# 16. On the Commons and Europe

with Michel Bauwens, Silke Helfrich and David Bollier

Michel Bauwens, Silke Helfrich and David Bollier are three of the most reknowned commons-thinkers in the world. Michel Bauwens is the co-founder of the P2P Foundation, one of the most important organisations in the commons movement. He is the author of countless important publications about the commons. Together with Vasilis Kostakis and Alex Pazaitis, he just released a new book1 titled *Peer To Peer: The Commons Manifesto* (2019). Silke Helfrich and David Bollier co-founded the Commons Strategies Group with Michel Bauwens. Helfrich and Bollier also co-wrote two important works about the commons in recent years: *The Wealth of the Commons* (2012) and *Patterns of Commoning* (2015). In September of 2019, the duo will release their latest book2: *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (2019), a truly seminal work for anyone interested in the commons. David Bollier is also a board member of Commons Network.

***Thomas de Groot****: Out of all the major crises we face today, which one is the most urgent?*

**Silke Helfrich:**  You mean: Which are the most important factors that *led to* the interconnected crises we are facing?

**David Bollier:** Good point, because from the perspective of the commons, the question is self-contradictory. The power of commoning is precisely that authority and action are distributed. Diverse players in particular local settings can determine their own fates, using rules that make sense for them in their special contexts. So even theoretically there is no ’single, most urgent struggle’. There are always multiple arenas of meaningful struggle and one can never know in advance which one will shock and surprise everyone with impressive results. This is also known as resilience.

**Michel Bauwens:** David is right. Nonetheless, the most urgent question today is undoubtedly climate change, which is itself an expression of deeper structural problems that we must tackle at the same time as a context for solving climate disruption.

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***TdG****: What are these deeper structural or systemic problems?*

**MB:** In my analysis, the structural problem is threefold. First of all, we believe that nature and natural resources, that we unfortunately see as being ‘outside’ ourselves, are infinite resources to be used for human need and private profit. Second, we believe that resources that are eminently shareable, and should be shared to advance humankind, should be made artificially scarce, so we privatize and marketize knowledge, making it unavailable for advancing the common good and solving issues more quickly. Finally, we develop our societies in ways that create inequality and increasing social instability, leading to more and more authoritarian outcomes.

**SH:** I’d like to highlight one of the aspects Michel points to. The deeper problem is the way we think; or more precisely, the way we are taught to think. We are immersed in an epistemological delirium – as Bruno Latour would put it. An example: when we think of nature as a resource to be used for our purposes, we imply that it is separated from us! Framed that way, everything comes down to a management problem – the mangement of some*thing*. And then we manage and manage and at the end of the day, we get burned out, suffering from that cultivated seperation. So, the root cause of the problems mentioned by Michel, and of many other problems, is that we ignore the most important element that makes us truly thrive: relatedness, connection.

**DB:** Exactly. Any of us could prioritize certain problems, but the more critical challenge is identifying the most suitable framework for understanding them. Climate change and inequality are obvious mega-problems, but what really matters is adopting the correct ontological premises and epistemology. This is so important because we need to frame our problems right – identify their most important dimensions -- if we want to address them effectively.

**SH**: Right, this means that we need to go a level deeper and look at the way we conceive the world and conceive ourselves as human beings. If these conceptions are too limited or shallow, or if they presume that human beings are merely hyper-rational, utility-maximizing machines the way economics does, the “solutions” that follow will be based on an erroneous foundation.

**DB**: True. In our new book, *Free Fair and Alive*, we call this ‘the OntoSeed’. If the seed we plant is ‘flawed’, the yield will be disappointing – or worse, doomed to fail.

**SH**: It’s like the DNA that contains a certain programme that unfolds and we have only a certain impact on the results it brings about. If it is structurally flawed, there is almost nothing we can do about it.

