



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

## Anthropologists Cheer Ostrom's Nobel

### Prize Recognizes Interdisciplinary Scholarship

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As most AAA members are no doubt aware, the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences was awarded to Elinor Ostrom.



Elinor Ostrom

The committee recognized her for her groundbreaking and highly influential work in understanding how humans use institutions (rules and norms) to sustainably manage common pool resources such as fisheries, forests and fresh water. Although she is a political scientist by training, Ostrom's work has long been familiar to many in anthropology. Over the years, she has conducted much of her research alongside anthropologists in places like Nepal, Kenya and Nigeria.

In 2006, Ostrom officially joined the Arizona State University (ASU) anthropology faculty in our School of Human, Evolution and Social Change (SHESC) and became the founding director of the Center for the Study of Institutional Diversity. Under her leadership, the center's faculty and students (including many anthropologists) draw from a wide range of methods, including ethnography, experiments, network analysis, mathematical

modeling and archival research, to understand how institutions emerge, evolve and endure. Most are working in small-scale social systems and many are working on problems of common pool resources. Although Ostrom's position is not full time—as she is also a professor at Indiana University-Bloomington—she is a strong intellectual, professional and personal presence at ASU.

Ostrom was attracted to ASU by the vision of SHESC, and her Nobel Prize provides an opportunity to look at this new academic unit and its relationship to anthropology. In 2005, the then-four-field department of anthropology entered into a bold experiment to push anthropological research in innovative, transdisciplinary directions, with a strongly problem-focused agenda. Some four years on, our department has been completely transformed. While we remain fully committed to our anthropology BA, MA and PhD degree programs, we also work with our new colleagues from such fields as geography, sociology, science and technology studies, applied mathematics and political science to offer several new anthropology-infused transdisciplinary degrees, including PhDs in environmental social sciences and in global health. The school's research agenda is more unified than that of many anthropology units and coalesces around several themes: human origins, evolution and diversity; societies and their natural environments; urban societies; global dynamics and regional interactions; culture, heritage

and identity; and biological, social and cultural dimensions of human health.

The Late Lessons from Early History program is just one example of how SHESC is keeping alive its anthropological core while adding a new transdisciplinary dimension. In 2008 SHESC received a five-year, \$2.5 million grant from the ASU's Intellectual Fusion program to pursue research that integrates anthropology and other disciplines. The titles of the constituent projects give an idea of the diversity covered. They include, among others, "Cooperation, Social Networks and Global Health," "Disruptions as a Cause and Consequence of Migration in Human History," "Urban Organization through the Ages: Neighborhoods, Open Spaces and Urban Life," and "People, Primates and Pathogens."

Since the transition in 2005 from Department of Anthropology to School of Human Evolution and Social Change, the school and its anthropology program have prospered. Tenured and tenure-track faculty have increased 48% (to 51), with some faculty moving from other ASU programs and others as new hires. Undergraduate majors and graduate students have increased by 43% and 25% respectively. Anthropology remains our core discipline, but it is an expanded (and, we believe, improved) anthropology that engages with wider currents in scholarship and society. Elinor Ostrom's move to ASU was stimulated by this new vision of anthropology. Although the Nobel Prize was based on work done before her move, her work is very anthropological, and we think the prize is something in which all anthropologists can take pride.

*Amber Wutich is a cultural anthropologist whose fieldwork examines human adaptability to water insecurity in Bolivia and the US. Since moving to ASU in 2006, her research has been enriched by collaborations with ecologists, geographers and mathematicians.*

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