

Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics

A “SOCIAL IMAGINARY” OF THE COMMONS: Its Ontology and Politics

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I. INTRODUCTION: ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REALITIES

In many advanced economies, the recent recession and uneven recovery brought to the surface systemic economic problems and worsened growing political polarisation. Economic difficulties include widening income and asset inequality, falling real wages, diminishing chances of upward mobility, reduced job opportunities, and increasing personal debt. Many not yet burdened by these fear that they or their children soon will be. Sources of these problems include globalisation of manufacturing, trade, and services; the finance, trade, and tax regulation shaping such globalisation; automation of industry and communication; and competition from emerging markets. These are aggravated by eroding support networks as extended families and communities disperse (often in pursuit of jobs), as local governments and communities lose resources, and as national economic policies fail to re-develop regions that have lost their economic base.

Associated with these economics are populist anxieties about economic competition from immigrants and minorities, loss of national identity, and national

control over borders and trade—all of which have spurred alienation from established political parties, elected representatives, and often from government overall, seen as out-of-touch with the citizenry. The US Tea Party, the Trump win, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the French National Front on the right and Syriza, Podemos, Jeremy Corbyn, and Bernie Sanders on the left have attracted support by giving voice to this alienation.

Our aim is not to add to the abundant literature on these difficulties but to analyse the basic conception of society—the social imaginary—that gives rise to them. What worldview undergirds these economic arrangements that contribute to so many societal problems? We submit that this imaginary misunderstands humanity's social nature and so even the conditions for individual flourishing, which depends on networks of reciprocal relations. After exploring this imaginary, we suggest an alternative grounded in the relational or networked nature of human living. As biologist Darcia Narvaez notes, "To approach eudaimonia or human flourishing, one must have a concept of human nature, a realization of what constitutes a normal baseline, and an understanding of where humans are—embedded in a cooperating natural world."¹ That is, to create productive public policy, citizens and their leaders need an understanding of what sort of creatures human beings are and develop policy to suit. In our final section, we describe specific economic and political policies that follow from this alternative social imaginary.

2. SOCIAL IMAGINARIES AND THE SPECIFIC SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF THE COMMONS

By 'social imaginary' we mean the model people have in mind of what society is and should be. It is both a descriptive and normative picture of the conditions and practices of societal co-existence, the spoken and unspoken rules of behaviour, and the values undergirding those norms. Values include the assessment of what is or

¹ Darcia Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture, and Wisdom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 438.

is not important and the contours of responsibility throughout society. Social imaginaries inform present mores, future expectations, and notions of change. They form the mental and emotional substructure from which both politics and policies flow. While they are neither the sole source of economics and politics nor a sufficient condition for state, civil society, and market functioning, they are a societal building block setting the often unarticulated bounds of the possible.

A 'social imaginary,' Cornelius Castoriadis holds, "creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence."² Charles Taylor conceptualises it as "ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations."³ Often assumed and unarticulated, it is "that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature."⁴

Our experience of life, Taylor continues, must conform considerably if not entirely to our social imaginaries. When these differ substantially, societal tensions and discontent arise. One example is the post-1945 expectation in Europe and North America that each generation would be better off than the previous one and that the middle class would expand relative to other classes. For many today, experience is now at odds with this expectation, yielding the discontent and political populism noted above. In December 2015, the Pew Research Center reported that the American middle class—once the largest class and the very meaning of the 'American dream'—is the majority no longer.⁵

This gap between expectation and experience has increased as the social imaginary of the common good has in many advanced economies dimmed and

² Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 145.

³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

⁵ Pew Research Center, *The American Middle Class is Losing Ground*, available online at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/>

no longer grounds much public policy. By common good we mean the standard use of the term: that economic and political resources be distributed for broad-based opportunity, for a present and future shared among society's members, and that such broad distribution warrants the support of civil society, state, and market. In mid-twentieth century advanced economies, common-good policies took the forms, for instance, of taxing the wealthy at rates sufficient to fund education, infrastructure, research, etc.; market norms for executive pay relative to employee compensation;⁶ co-determination of wages and working conditions by employers, trade unions, and government; worker representation on company boards and regional banks; and commitment to vocational training by government and trade/manufacturing guilds.

