

# TAKING BACK OWNERSHIP

## TRANSFORMING CAPITAL INTO COMMONS

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**MOLLY SCOTT CATO &  
 UGO MATTEI**

Whether in the natural or virtual world – the wildly diverging ways in which resources are conceived of and managed shows us that a commons-based approach, rather than one following market logics, can lead to dramatically different outcomes.

### GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL:

**What would your definition of the commons be?**

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**UGO MATTEI:** The concept of the commons cannot be defined in straight terms; I simply use the following definition: commons are resources managed in the interest of future generations.

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** I agree; it is the use that defines whether a resource is commons or not. Let's take for example the provision of livelihood: you can use your resources to secure the basic necessities, such as food, water, shelter, and clothing in many different ways; if you approach it in a form of 'enclosure for exchange' that means that you have done it in a market way, if you approach it in form of use for subsistence, then you have done it in a commons way.

**What is the connection between the commons and ecology?**

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**UGO MATTEI:** The connection is pretty straightforward. We are used to living in a legal and socioeconomic system that is based on the extreme individualisation of society; an individualisation that favours technological transformations and capitalist extraction. The way in which this process has evolved throughout modernity is clearly not sustainable, as it assumes infinite resources on a finite planet. Any attempt to change direction, and to create new forms of social organisation requires us to create new intellectual categories. The idea of the commons has been certainly the most promising effort to overcome the capitalist mindset.

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** In the market model, resources are privately owned and scarce, while a commons model adopts a framing in which resources are abundant and shared socially. The reason we want to shift from the market model is that once you enable the enclosure of resources and their transformation into saleable units of goods and services, and once you create an incentive to exploit them more, serious ecological problems will follow. Whereas if you accept that the resources we all depend on are common property, and that we have a social incentive to cooperate in order to share them, we will obviously manage them in a more sustainable way.

**UGO MATTEI:** We are challenging the assumption that value corresponds to exchange and capitalist accumulations, and the alternative that we are looking for is a view that puts the ecological community and the sharing of resources at the centre, in a model in which satisfaction is derived from use, rather than exchange. This of course requires us to completely rethink the free trade agreements, for example, that are based on the opposite presumption, as well as many other capitalistic structures.

### Are the commons that we find in nature different from those in the digital world?

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**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** Not really. As the examples of pollinating insects, wind, or sunshine show, almost every commons can be conceptualised as something that has a market value, and this works both ways: anything that you can make money out of, you can also conceptualise as a commons.

The classic example of the commons in the digital world is Wikipedia. Everybody uses Wikipedia, many of us write new Wikipedia articles, and we also often donate money to Wikipedia so that it can keep on working. It is a very good example of a platform that works because people are sharing. The opposite of the digital commons is something like Facebook, where we all put our photos online, but the platform is enclosed, and the money that is made goes to Mark Zuckerberg and his team. Imagine how much money Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales could have gotten if he had decided to privatise Wikipedia, but he deliberately didn't do it.

**UGO MATTEI:** Pretending that there is an ontological difference between nature, science, technology, and politics in the current era is nothing more than an ideology. Due to the project of modernity, today we have an enormous amount of capital in the world, but almost no commons anymore. So the

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next project should be to transform some of this capital into commons. And clearly the information economy, such as the internet, is the first kind of capital that we can win back in the form of the commons. But this requires a huge transformation, because even Wikipedia, the only significant example of commons on the web, is dwarfed by Twitter or Facebook.

**You said that with the commons we need to find an alternative to the market model. But don't we also need an alternative to the state model?**

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**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** I disagree with the three-way distinction of public, private, and social enterprise models. For me, we are all living in a world that is shaped by the market, and the fact that we provide some services through a public system doesn't really take us away from this basic concept. So when I talk about the market model, I don't just mean the private sector, I am talking about an economic model in which we are focused on exchange rather than production for subsistence, and the state is an accomplice.

