# 1. Introduction: Shifting Paradigms

By Sophie Bloemen and Thomas de Groot

‘Europe’ is more an idea than a geographical unit. In many ways, it remains a promise, something that one day might take shape. How we design that promise is continuously up for debate. The current dominant shape of the idea that we call Europe is simply not good enough. We must reinvigorate its promise.

Our Europe is optimistic, driven by ideas and stories that have the common good in mind. Our Europe is inspired by human flourishing and mutual trust. Our Europe is built on generosity and hope, not on extraction and dogma. It is built on communities and citizens, not on markets and consumers.

The foundational stories of collective post-war reconstruction and the mantra of ‘never again’ have lost their appeal. Europe is now facing various forms of social and political regression, notably the rise of new forms of nationalist, neo-fascist and undemocratic movements.

Europe needs new stories that orient us towards a brighter future. We believe that one of these stories is that of the commons. It is the story of people jointly stewarding resources, like water or energy or even cities and knowledge. It is a story of communities, of collaborative and democratic practices. The commons have been a forgotten sector of our society and our economy. They convey the space in which communities write their own rules. The commons presuppose activity, communication and democratic stewardship. They move us away from linear thinking and individualism, towards ecosystems and social relationships.

Perceiving our shared resources — like water, land, air, cultural heritage and scientific achievements — as global commons inspires us to take a certain ethical perspective. It leads us to recognize the imperative to jointly and equitably govern these resources, in a way that maintains the wealth of our planet. It implies a regenerative economy that sustains the planet, not an extractive one that destroys it. Embracing the commons fosters a culture of reciprocity to bring about a more socially and ecologically sustainable society.

Commons Network has in the last several years worked to tell that story, to convey the logic of the commons in policy circles, in civil society and in the public debate. Together with others, we saw the enormous power and potential of this story and practice, the collective potential of all commoners. We have acted as a think tank, as organisers, as activists and advocates. We published papers, wrote articles, organised Assemblies, met countless people and learned about thousands of initiatives. We saw how the commons connects struggles in different realms and bridges movements and approaches: it provides a new vocabulary for social justice and collective action for a social-ecological transition.

This renewed claim to community, belonging and collaborative values makes a new politics and a new economy possible. Yes, we argue that this vision brings us closer to the ideal of Europe as a post-nationalist space1. Through trans-local solidarity and multilayered belonging, we can escape the stand-off between detached cosmopolitanism and regressive nationalism.

Having learned about the different practices and forms of commons and what they need from institutions to thrive, we decided to bring it all together. Here, we showcase the ideas, the people, the practices and the policy implications. This book offers an insight into this growing movement. While we are writing this, new commons initiatives are emerging, adding to the theories and practies and further developing the discourse.

Working on the commons, we have come to observe transformative ideas emerging all around us. More and more people dare to imagine radically different futures, beyond ‘there is no alternative’. More and more policymakers are adopting new concepts like food sovereignty or ‘the Doughnut’. More and more activists are merging anti-racism and eco-feminism in one intersectional and emancipatory theory of change. Even de-growth, a concept that is still too radical for most greens and social-democrats, is slowly becoming more mainstream. We have moved past the neoliberal consensus. We have come to recognize the limits of our planet and the boundaries of the living world as we respect our embedded role in it.

The commons are not primarily a political theory, but first and foremost a practice emerging from the bottom-up. Everywhere, people are engaging in alternative practices as part of the struggle for ecological, social and cultural transition within their communities. Local energy cooperatives are prioritising community wealth and open access medical journals are sharing knowledge – these practices represent social and cultural shifts in value models.

While societal shifts are often framed in terms of economy or technologies, they are rooted in cultural change. Our culture reflects and shapes our values and how we attribute meaning to our lives. Many current community-led and social innovation initiatives contain strong elements of practical cultural change. New social values and practices are enabling communities to be generative instead of extractive. This is creating a new civic and cultural ethic that is breaking with conventional notions of citizenship and participation. The regeneration activities of commoners showcase, above all, cultural manifestations of new ways of daily life.

The European Union and its member states have a huge role to play in facilitating social and ecological transition. The political project of the European Union could be truly transformative. Yet for now, our institutions are firmly grounded in outdated frames of thinking. Most of the policy that originates in Brussels is based on endless growth, markets and competition. In order to transition to a different economy and society, we must first have a vision. It is crucial that a large transformative vision gains the support of institutions and policymakers.

