# 2. The Potential of the Commons: A Conversation with Kate Raworth and George Monbiot

by Thomas de Groot and Sophie Bloemen

It’s hard to overstate the influence Kate Raworth and George Monbiot have had on the increasing popular attention to the commons. *Doughnut Economics*, the best-selling book1 that Raworth published in 2017, sent shockwaves through the world of economics and politics. *Out of the Wreckage*, Monbiot’s best-selling book2 from 2017, struck a chord with policymakers and activists. More importantly, both writers have managed to reach an audience that goes far beyond academia or policy circles. Their ideas are discussed in mainstream media, from newspapers to talkshows, and they are quoted by politicians and activists. Both have managed to built platforms for themselves that reach milions of people. And both of them discuss the commons at length. We sat down with them in Oxford for a conversation about the problems we face and how the commons can help us make things better.

## The Doughnut and the commons

*Doughnut Economics*, according to some, represents a true paradigm shift in economics. The book fundamentally challenges the legitimacy of the market as the basis of economic thought. Moreover, *Doughnut Economics* is a j’accuse to almost all mainstream political parties that blindly take economic theories for granted and base their entire policy platforms on the narrow scope of neoliberal factoids.

"For me, the commons is a way of broadening peoples’ economic perspectives." Kate Raworth says, "And it’s much needed too. Even just that new and smaller position of economics, as just a subsystem, is too radical for most mainstream economists."

In the ‘Doughnut’, the economy is divided into four fundamental ways people provision for their wants and needs. Raworth explains: "We all know the market and the state," she explains. "Those two have been the subject of an ongoing ideological boxing match, fighting over which side can deliver the most growth. And old economics has been so focused on them, that we have lost sight of the household, the space in which caring work is done and the commons. We’ve massively over-emphasized the market and the state. The commons and the household have been neglected for decades if not centuries. So we are not very skilled at those two systems anymore."

That’s why I tell economists that if you ignore the commons, you’re ignoring one of the most vibrant spaces of the 21st century economy.

While lambasting economists and policymakers, Raworth also offers an optimistic vision full of hopeful ideas and insights. "Elinor Ostrom was briliant in showing the commons in a fishing area or a piece of farmland. Add to that the incredible potential of the digital commons. I think both her Nobel Prize and the rise of the digital commons mean that the commons is going to become resurgent. That’s why I tell economists that if you ignore the commons, you’re ignoring one of the most vibrant spaces of the 21st century economy."

## A new Politics of Belonging

*Out of the Wreckage* endeavours to lay the groundwork for a "new politics of belonging," as George Monbiot himself puts it. And just as in the Doughnut, the commons are at the heart of this new progressive narrative. "Kate talks about the commons as a starting point for her new vision on economics and I look at the commons for their potential for political renewal. We both agree that this is mostly a difference in nuance, our visions on the commons are very connected."

Monbiot carves out a path towards these new politics. "We need to build bridging communities within geographical neighbourhoods, we need a participatory economy, we need to implement democratic innovations and we need the commons. I see the commons as a re-democratising space." Prospering communities, he explains, are founded on thick networks that foster a culture of collaboration, in which "being an involved citizen" is no longer the exception, but the norm. That is when political change happens.

"Participatory democracy is crucial in reclaiming trust in our political systems. It allows us to re-gain a sense of ownership over our political systems." Monbiot describes the current representative system of democracy as "preposterous". "We vote for a government every four years and that government then assumes a mandate for everything it wants to do for the next four years, even for things that were not in their manifestos. It is an assumption of consent. No wonder we are alienated from politics, no wonder we don’t trust our leaders anymore."

Participatory democracy is crucial in reclaiming trust in our political systems. It allows us to re-gain a sense of ownership over our political systems.

Monbiot says participatory budgeting is another essential step towards political renewal. In the Brazilian city of Porto Allegre, for instance, people of many different backgrounds re-claimed a role in policymaking by pioneering new ways of setting the municipal budget together. As Monbiot says, "if you can do it there, you can do it anywhere."

The final step is economic transformation. "Very much in line with Kate’s vision, we need to start shifting resources out of the market and the state and into the commons. Let’s start by moving land out of the hands of the private sector and into the hands of the community and the commons."

## The Potential of the Digital Commons

The commons are the protagonist in the new story that Raworth and Monbiot are trying to tell. They offer an untapped potential in economic terms and they form the cornerstone of the new political discourse that is emerging from the wreckage of opaque representative democracy and free market fundamentalism. Their hopeful message is that we are only at the beginning.

That promise is exemplified in new technology, according to Raworth. "Twenty-first century technologies and the digital commons offer incredible potential. Look at how we generate energy, how we run machines, how we communicate and how we create and share knowledge. These forces were always centralized, by design. Energy came from an oil rig, production was done in a factory, communications came from an operator’s switchboard and knowledge was held under patent and copyright.

