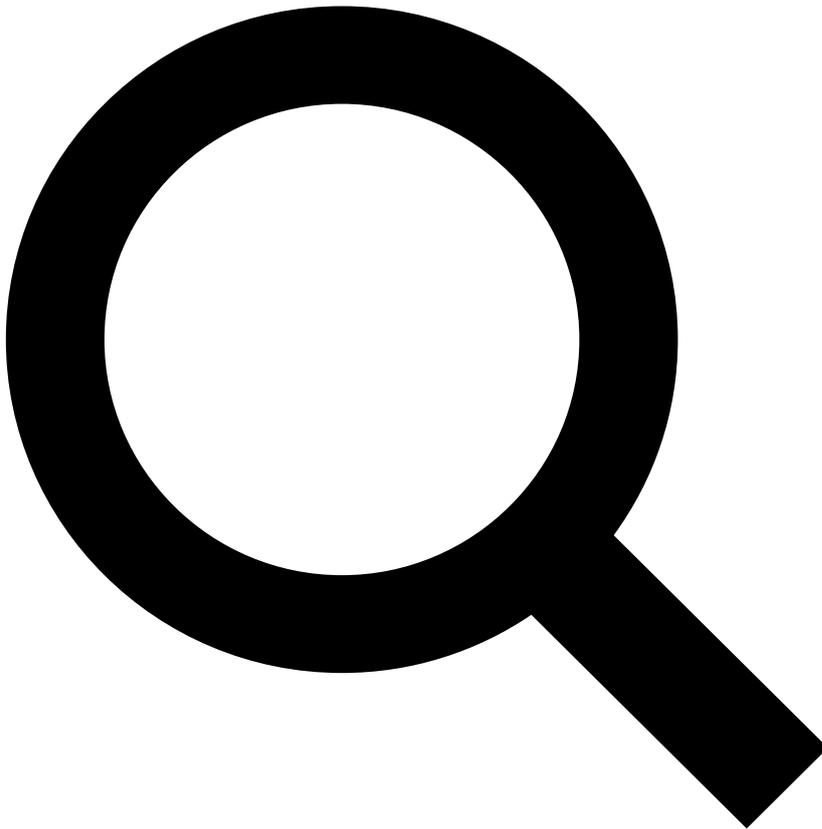


I have never quite understood why there is a Nobel Prize just in economics. Why a prize basically on financial relationships? Why not a prize for the human sciences as whole instead? After all, there is a prize in biology, and no prize in marine biology, or a prize in physics and no prize in physics of condensed matters (what about a prize in "Peace in Middle-East" or "Literature in prose"? Anyway, it is not really a Nobel Prize). Be that as it may, if there had been a Prize just in anthropology rather than in just in economics, I would still have nominated [Elinor Ostrom](#), (the 2009 Noble Prize in Economics).



First, Ostrom's work is both theoretically and empirically grounded. It is theoretically grounded because her enquiry started from the problem of collective action discovered by the rational choice theory. There are situations where everyone stands to benefit from the contribution of others and even more so if they do not contribute themselves (see Garrett Hardin's [famous article](#) on the tragedy of the commons in Science 13 December 1968: Vol. 162. no. 3859, pp. 1243 - 1248). Her work is also empirically grounded for Elinor Ostrom has started her work from the observation that, despite the apparent paradox, people do solve problems of collective actions. She has studied literally thousands of examples all over the world: Forests, fisheries, oil fields, grazing lands, irrigation systems, and so on. She came with a great book, [Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action](#), that highlighted the important features of successful institutions (deliberation, punishment, cheater detection, etc.).

Her work is also of importance for a second reason. Today, issues of collective actions have become a central problem in evolutionary anthropology. There are supposed to present the greatest challenge to evolutionary theories of human cooperation. There are studied experimentally in public good games. Ostrom's work reminds us that humans do not need cooperative tendencies to solve

tragedies of commons and build successful institutions. They only need to talk, to organize themselves, and to find the adequate solution for their particular problem. I am not saying (as in rational choice theory) that humans are selfish. Far from it. I do think that they are truly cooperative. I am only suggesting that public goods games, problems of collective action and large scale cooperation (villages, tribes, churches, etc.) may not need a general evolutionary solution to be explained and that evolutionary theories should focus rather on small scale cooperative interactions.