



TENSIONS IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

OSTROM'S TENSIONS

REEXAMINING the POLITICAL ECONOMY and
PUBLIC POLICY of ELINOR C. OSTROM

EDITED by ROBERTA Q. HERZBERG,
PETER J. BOETTKE, and PAUL DRAGOS ALIGICA



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Roberta Q. Herzberg, Peter J. Boettke, and Paul Dragoș Aligica

SECTION 1: THEORETICAL TENSIONS

1 BEYOND A PRECARIOUS BALANCE

Michael D. McGinnis

2 AN INTRICATE MOVE TOWARD REALITY

Adrian Miroiu

SECTION 2: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION TENSIONS

3 "WHAT SHOULD WE DO?"

Peter Levine

4 SOCIAL RECONTRACTING

Adam Martin

5 INSTITUTIONAL COMPLEXITY AND THE PUBLIC CHOICE

ANALYSIS OF FEASIBLE POLICY CHANGES

Vlad Tarco

SECTION 3: METHODOLOGICAL TENSIONS

6 WHOSE PROBLEMS ARE BEING SOLVED?

Andreas Thiel and Erik Swyngedouw

7 IN PRAISE OF ECLECTICISM

Aurelian Craiutu

CONTRIBUTORS

AN INTRICATE MOVE TOWARD REALITY

ELINOR OSTROM AND SCIENTIFIC REALISM

ADRIAN MIROIU

In a review of the state of political science as a discipline at the beginning of the 1980s, Elinor Ostrom (1982) noted the dominance of the focus on data collection and analysis, coupled with the neglect of attempts to develop new theoretical insights. For Ostrom, this concentration of efforts in political science had at least two limits. First, scholars failed to acknowledge a correct relation between data and theory. Data, she argued, are not the starting point of the attempts to understand reality; on the contrary, "the development of theory precedes the choice of appropriate methods to test a theory" (Ostrom 1982, 19).¹ A second limit, which has a metatheoretical nature, was researchers' (usually tacit) acceptance of the prevailing view developed by the philosophers of science on what a political theory should look like. For many researchers, the so-called received view of theories, or the syntactic view (Suppe 1974), came to be largely endorsed. According to that view, a theory is identified with a logically connected set of propositions, formulated in a carefully constructed language. The theory can be confronted with reality: in conjunction with statements of antecedent conditions, it gives explanations or predictions of empirical phenomena (Hempel and Oppenheim 1948). That view of theories has many shortcomings. Unfortunately, wrote Ostrom, although alternatives exist—and she mentioned works by authors like Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and even Jurgen Habermas—the received view "has not been

1948). That view of theories has many shortcomings. Unfortunately, wrote Ostrom, although alternatives exist—and she mentioned works by authors like Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and even Jurgen Habermas—the received view “has not been replaced with another dominant philosophy of science.”

However, she was partly wrong. In the decade before her paper was published the received view of theories was powerfully rejected from multiple perspectives by the philosophers of science, and some of its main champions, Carl Hempel, for example, even abandoned it (Suppe 2000). The so-called semantic view of theories, which asserts that theories are not linguistic entities but (structured) collections of models, won the war and revived the debates on the relation between theory and reality.

In this chapter, I argue that Ostrom’s theoretical endeavor was in line with these developments. The structure of my argument is as follows. The first section introduces the semantic view of theories, in the context of Ostrom’s well-known triadic conceptual scheme: frameworks, theories, models. According to this view, theories are structured collections of models. In the second section, I argue that the main piece in Ostrom’s picture of scientific inquiry is the concept of model. I first identify the main characteristics of models, and then I discuss the structure of the collections of models that researchers develop. This discussion will bring me to discern the characteristics and the role of a neglected concept Ostrom added to complement the triadic scheme: theoretical scenarios. Finally, I argue that the focus on models is consistent with a semantic conception of theories. In the third section, I turn to the philosophical idea of scientific realism: how our conceptual constructs relate to the empirical world. I argue that Ostrom’s view on models, theories, and frameworks can be interpreted as a sophisticated type of realist position called *structural realism*.

THE SEMANTIC APPROACH

The Three Levels Approach

The study of complex configurations of rules, argues Ostrom, is done not only by appealing to different theoretical approaches, to be found in distinct disciplines, but also at three “levels of specificity”: frameworks, theories, and models.² These theoretical concepts range from the most general to the most detailed types of assumptions, so they can be placed at certain points on the same continuum. Frameworks are the most general. Placed at the other end of the continuum, models make very specific assumptions useful in the analysis of a concrete

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A closer examination of the three concepts shows that Ostrom tended to attach to frameworks a law different from that of theories and models. I would identify at least four dimensions that set frameworks apart from both theories and models. First, while theories and models have “theoretical roles,” frameworks are situated at a metatheoretical level: their language is rich enough to provide a common base for talking about different theories, so frameworks make us able to compare the theories. “They attempt to identify the universal elements that any theory relevant to the same kind of phenomena would need to include” (McGinnis and Ostrom 2014). Two important aspects are involved here. On the one hand, the capacity of frameworks to offer a comparative evaluation of theories avoids the danger conceptualized by Kuhn (1970) that different theories are encapsulated in mutually incomparable worlds. On the other hand, the fact that frameworks are capable of playing this metatheoretical role means that frameworks are sophisticated enough to allow their use in comparing theories. One can reconstruct in frameworks at least those significant components and parts of the theories that make comparisons possible in terms of theories’ descriptive, explanatory, and predictive capacities.

Moving to a second distinction, besides their “diagnostic role,” frameworks have an explanatory one. They do not directly explain empirical phenomena, but “isolate the immediate structure affecting a process of interest to the analyst for the purpose of explaining regularities in human actions and results, and potentially to reform them” (Ostrom 2011, 11). Theories are expected to produce their explanation within the structure provided by frameworks. As Vincent Ostrom (1997, 105) notes, a framework is necessary to specify the features that need identification in any analytical effort, and thus opens the way to formulating theoretical explanations. The framework brings together heterogeneous elements that can be used to conceptualize different patterns of order in human societies.³ By