**Is a commons regime an exclusive regime, or should it coexist with capitalism?**

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**UGO MATTEI:** If we started with a blank sheet I would say that the whole notion of the commons is a foundational notion, as foundational as the notion of individual rights for today's capitalist economy. It is a completely different way to conceptualise law and social organisations – and in a utopian world, the commons could actually be seen as an alternative to today's economic system.

There is, however, a more realistic perspective in which neither the public nor the private sector can yield to the commons easily. These sectors are very resilient. Since the Nobel-prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom started talking about the commons, things have gone

in a completely different direction than we would have desired. There has been even more ‘technologisation’ and digitalisation, and the only way for the commons to prevail would be to live together with the capitalist organisation of things. In order to do so, commons have to be very smartly steered into some of the institutional settings that we have out there. We have to use what we have, in a way that exposes the contradiction of the capitalist economy, in the hope that it will fall at some point.

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** Here I think we have a bit of a disagreement, because the Green approach would be to say that you don’t wait for the collapse of the capitalist system, but you create commons-based alternatives wherever you have the chance to do so. That in itself provides us with a sense of learning and understanding, and a different consciousness around those economic activities that facilitate the transcendence of the capitalist system into something better. There are already some smaller examples, all over Europe. In Stroud, the town that I live in, we have set up a community-supported agriculture system that provides food for 200 contributing families; we pay rent for the land, but that is only a minimal rent. It is an example of a system that is based on a commons approach to provide vegetables to the community. It operates within a capitalist society, but it has a different understanding of how the economy should work.

**UGO MATTEI:** I don’t think there is a fundamental disagreement. We look at our possibilities, and try to construct a new form of consciousness which is necessary for a larger, revolutionary enterprise.

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** I agree, but instead of “revolutionary”, I would rather use the word “transformative”. And the internet could be a good terrain for this transformation, as today’s young people intrinsically understand how a commons economy might work. When they use and share digital goods, they are outraged by restrictions such as geoblocking (when access to content is restricted to users in some geographical areas). The internet also provides lots of opportunities to learn and conceptualise. Just look at Facebook: the value of Facebook is created by the users who contribute their content, there is only a very tiny amount of innovation involved in creating the algorithm and coming up with the initial idea. Nevertheless, this initial innovation was rewarded a million times over. I think we now need to make a claim that Facebook should be owned by the people who use it – like in the case of the Wikipedia model. I think it is outrageous that Zuckerberg can pretend to be a great philanthropist who solves the problems of the world, using money he enclosed from stuff I put on Facebook.

**UGO MATTEI:** It would be very important to look openly at the fact that Zuckerberg con-



trols those large servers that store our data, and to figure out how to get back control over them. The governments are not going to do that for us, because they are in the pocket of corporations. So you have to use people power but that would require a level of consciousness and activity that the young people you are talking about don't have.

The millennial kids are cyborgs, they think about themselves as individuals, rather than parts of a community, and are living their lives connected to these machines. It seems very unlikely that critical thoughts can come out of that generation. I think the wide use of smart phones and computers has a similar effect on people as heroin had in the 70s: it keeps complete control over generational aspirations, they are addicted to these things, and now they don't talk, and don't organise anymore. Don't tell me the Arab Spring was something that proves this statement wrong, after five years we have a clear understanding of how little the Arab Spring has achieved.

**Can the commons be useful for the European project? Can they be a driver for further integration?**

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**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** The majority of European politicians are in support of an economic model that clearly isn't working, while many citizens are losing confidence. Today, we can find two groups in the European Parliament who are advocating for a new economic model, but there is an important difference between the two of them: the GUE/NGL – Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left would see a bigger role for public ownership and social ownership, while we [the Greens/EFA Group] would advocate for commons, community ownership, and the social management of resources.

