differences in perspective. But creativity and differences in interpretation mean that lawlike social patterns are unlikely to arise" (Poteete et al. 2010, p. 9). Structural variables shape and influence people's actions, and so exert a causal influence over outcomes, but without determining them, because people have the capacity—the agency—to interpret and respond creatively to the social-structural context in which they find themselves. For the Ostroms, therefore, both social-structural factors and human agency exert a causal influence over overcomes and are therefore explanatorily significant. Hence Ostrom's remark that she sought to "allow scholars who stress structural explanations of human behaviour and those who stress individual choice to find common ground, rather than to continue the futile debate over whether structural variables or individual attributes are the most important" (E. Ostrom [1998] 2014, p. 124; also see Lewis 2021, pp. 625-26, 629-32).

One final point, well made by Tarko, is worth emphasising. While in developing these insights Ostrom "builds on the work of behavioural economics" (p. 67) (see, e.g., E. Ostrom [1998] 2014, pp. 123-24, 128-33; 2005, pp. 69-133), she also departs from certain important strands of behavioural research, in particular work—associated with what Tarko refers to as the 'new paternalism'—suggesting that policy-makers should seek to 'nudge' people into taking particular courses of action (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein 2009). "Ostrom's work," Tarko (p. 48) argues, "is very strongly anti-paternalistic, focused instead on people's abilities to self-govern." Accordingly, the Ostroms emphasise that people need the ability to practice "the arts and science of association" (that is, to create and maintain the rules that facilitate self-governance): they require the intellectual resources—the ideas and the imagination—to conceptualise the possibility of governing the resource themselves; they need the courage to take assume responsibility for managing it; and they need to be able to identify, agree upon, and resolve conflicts over the requisite rules (E. Ostrom 1990, pp. 7, 14; V. Ostrom 1997, pp. 271-302). This view of people as co-creators of the rules that govern them, rather than as passive pawns to be manipulated by technocratic experts, lies at the heart of the Ostroms' vision of a democratic society (Tarko, pp. 48-49, 66-67; also see Aligica 2019, pp. 97-117).

Michael McGinnis's contribution compares the Bloomington School with the New Institutional Economics (chapter 3).¹⁹ He argues that the two approaches have shared foundations, in particular a com-

mon emphasis on methodological individualism and bounded rationality (pp. 26-29). However, they also diverge in important ways. While new institutionalists tend to “conceptualise politics as exchanges between public officials and private actors”, the Bloomington school scholars counter that politics “encompasses a far broader range of experience than mere exchange” (p. 29).

A basic tenet of the Bloomington school is that governance should be understood as co-production, a form of collective action in which the governed see themselves as an integral part of the governing process (ibid.).

McGinnis goes on to argue that this perspective encourages Bloomington scholars to be more willing to acknowledge the complexity of people’s motivations, quoting Elinor’s Ostrom’s remark that rather than designing institutions on the basis that people are always and everywhere self-interested, “a core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans” (p. 30, quoting E. Ostrom [2010] 2014, p. 197).²⁰ These differences also reflect the way that while new institutionalism focusses on the principal-agent problems that arise within hierarchically-order, top-down political systems, Bloomington school scholars “emphasise bottom-up processes of joint participation in crafting, monitoring, enforcing, evaluating, and revising rules and the shared norms which support the legitimacy of those rules” (p. 42).

One might add to McGinnis’s insightful comparison by highlighting how, in developing her theory of collective action, Elinor Ostrom sought to analyse and explain not only how people are sometimes able to develop institutions that facilitate successful self-governance, but also why—perhaps because they fail to solve the relevant second-order collective action problems—they sometimes fail to do so (E. Ostrom 1990, pp. 58-181). As she writes in *Governing the Commons* “‘getting the institutions right’ is a difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process” that does not always end in success, which is why “the cases to be discussed in this book illustrate both successful and unsuccessful efforts to escape tragic outcomes” (1990, p. 14). In portraying the processes through which people attempt to develop such institutions as contingent, in the sense of not always yielding institutions that are conducive to successful self-governance, Ostrom avoids the charge of functionalism that is sometimes levelled against other exponents of new institutional economics (see, e.g., Granovetter 1992, pp. 4-7). Put slightly differently, Ostrom shares with critics of new institutional economics such as Mark Granovetter a concern to examine the contingent, dynamic processes through which beneficial institutions do—or, sometimes, do not—arise (Granovetter 1992, p. 9). This is, of course, an illustration of Calder and Storr’s point that both Ostrom and new economic sociologists like Granovetter portray people as being embedded in networks of social relations that, by affording or denying them access to various kinds of resources, shape their capacity to engage successfully in collective endeavour.