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In their book2 *Free, Fair and Alive*, Bollier and Helfrich write*:* “Enacting Peer Governance needs to be a living, developmental process in itself. Therefore, instead of offering a full set of prescriptive formulas, our patterns amount to procedural guidelines that enable a stepwise, adaptable path for developing a commons. Enacting a commons through Peer Governance resembles the way in which DNA provides general guidance, but not strict instructions, for the autonomous development and differentiation of an embryo. “Does the DNA contain a full description of the organism to which it will give rise?” asks British biologist Lewis Wolpert. “The answer is no. The genome contains instead a program of instructions for making the organism — a generative program …” So, the bad news is that there is no blueprint, no panacea. Peer Governance is not a prescriptive, rule-driven program for fabricating commons or managing resources. But the good news is that Peer Governance is a generative process. It is a reliable means by which commoners can build authentic, living relationships among themselves, and in so doing, develop a coherent, stable commons.” [TdG]

**DB**: Indeed. The ‘OntoSeed’, in turn, affects the structural analyses that are possible and how we can respond. Conventional market-based solutions, international treaties, and state regulation -- for example -- are not going to overcome deep, systemic problems because they are based on the same premises that gave rise to the problems in the first place. They presume homo economicus as an idealized model of a human being, which has proven itself incapable of responding to both scientific evidence and urgent collective-action needs.

**SH**: And this homo economicus is conceived as an isolated being that focuses on self-maximizing its individual gain. The problem is, that by believing in this story and shaping our institutions accordingly, we actually *become* a homo economicus. But this conception of ourselves as human beings will not ever make us realise our full potential.

Knowledge, code and design can simply be shared widely and generously, because they become more useful for everybody as we share them. The only thing that prevents us from sharing knowledge generously is the socio-economic model that surrounds us, aka capitalism.

***TdG****: What do the commons have to offer in response?*

**MB:** We have made substantial progress in recreating commons of shared knowledge, and have started redistribution mechanisms, like urban commons, using commons-centric ecosystems, but it is vital to move the commons-centric economic and social systems to actual material production, as is now already happening in food and energy. Why is this vital: First of all because mutualization and pooling of knowledge, makes sure that all innovations and solutions can be replicated, learned from, and adapted, wherever they are needed. Next, because mutualization of physical resources and provisioning systems has an enormous capacity to diminish the human footprint while maintaining complex social systems for human wellbeing. And finally, because the commons-based model of cosmo-local production3, whereby ‘all that is light is global and shared and all that is heavy is localized to the extent possible’, is also one that can regenerate local and bioregional economies, where we can move from extractive economic models, to generative economic models, that heal the earth, its resources and communities. Transforming our means of production and distribution will be vital, by integrating all positive and negative, social and ecological externalities, at all levels of human decision-making.

**SH:** I agree in general, but I think that we have to pay a lot of attention to the way we conceptualize things. An example: the idea of “mutualizing knowledge” does not make sense to me, at least not in a commons context. Knowledge, code and design can simply be shared widely and generously, because they become more useful for everybody as we share them. The only thing that prevents us from sharing knowledge generously is the socio-economic model that surrounds us, aka capitalism. It is only in this context that it is functional to make what is abundant – such as knowledge – artificially scarce. The purpose for doing this, of course, is to ensure that potential competitors are kept at distance and that everything can be traded on the market. Markets *require* scarcity in order to work!

Furthermore, we need to be very careful, almost meticulous, not only with the concepts we refer to, but with our wording. We can hardly be truly transformative if we use the language of market economics, state power, and political liberalism. I actually think that we need to come up with a language that is able to capture the essence of commoning and its transformative power. Rather than isolated I’s and homo economicus, we are “Nested I’s!” – biological and social creatures with deep relational connections and dependencies.

By asserting a coherent alternative vision, the commons as a discourse begins the process of changing politics and culture. It opens up a space for talking about practical alternatives that escape the destructive logic of neoliberal capitalism and state power as historically exercised.