**UGO MATTEI:** I have been very perplexed about this for quite some time. One part of me wants to think that the EU is still worth saving, and believes that the commons could be used to gain some kind of constitutional balance. But it is not going to be easy. Today



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there is a very bad constitutional balance in liberal Western constitutional democracies. If tomorrow we wanted to socialise Facebook, we would have to go over many phases of social litigation, and the likelihood of losing would be extremely high. On the other hand, if any European government decided to privatise something they could do that without any form of control. If, for example, the Italian government is selling the post offices, there is no legal action possible for me to stop the process, even though it is my property as a taxpayer. An important role of the commons would therefore be to ensure that public assets are entitled at least to the same protection as private assets. This is why we need to advocate for a fundamental transformation in the constitutions of Europe, changes that would allow some kind of reconfiguration of the relationship between the people of Europe and their belongings.

A major worry for me concerning the EU is that I don't know whether the commons are compatible with a system in which the centre of power is so far away from where things actually happen; half a billion people in a single market, governed by the same laws and the same institutions seems too much to me. The commons are based on the philosophy of 'small is beautiful', whilst in contrast, the European project is huge.

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** I disagree, I think that we need citizen participation at all levels: at the global level we need to solve climate issues,

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set common rules for corporations, and so on, then we can start with tax-policy at the European level, in order to stop corporations from making profits by avoiding taxes. Part of what we need to do is find out which powers should be exercised at which levels.

**There is a liberal argument according to which most people only start caring about the environment once they become rich with the help of capitalism – and indeed we can see that Green parties are most successful in the richer Member States of the EU. How can we overcome this problem when advocating for the commons?**

**MOLLY SCOTT CATO:** I think this is rubbish; if we look at where the environment has been destroyed less, those are the poorer countries of the world, and even the destruction that has happened there is due to the Anglo-Saxon and other European colonisers and post-colonisers. I think it is a complacent Eurocentric view to say that. But I take the point about our own societies; in Europe we haven't been really successful in reaching out to working-class communities, but I think that's mainly due to the way Greens speak and debate, and I think it is also patronising to say that that the poor are not concerned about the environment because they absolutely are, and if they haven't found a way to express that through politics, that's because the political system is failing them.

**UGO MATTEI:** This is a new, revamped form of the old, disproven trickle-down argument.<sup>1</sup> I think claiming that only the rich care about the environment is completely unfounded. California, where the environmentally-friendly Tesla electric cars were invented, has an ecological footprint of six, which means if everybody else in the world were to live like the Californians, we would need six planets to reproduce the resources that we use. Burkina Faso, in contrast, has an environmental footprint of 0.1. These are the facts; all the rest is bullshit.

<sup>1</sup> The promise that an increase in salaries for high income earners will benefit the rest of the economy as well, as their increased income and wealth will filter through to all sections in society.

If the Greens are doing poorly in some countries that's because of their poor leaders, at least in Italy, where the Greens existed as a small clique of people who had no capacity to talk to anyone who was different from them. But I admit that there is a problem due to the very strong relationship between the structure of representative democracy and the capitalist society, due to which a movement that doesn't follow a capitalist mindset – someone who, for example, thinks in terms of the commons, rather than of the individual – will find it very difficult to be represented by the process of representative democracy. It is very difficult to impose commons from the top down, as the commons are a bottom-up platform, it has to come from the people, and the most conducive thing we can do now is to create some commons literacy, to talk to people, and to free them from the technological cage in which their heads are stuck.

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#### MOLLY SCOTT CATO

is the first Green MEP for the South West of England and Gibraltar, elected in May 2014. She is a leading member of Green House think tank, and formerly professor of strategy and sustainability at the University of Roehampton. She has written several books including *Green Economics* (2009), *Environment and Economy* (2011) and *The Bioregional Economy* (2012) as well as numerous academic papers.



#### UGO MATTEI

is a professor of law in Turin and at the University of California, Hastings. He is the author of *Plunder, When the Rule of Law is Illegal* (with Laura Nader), and most recently *The Ecology of Law* with Fritjof Capra. In 2011 he authored *Bene Comuni: Un Manifesto*, a manifesto for the commons that could provide the theoretical basis for the current wave of resistance against neoliberalism. He has been a leading promoter of the Italian referendum against the privatisation of water.