5. POLICY

Paul Dragos Aligica (chapter 9) focuses on the instrumental role played by the Ostroms in the development of a political economy perspective on public administration, whereby they sought “to promote public choice [theory] as the theoretical foundation in public administration and public administration as the applied domain of public choice” (p. 138). This paradigm shift involved a move away from portrayals of public administration as involving a hierarchy of professionally-trained public servants with a single centre of power (Wilson 1956; Gerth and Mills 1946) towards a ‘political economy’ approach, inspired by the work of scholars such as Olson (1965), Tullock (1965) and Buchanan (1969), that deployed economic reasoning to analyse the behaviour of the public sector in ways that subverted traditional Wilsonian and Weberian perspectives (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom 1971; V. Ostrom 2008, pp. 20-31, 42-64). Explicitly invoking the work of Thomas Kuhn, Vincent Ostrom in particular argued that the discipline of public administration was

undergoing an intellectual crisis whose resolution required a shift to the new political economy paradigm (2008, pp. 5-19, 87-115).

In the early 1970s, in contrast to the then mainstream Wilsonian approach, the new political economy paradigm suggested that the multiplicity of political unit, duplication of functions, and overlapping jurisdictions that characterised American metropolitan government did not necessarily indicate inefficiency. For the Ostroms, as Aligica (pp. 140-42) makes clear, the tools of economic analysis could be used to show that what the mainstream saw as signs of chaos and inefficiency in the provision of public services could actually be features of a polycentric system of provision whereby a “multiplicity of governance units was functioning as a competition-generating structure” (p. 141).²¹ Competition between multiple producers of public services, between which consumer-citizens could choose in a quasi-market setting, might serve to generate both the incentives and the information needed to allocate resources more efficiently than under a monocentric regime in which an area was served by just a single monopoly producer (pp. 142-50). As the Ostroms wrote, “Competitive pressures are the key factors in maintaining the viability of a democratic system of public administration ... The characteristics of public services and the important role for diverse organisations, including private enterprises, in the delivery of such services dictate the nature and structure of a public economy. The public economy need not be an exclusive government monopoly” (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom [1977] 1999, p. 99, quoted in Aligica, p. 146).²²

One question that arises in the case of polycentric systems concerns the feedback mechanism through which people learn how to allocate resources more effectively within public economies or quasi-markets. This issue is considered not only by Aligica (pp. 142-44) but also by Peter Boettke in his contribution, entitled “Learning from the Socialist Calculation Debate: Is Efficiency in Public Economies Possible?” (chapter 8). Boettke considers the Ostroms’ work on the provision of public goods through polycentric systems of governance in light of the following question: what are the analogues in such systems of the freely-formed market prices, and the calculations of profit and loss they facilitate, that help people learn enough to ensure that the needs of citizens are met at the lowest possible cost (pp. 124-25, 129-35)? Like Aligica, Boettke invokes the path-breaking work of Ostrom et al. ([1961] 1999, pp. 42-46), in which it is argued that the gain or loss of contracts, and the movement of people within jurisdictions as they ‘vote with their feet’, can generate the error-correcting negative feedback required to ensure that “much of the flexibility and responsiveness of market organisation can be realised in the public service economy” (Ostrom, et al. [1961] 1999, p. 45; also see pp. 42-46 and V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom [1977] 1999, pp. 92, 94-99).²³

In their essay on ‘Environmental Policy from a Self-governance Perspective’ (chapter 7), Jayme Lemke and Jordan Lofthouse explore the relevance of the Ostroms’ work for environmental policy. As they write at the outset of their essay, “[b]y taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates political economy into environmental studies, the Bloomington School developed an approach that combines the study of economics and politics to help scholars and policy-makers understand the root cause of environmental problems and find real, viable ways to address them” (p. 106). Lemke and Lofthouse first outline Elinor Ostrom’s work on the governance of common property resources (pp. 107-10), arguing—in an echo of Duhnea and Martin (pp. 14-15)—that her emphasis on the possibility of local communities devising by and for themselves rules that facilitate successful self-governance is “at its core deeply democratic in that it insists on deliberation, cooperation, and compromise as important tools for solving social problems’ (p. 110; also see p. 120).