**DB:** The great potential of the commons lies in helping us re-imagine what human beings actually are -- and then to re-orient our perspectives, policies, laws, and institutions accordingly. The commons is at one level a discourse and political history, but more fundamentally it is a set of social practices and ethical values that honor fairness, self-determination, inclusion, and responsibility aligned with entitlements. The commons is pre-political in the sense that commoning is an ancient impulse of humanity. It tends to precede any political system and function somewhat autonomously.

The commons points to a different vision of how society might be ordered, relative to modernity and capitalism. It emphasizes peer governance and provisioning at a more local, participatory level. It prioritizes fairness and inclusion. It is not about maximum material throughput -- growth, consumerism, profit, GDP -- but about responsible long-term stewardship on behalf of all. By asserting a coherent alternative vision, the commons as a discourse begins the process of changing politics and culture. It opens up a space for talking about practical alternatives that escape the destructive logic of neoliberal capitalism and state power as historically exercised.

***TdG****: What is the role of institutions?*

**MB:** The role of institutions, and thus of European institutions, must change their focus from their functioning as market-centric state forms, and the EU certainly has very strong neoliberal biases which block many necessary pathways, towards commons-centric public-social partnerships.

**SH**: Which we could call Commons/Public Partnerships, commons first, of course.

**MB**: Yes. And territorial common good institutions can eliminate the multitude of obstacles standing in the way of collaboration and mutualization, and facilitate the autonomy of civil society actors at the personal and collective level.

**DB:** As commons grow in size and influence, some sort of *modus vivendi* is needed between the state (law, bureaucracy, policy, representative law-making) and the very different logic and ethic of commoning, which is more ecologically and socially grounded. The state may have legality on its side, but the commons more often has social and moral legitimacy.

Inste*ad of presuming that markets are the only efficient way to produce wealth (when in fact, they are often merely extractive and predatory for private gain), policymakers need to recognize that commons are value-generating social systems.*

***TdG****: What can commoners do to change these institutions?*

**MB:** Beyond public-commons cooperation protocols and mechanisms, there is also a necessary process of the commonification of public services, so that the public resources become inalienable and governed ‘poly-centrically’ by the multiple stakeholders.

**SH:** Yeah, we need to -- metaphorically speaking -- put up stickers everywhere and shout out: “This is not for sale, because it is ours.” But we also need to get clarity about who is “us” and what rights and obligations this process of commonification entails. After all, we should not forget that commons comes from Latin cum + munus. Cum (English “with”) denotes the joining of elements. Munus — which is also found in the word “municipality” — means service, duty, obligation, and sometimes gift. All terms that conjoin cum and munus, such as communion, community, communism, and, of course, communication, point to a co-obligation — or a linkage between use rights, benefits, and duty.

**MB:** This means that poly-centric governance includes a special role for all citizens but also specifically for transition agents which can prove their impacts. We must overcome the merely competitive public procurement processes and mobilize the whole society towards the eco-social transition. Contributory democracy means that multi-governed institutions can give a place at the decision-making table to commons-oriented civic communities that are exemplars for the transition. Collective institutions like the EU must become commons-facilitating institutions, that start judging projects and initiatives on their regenerative, common good impact, and are thereby able to promote and finance regenerative activity, by mobilizing the whole society and not just firms, and by creating a planning framework of global thresholds and allocations, which can be used granularly at every level, so that production of human needs (and all other beings) can proceed within planetary boundaries and resource boundaries. The role of territorial organizations like the EU is to focus also on capacity building, so that commons engagement can be undertaken by all citizens at their full capacity. One of their central tasks is to help strengthen ‘commons of capabilities’.

**DB:** But how can state power and commoning coexist? That is a significant challenge that commoners and European policymakers alike must address. A first priority should be to decriminalize commoning in cases where it is illegal, such as in seed-sharing and certain forms of information-sharing. We also need new types of law to affirmatively support commoning. It has taken ingenious "legal hacks" such as Creative Commons licenses, the General Public License for free software, and community land trusts to make certain forms of sharing explicitly legal and practical. Instead of presuming that markets are the only efficient way to produce wealth (when in fact, they are often merely extractive and predatory for private gain), policymakers need to recognize that commons are value-generating social systems. Even better, the commons usually do so without the "externalities" that businesses routinely impose upon the environment, communities, and future generations.