"Now, thanks to distributive technologies like solar panels on your own roof or 3D printing, you can literally own your own production system. Communication has also been transformed into a distributive force, thanks to smartphones that allow each and everyone to become a node onto the network. Even knowledge is now being re-distributed, thanks to Creative Commons and commons-based licenses. All these developments completely flip the idea that you have to separate the workers and the means of production. The production means used to be so big that no one, apart from the upperclass, could own or manage their own. But now, they are so small, they fit in your pocket. This is revolutionary."

The first internet was open source and non-commercial and slightly utopian. The second version of the Internet was captured. So let’s see the possibility and make the internet 3.0 truly distributive.

Raworth continued: "We’ve only just begun to see how the commons work. But we already know that it is near zero-marginal cost to operate in the digital commons. So it offers huge opportunities. All we have to do is learn the skills needed to make something, to collaborate. That is the art of the commons. The potential is unprecedented. I feel a great excitement about what’s going to happen."

Does that mean that technology will solve everything? "No, not at all," says Raworth. "There is a total bifurcation of how this can go. Right now it is not going in the right way. Networks have the potential to be distributive, but because of their architecture, they have just as big a potential to be captured. By itself, it is never going to go well. All this centralised infrastructure, these captured networks, that is really just ‘Internet 2.0’. That’s not the end of the Internet. We are just beginning. The first internet was open source and non-commercial and slightly utopian. The second version of the Internet was captured. So let’s see the possibility and make the internet 3.0 truly distributive. There is nothing inherent about these networks that says they will be captured or distributive. We have to put in place regulation that make it distributive and keep it distributive."

## The commons fallacy

Monbiot and Raworth also agree on their analysis of the misunderstandings about the commons. The commons are not tragic, as Garrett Hardin had famously asserted3. Or as Monbiot puts it: "Garrett Hardin, as it turns out, had never actually encountered a commons in real life before. He didn’t even know how they worked in theory, let alone in practice. He didn’t even know what a commons was. He mistook a commons for an open access regime. An open access regime is something entirely different. Oceanic fisheries are open access, for instance. Anyone can plunge in, drop a net and catch some fish. As a result, they are massively overfished."

Successful commons are tightly regulated systems. Hardin presumed that a commons has no regulation. In some ways, argues Monbiot, a commons is more effectively regulated than either a state or a market system. "Because you have the whole community involved in decisions, making sure that those decisions are equitable, that they are made by the collective mind, and that they reflect the needs of the whole community."

Neoliberalism claims that the market is the only legitimate sphere and that when states seek to change social outcomes, they act illegitimately. That belief has been internalised by us all.

## "We Are in Control"

Democracy and its flaws constitute another unifying element of the vision of these two thinkers. This is a topic that is ever more controversial in times of Brexit. But Monbiot is adamant. "The Brexit campaign was won using the slogan ‘Take Back Control’. This was actually a really good slogan. There is an urgent need felt by many people in this country and in many other countries to take back control over their lives."

Monbiot says governments have become managerial and technocratic. "We have less and less purchase on the decision-making that affects our lives. We believe less and less in the government as a force for social change. We trust less those who govern us. Neoliberalism claims that the market is the only legitimate sphere and that when states seek to change social outcomes, they act illegitimately. That belief has been internalised by us all. It is very hard for us to shake. We have come to lose the idea that we can change our lives through voting in governments that are more *dirigiste*."

Democratising our systems means granting control over decision-making processes, treating people as intelligent citizens, according to Monbiot. "Evidence from all over the world shows that people respond like intelligent citizens when you treat them as such. We make informed choices because we recognise that power has been placed in our hands. This can lead to remarkable phenomena. At one point, in Porto Allegre, people took to the streets demanding their taxes were *raised*. It seems bizarre, but it makes perfect sense: if it takes you three hours everyday to get to work, you feel incentivised to improve the public transport system. The idea of re-engaging people in decision-making processes is one of the great strengths of the commons: we are in control."

Mainstream economics only looks at people as highly individualized, ego-driven creatures. But there is so much more to us than just the homo economicus.

Monbiot concludes that democratising our systems is empowering. "It means giving back meaning, purpose and utility. This is about the fundamentals of human flourishing. Without meaning, purpose and utility, we fall into despair. Feeling useful to others, and as an active citizen, you feel useful to yourself and to the people around you. This is a fundamental human need, wanting to feel useful. People get depressed when they feel useless."

## Re-Frame Ourselves to Re-Frame Reality

To fundamentally change the system, both authors argue, a paradigm shift is needed. For Raworth, that shift happens when we change the way we look at ourselves. "Look at human nature, look at all the different characteristics we carry within ourselves. Mainstream economics only looks at people as highly individualized, ego-driven creatures. But there is so much more to us than just the homo economicus. In the household we are partners or parents, neighbours or friends. In relation to the state we are voters, protesters, residents, service users. And in relation to the commons we are creators, repairers, makers and stewards. Economics tells us we are only labourer, consumer and producer. That is a very narrow depiction."

The way we frame reality, re-enforces that reality, Raworth explains. "There are traits they tell us we have. And when we are told over and over again about those traits, they are activated and stimulated. It becomes self-fulfilling. But there is a much richer story to be told, if you look at the other traits of human beings. That to me is the beginning of the paradigm shift. Start with a different picture, a much richer picture."