Lemke and Lofthouse then consider the implications of Ostrom’s approach for global environmental problems such as climate change. They argue, consistent with the democratic nature of the Ostroms’ approach, that dealing with such problems requires much more than global agreements negotiated by governments: “global solutions are unlikely to succeed unless they are accompanied by national, regional and local solutions to the same problems”. The reason is that “creating long-term solutions to climate change involves changing the day-to-day activities of individuals, companies, communities, and government at multiple levels” (p. 111; also see E. Ostrom 2014). It requires, in other words, a polycentric system that affords people and organisations opportunities to begin to find solutions to environment problems as part of, and indeed

in anticipation of, global initiatives to tackle such challenges. And as already noted, a polycentric system also facilitates a process of experimentation and discovery that “will help us to learn which sets of actions, technologies, and institutions are the most effective at reducing the threats of climate change” (p. 112). As Ostrom writes, “The advantage of a polycentric approach is that it encourages experimentation by multiple actors, as well as the development of methods for assessing the benefits and costs of particular strategies adopted in one setting and comparing these with results obtained ... Rather than only a global effort, it would be better to self-consciously adopt a polycentric approach to the problem of climate change in order to gain benefits at multiple scales as well as to encourage experimentation and learning from diverse policies at multiple scales” (E. Ostrom 2010, pp. 555-56, quoted in Lemke and Lofthouse, pp. 112-13; also see Ostrom 2014, p. 116).

On this view, especially when one is dealing with highly complex problems, the appropriate solution, including the scale at which it is provided, cannot be determined *a priori* but needs to be discovered. As Lemke and Lofthouse write, “The complex nature of most environmental problems means that one-size fits all solutions are unlikely to work.” For example, rather than assuming from the outset that a global, top-down solution to large-scale environmental problems is required, it should be acknowledged that solutions might emerge from the bottom-up as “organisations across many different communities ... work together” (p. 118) in ways that might, but need not, involve them according a role to central government: “The critical point is that government is not presumed either necessary or unnecessary, but instead involved to the extent that individuals on the ground determine that government action is the most effective way to proceed.” And, of course, the strength of polycentric systems is that they facilitate the experimentation needed to set in train a process of discovery that will enable people to learn what approach is best suited to solving the particular environmental problems they face.

Vincent Ostrom sometimes expressed this point by referring to Ross Ashby’s ‘law of requisite variety’, according to which in order “to realise specified effects, there must exist as much variety in the strategies available as there is variety in the conditions that obtain” (V. Ostrom [1993] 1999, p. 182; also see Ashby 1956, pp. 206-13):

There can be no universal problem-solver capable of addressing diverse problems as applying to societies as wholes. Rather, human societies require diverse patterns of association to cope with problems of varying scales under variable time and place exigencies. Principles of heterogeneity and complementarity imply that all human associations occur in the context which W. R. Ashby (1956) has identified as a law of requisite variety. Given time and space specificities, achieving complementarity among heterogeneous and diverse elements implies that uniform laws of association are not appropriate for the governance of all associated relationships in human societies (V. Ostrom [1990] 1999, p. 411).

In other words, by affording people the opportunity to devise their own operational rules, polycentric systems constitute a mechanism for generating the variety needed for people to be able to identify rules that are well-adapted to dealing with the particular kinds of problems they face (V. Ostrom 1997, pp. 121-22, 222-23; 2008, p. 48, 190 n. 6).

6. CONCLUSION

The essays contained in this worthwhile volume illustrate how Elinor and Vincent Ostrom drew on a wide range of sources in their efforts to develop a framework for understanding the possibility of self-governance in a variety of settings. Their efforts at intellectual artisanship bore fruit in a host of applied studies, encompassing not only the governance of environmental resources and public services, as discussed in several of the essays in the volume under review here, but also of knowledge creation in a digital world and the political economy of development aid (Hess and Ostrom [ed.] 2011, Gibson et al. 2005). Their ideas have

continued provide inspiration for other scholars, who have deployed them to good effect in a host of studies, including—to name but a few topics that have been thus illuminated—theoretical analyses of citizenship (Aligica) and of the firm and innovation (Deakin 2012, Potts 2018), as well as more applied work on recovery from natural disasters (Storr et al. 2017) and responses to the pandemic (Paniagua and Rayamajhee 2021). Such work testifies to the continued creative potential of the Ostroms’ ideas. The essays contained in this very useful collection, by discussing the Ostroms’ main ideas and comparing and contrasting their work with that of several other approaches to social science, provide a very helpful resource for those interested in learning more about the Bloomington School, its relations to other schools of thought, and how it can be used to advance our understanding of important issues in political economy. The editors and contributors are to be congratulated on a fine achievement.