***TdG****: What would a transition of these roles and mentalities of institutions look like?*

**MB:** Climate change, the vital necessary transition towards a mode of production and distribution that is fully compatible with the maintenance of life, the health of the planet, is certainly the fight of our times, but it cannot succeed without more social equity and massive sharing of knowledge. Which means that it becomes a vast process of eco-social transition processes, not just focused on mere decarbonisation. One of the associated priorities is to create means of managing human production that fully integrate externalties, and therefore, the accounting and management of externalities is also a vital part of the transition. Humans must become thermo-dynamically informed in their productive decision-making and society as a whole must become life-centric, not only for humans but for all life and beings, and future generations. This goes well beyond mitigation towards generative and regenerative models. None of this can succeed without giving commons, a vastly more important place in the way society and its institutions are organized. The common good, and nature, must have a voice, and we need institutions that allow for this voice to be heard, not occassionally but as the vast ground of all human decisions.

**DB:** An added benefit of a commons-based strategy is greater resilience and popular empowerment by distributing authority more widely and at appropriate levels (the idea of "subsidiarity"), rather than concentrating too much power with politicians and centralized bureaucracies. By deconcentrating power, state assistance to commons would in effect promote greater democratic participation and control while reducing large-scale abuses of power and ecological harm.

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***TdG****: Can you give me some examples of practices that have inspired you recently?*

**DB:**  Commons/public partnerships in which the state actively and in good faith assists the work of commons, have already been mentioned. Imagine expanding the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative, DNDi, which is a partnership among commons, state institutions, and private companies to reduce the costs of drug R&D and distribution. DNDi releases medically important drugs under royalty-free, non-exclusive licenses so that benefits so that the drugs can be made available everywhere inexpensively.

Or consider how the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team has helped various states in the wake of natural disasters, such as the earthquake in Haiti. HOT is a commons-driven solution that brings together volunteer hackers to produce invaluable web maps showing first-responders and victims where to find hospitals, water, and other necessities.

The System of Rice Intensification is a global open-source community that trades advice and knowledge about the agronomy of growing rice. Working totally outside of conventional multilateral channels, SRI has brought together farmers in Sri Lanka and Cuba, India and Indonesia, to improve their rice yields by two or three-fold.

The state could help decommodify land and make it more available to ordinary people through community land trusts. If this is the agenda, special attention should be paid to developing commons-friendly infrastructure. This could be hugely beneficial, as seen in community-owned Wi-Fi like Guifi.net, free and open source software, and regional food systems that empower smaller farmers and enterprises.

Developing legal hacks that can provide legal recognition to commoning is vital. Platform cooperatives that offer alternatives to the "gig economy" (Uber) are one innovation that needs support. So are certain distributed ledger technologies such as Holochain, which aims to be a commons-friendly alternative to the blockchain as emboded in Bitcoin.

Ultimately, the most urgent struggle is not to "pick battles to fight" with the state or ideological adversaries, or to attempt to seize state power, an achievement that may be Pyrrhic, as the experience of Syriza has shown. The most urgent struggle is to build out the world of commoning as a parallel social economy with its own stability, autonomy, and effectiveness. That is the foundational base upon which a transformational politics can be built.

**SH:** Exactly. State institutions are misconstrued as solutions when they are often part of the problem. Representative democracy purports to be fair and effective, but because it is hierarchical and corrupted by money – the wider problem of ‘Governing-through-Money’ – it is not TRULY representative and centralized bureaucracies have trouble being responsive to dynamic, local circumstances. I think we have to ask ourselves if commons and commoning can be reconciled with representative democracy and bureaucracy, and if so, how. The challenge for all of us is to learn to think like a commoner and to feel like a commoner. This basically means to learn to really feel and recognize that we are inescapably related to each other – to see that we are interdependent on each other and that my personal development depends on the development of yours, and vice versa.