## The Predistribution of Wealth

Raworth’s *Doughnut* offers another major discursive shift that politicians and economists alike should take heed of. "These days, most progressive economists and politicians talk about redistribution and taxes. What they are really doing is just accepting that the system is the way it is, and that taxes are needed to even it out, from those that have a lot to those that do not have enough. They debate what the top tax rate should be, or what a minimum living wage should be. But we should go beyond redistributing income, to predistributing the sources of wealth creation. Do we agree that fundamentally, wealth lies within the potential of every human being? Then everyone should have a stake in the sources of wealth creation."

Access to knowledge is access to means of wealth creation. We don’t have to own the idea, we collectively add to the idea, we share it, we remix it, and by doing so, we collective create new ideas.

Predistributive measures are those that prevent the rise of economic inequalities before they occur, as opposed to state measures that try to mitigate them after the fact, through taxation and other similar actions. Examples of predistributive design of economic systems, Raworth claims, are abound. "We have just left behind us a century of corporate ownership. The worker used to get a wage and the capitalist would get his dividend. Thanks to the decentralisation of the means of production, we now see the potential for small-scale employee-owned enterprises. There, the return on the business stays with those who did the work."

Access to knowledge is another good example, Raworth says. "Access to knowledge is access to means of wealth creation. We don’t have to own the idea, we collectively add to the idea, we share it, we remix it, and by doing so, we collective create new ideas."

## Shaping the Commons in Europe

Our conversation could not have been more timely with the European Elections around the corner. Both Raworth and Monbiot have clear ideas about what the EU could do to advance the commons. "I think the EU is uniquely placed to tackle environmental breakdown by transcending national interests", Monbiot says. "This is an existential crisis that nations have singularly failed to respond to effectively. This is not just about climate breakdown, which everybody thinks of first, but actually, there are natural breakdowns happening even faster than that. The loss of fertile soil, the loss of ecosystems cascading in ecological collapse in many parts of the world. Some of them accelerated by policies like the Common Agricultural Policy and the Commons Fishery Policy. The horrendous impact of biofuel, like biodiesel coming from palm oil."

The EU needs to recognise the existence of the commons and make space for them. The commons is about networks. Networks need nodes to connect. The EU needs to conceptualize the commons, facilitate those nodes and be a partner state to the commons.

Raworth agrees. "At the European level, you have the possibility of scale. For instance, if a small town wants to build a circular economy, it will be hampered by the fact that they are tied into a national network of goods and services and regulations. The EU can change this, to empower local towns to be the change. The EU could ban all but three sorts of plastics and require them to be recycled. They could ban landfills. This would have such an impact, that it would create market opportunities. This offers opportunities of scale for entrepreneurs."

At best, Monbiot argues, the EU should be a truly transnational organisation. "That organisation should be able to manage the transnational commons. Right now the EU treats some parts of the commons like an open access regime, like the atmosphere. We need to turn that into a commons. And only institutions that transcend national interests can make that shift. Only the EU can start turning our open access dump into a commons in which we feel we all have a stake and we all a responsibility."

"I agree," Raworth says, "the EU needs to recognise the existence of the commons and make space for them. The commons is about networks. Networks need nodes to connect. The EU needs to conceptualize the commons, facilitate those nodes and, as Michel Bauwens would say4, be a partner state to the commons. I would add that something that the EU can do that private companies will never do, is to have a vision of a place we want to get to. This is why I like Mariana Mazzucato’s work, talking about the role of the state to foster a vision5, to shape the direction we are going in."

## Bringing Down the Old and Promoting the New

Both Raworth and Monbiot emphasize that we cannot merely depend on politicians and experts to bring forth the change that is needed. "Any sustained political change is going to have to be underpinned by social movements," says Monbiot. "They are the backbone of societal change. And they always will be."

"This transition we talk about is not easily going to come about," says Raworth. "*The old* is going to hang on for as long as it can to the power it has and to the narratives that it holds. A lot of energy will have to go into bringing down the old and promoting the new. Each of us have to decide what energizes us, where we choose to work. I personally like bringing up the new. There is nothing more powerful than showing a real example and saying: ‘Yes, this is real, this is happening, it obviously works, so stop saying it will never work’.

"Some social movements are very much against the old, and we really need them too. Others are focusing on making the new thing happen, and we need those too. More than a hundred cities are now producing more than 70 percent of their energy from solar and hydro. Let’s tell those stories of regenerative practices that are coming into play to say: this is happening.

"So, old power will absolutely resist this”, says Raworth. "We’ll see that the old and the new will ride along side each other for a while, in a very uncomfortable way. And there will be continued disruptions and challenges, like Brexit. Or new technologies. Or schools and students on climate strike. The question is, will we allow these disruptions to be captured by the old powers? Brexit is a perfect example of this. The Conservative and the Labour parties both have exceptionally positive hopes for their versions of Brexit, and those are both unrealistic. Will disruptions be captured by the old powers to extend themselves, or can we harness them for the new?"