The commons often emerge from the bottom up; they are dependent on community processes and their logic is mostly at odds with the EU’s institutional logic. However, we believe there is an important role for EU politics and policy to create the right incentives, to remove hurdles and to support this re-emerging sector. Supporting communities means addressing the sense of losing control, identity and security. As a post-nationalist project, the EU will, ideally, undergo a change in consciousness away from nationalism, moving toward a flexible mode of citizenship that allows for multiple belongings.

This publication explores these new politics and describes the commons in different spheres of society, economy and politics. With these stories, positions, and visions we aim to inspire but also give clear direction. The book is divided into seven thematic sections. Most sections have a theoretical position and a practical case study. All sections feature influential thinkers whose voices we want to amplify. This book is comprised of the insights of more than 20 writers, activists and pioneers, standing on the shoulders of hundreds more.

Kate Raworth and George Monbiot invited us to Oxford to discuss the role of the commons in their work, which led to the second chapter. In our conversation, George Monbiot addresses the political potential of the commons as a fundamental building block for a new ‘politics of belonging’. Kate Raworth explains how the commons can help us arrive at a new, different economy, one that serves people and planet.

In the next chapter, we continue to re-think what aspects of our daily life belong to the domain of the market and the commons. Energy as a commons is presented by Commons Network co-founder David Hammerstein with a clear message: unless we accept de-growth as the only viable path forward, no amount of renewable energy will help us. Cecile Blanchet takes us on a journey to an energy cooperative in chapter 4, setting the scene for a good overview of the current debate on renewables and energy democracy.

In chapter 5, Jose Luis Vivero-Pol offers a passionate plea for food as commons. Food as a system, from farmer to our plate, from the cultural notion of food to its function in our society, should never be a commodity, he argues. In chapter 6, Thomas de Groot investigates how commoners on the ground are bringing this idea to life, in a case study of FoodTopia in Spain and BuurtBuik in The Netherlands.

Urban policies are of critical importance to the emergence of the commons. The groundbreaking work that Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione have done in the emerging field of urban commons gives us tools to do this. In chapter 7, they describe how they arrived at their vision. In chapter 8, Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou deliver an urgent appeal to architects to embrace the commons through their case study on R-Urban and ‘aaa’, a collective of autonomous architects that take the commons as the foundational principle of their work. George Monbiot returns in chapter 9, to tell the story of Barking and Dagenham, one of the only ‘Leave-voting’ boroughs in the London area. Monbiot convincingly presents this case study as the potential start of a national transformation.

A citizen-based digital sphere that works for people? In chapter 10, Sophie Bloemen, Alek Tarkowski and Paul Keller present their new vision for a digital Europe, built on core principles like decentralisation and digital commons. Democratic ownership is a path forward, away from an economic dead end. That is why, in chapter 11, we asked Trebor Scholz to write about platform cooperatives, which are a good example of democratising the internet. How hard it is to imagine a different internet, one without near-monopolies from SIlicon Valley and surveillance capitalism, is shown by Commons Network fellow Mai Ishikawa Sutton in chapter 12.

As long as we refuse to see biomedical knowledge as a commons, we will never achieve full accessibility to medicines. That is what Sophie Bloemen argues in chapter 13, in her invocation of the commons to bolster the access to medicines movement. How this might work in practice is demonstrated in chapters 14 and 15, where we present the cases of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) and the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP). Benjamin Coriat, Spring Gombe and Jean-Francois Alesandrini of DNDi brief us in detail about how a non-profit medicines developer functions as a commons. MPP-founder Ellen ’t Hoen gives us a detailed account of the vision and the process that led to the Patent Pool.

Finally, we talk to commons-thinkers Michel Bauwens, Silke Helfrich and David Bollier for an in-depth discussion about the commons movement, what commoners can do for Europe and vice versa.

*Our Commons* is first released online, as an e-book. In the summer of 2019, the team behind this work will continue the process of organic publication. We will release individual sections as booklets, addressed at different audiences. We will work on a web-version of all the texts, for easier re-use and remixing. We embrace the principle of design global, produce local or in this case, print on demand. Towards the autumn of 2019, we will start the process of translating this work in Dutch, to publish it in traditional book form in The Netherlands. We hope that *Our Commons* will inspire people to take action.