NOTES

- 1 All otherwise unattributed page references are to the volume under review.
- 2 GMU is, of course, located in Fairfax Virginia. Hence the reference to that state in the title of this essay. In the interests of full disclosure, it should be mentioned that the author of this review is amongst other things an Affiliated Fellow at the F. A. Hayek Program for Advanced Study in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at GMU.
- 3 See, for example, Wall (2017) for an example of a radical political economy perspective on the Ostroms’ work, Colander and Kupers (2017) and Gaus (2021: 15, 198-206) for analyses that engage with it from the vantage point provided by complexity theory, and Wilson (2015) for an evolutionary analysis. For Elinor Ostrom’s use of complexity and evolutionary theory, see Ostrom (1999) and Wilson et al. (2013).
- 4 See, for example, V. Ostrom ([1997] 2012) and E. Ostrom (2011).
- 5 This is a point to which Boettke also alludes in his contribution to the collection (pp. 123-24).
- 6 Ostrom acknowledges her indebtedness to Buchanan for the notion of distinct levels of analysis in, for example, Ostrom (2004, p. 39).
- 7 For an interesting discussion of some differences between Buchanan and the Ostroms on these issues, see Boettke and Lemke (2018, pp. 68-69).
- 8 See Dold and Lewis (2020, pp. 1162-66) for a more detailed account.
- 9 “In my judgment, we are left with the circumstances that the model of *Homo economicus* used in neoclassical theory does not supply an adequate basis for informing choices at the constitutional level of analysis or for establishing the logical foundations for constitutional democracies” (V. Ostrom [1997] 2012, p. 94; also see pp. 92-94, 97). For an insightful discussion of the role played by the notion of ‘covenant’ in the thought of Vincent Ostrom, see Malik (2017).
- 10 We return to this point below, in discussing McGinnis’s chapter.
- 11 A similar argument can be found in the context of Hayek’s work in Lewis (2022).
- 12 For an interesting discussion of related issues, see Boettke and Lemke (2018).
- 13 Hayek wrote most explicitly on federalism in the context of his discussions of a liberal international order (see Hayek [1939] 2022). For a discussion, see Lewis (2022).
- 14 For other contributions, see Malik (2017) and Lewis (2017, 2021).
- 15 This account is closely related, for Vincent Ostrom in particular, to the notion of covenantal reasoning. The latter suggests that people who are seeking to devise and implement a set of rules for governing their interactions recognise an obligation to consider one another’s interests and goals (see section 2 above). The linguistic expression of their recognition of this obligation is the use of the collective (‘we’) rather than the singular (‘I’) form of intentions (for more on which see Lewis and Peterson 2021). That people have the capacity to engage in covenantal reasoning is another important feature of Vincent Ostrom’s ontological commitments (V. Ostrom 1991, pp. 62-66, 252-53, [1996] 2012, p. 75, [1997] 2012, pp. 93-94, 100-1, 1997, pp. 188, 292-95).
- 16 For more on the ontological presuppositions of the new economic sociology, see Lewis (2004).

- 17 It is also worth noting in this context that Vincent Ostrom draws on Lachmann's analysis of capital as consisting of heterogeneous goods that stand in relations of complementarity and substitutability to each other in his analysis of rule-creation-as-artisanship (Ostrom [1991] 2012, p. 280, 1997, pp. 66, 85, 205-06, 222-23).
- 18 The similarities with Hayek's compositive method, according to which social scientists seek to show how the subjective beliefs held by individual people lead them to act in ways that give rise, unintentionally, to the structures that help to make up the social world, are obvious (Hayek 2010, pp. 91-107).
- 19 For McGinnis, the new institutionalism is exemplified by the work of Ronald Coase, Douglas North and Oliver Williamson.
- 20 Hence also her remark that "institutions ... differentially reward or punish [people] over time so that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are learned and develop over time ... Learning to craft rules that attract and encourage individuals who share norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, or who learn them over time, is a fundamental skill in all democratic societies" (2005, p. 133). Also see the discussion found earlier in this review of Vincent Ostrom's notion of covenantal reasoning.
- 21 Also see Lemke and Lofthouse's essay in this volume (chapter 7, pp. 114-15).
- 22 For empirical studies of the beneficial effects of polycentric governance in the provision of public services, see for example Ostrom (1983), Ostrom and Parks (1987) and Oakerson and Parks (1988).
- 23 Also see the very useful discussion of federalism and polycentricity provided by Candela in the final chapter of the volume under review (pp. 159-62). Chamlee-Wright and Myers (2008, pp. 138-61) provide an insightful discussion of analogues to market-based discovery in non-market environments.

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