However, by 'social imaginary of the commons' we also include the worldview undergirding these practices. Part of every social imaginary is its primary worldview, an understanding of how human beings survive and flourish, what Robert Doran calls the "the mass and momentum of feeling," a "normative source of meaning."⁷

The worldview grounding the social imaginary of the commons is neither collectivist nor a binary that demands balancing personhood against societal relations/responsibilities. Collectivism subordinates the person to the whole while the binary fosters the zero-sum idea that contributing to society diminishes one's own resources. Instead, the social imaginary of the commons goes beyond the binary to understand individuality as *mutually constitutive* with societal relations. Each person, while separate and distinct from others, comes to be the person she is through nexes of relationships situated in a cultural and historical era. In short, the conditions of individuality itself are separability-*amid*-situatedness. There is no person without constituting relations, and no relations without separable persons to constitute and inhabit them. It is thus not only economic calculations but this

⁶ In the USA, the CEO-to-worker pay-ratio today is 354:1 (<http://www.aflcio.org/Corporate-Watch/Paywatch-Archive/CEO-Pay-and-You/CEO-to-Worker-Pay-Gap-in-the-United-States/Pay-Gaps-in-the-World>); fifty years ago, it was 20:1 (<http://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-2012-extraordinarily-high/>).

⁷ Robert Doran, *What is Systematic Theology?* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 166, 178.

ontology, this understanding of how human beings function and flourish, that is needed to ground public policy.

3. THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF THE COMMONS AS SEPARABILITY-AMID-SITUATEDNESS

In the worldview of separability-amid-situatedness, the separability aspect refers to the freedom and ability to develop ideas and forms of life different from those of one's past and neighbours. It is associated with physical and intellectual mobility, societal change, and innovation—precisely the ability to separate from one's milieu. This minimal “methodological individualism”⁸ becomes, with increasing separation among persons, the maximal “ontological individualism,”⁹ where there are only individuals and no such thing as groups or society as claimed by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.¹⁰ The normative claims of separability are associated with liberalism, including negative liberty protected by rights-based law and “small government” political systems. Such systems hold that public policy should benefit the individual (not associations), also called “value individualism.”¹¹ Importantly, these benefits also include human and civil rights as they adhere to persons regardless of their relations.

Situatedness views the group and its traditions as conceptually prior to the individual, whose sense of self, values, and habits are formed by what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*.¹² Groups, Philip Selznick writes, entail “a common faith or fate, a personal identity, a sense of belonging, and a supportive structure of activities and relationships.”¹³ Selznick's is the minimal position as the individual is acknowledged (it is she who has a sense of belonging) even as the group remains

⁸ Colin Bird, *The myth of liberal individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in *The Sunday Times*, 31 October 1987, <http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>

¹¹ Bird, *The myth of liberal individualism*, p. 58.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹³ Philip Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), p. 357.

formative. A more maximal view takes persons to be so societally constituted that they do not go much beyond that constitution. John Macmurray writes that "I exist only as one element in the complex 'You and I.'"¹⁴ Normative claims of situatedness are associated with both progressive and conservative views, including the idea that policies and resources should support groups as they instill persons with values and life skills and make society work. Associated with this is that idea that a broad-based distribution of "primary goods" or the "social minimum" should be supported by societal policies and institutions rather than being available only to individuals as they can afford.¹⁵ A more sweeping normative claim is the notion that, as traditional communities carry extensive wisdom, they should resist change.

In the social imaginary of the commons, separability and situatedness in mutual constitution is the way persons and societies become who and what they are. Each person is distinct; even identical twins develop different characters and life goals—what Alain Badiou calls "universal singularity."¹⁶ Yet each develops through layers of relationships, both with those near and that extend out, as our educational and economic opportunities and obstacles are informed by those who are not necessarily nearby. This networked impact entails networked responsibility among individuals and among groups.

This sociological claim finds support in the biological sciences. Narvaez writes that "whom a person becomes is a co-construction of genes, gene expression from environmental effects [...] and the ecological and cultural surroundings [...]. There is no being without shared social relations."¹⁷ Her description of this *unselfish* gene continues as follows:

Immersion in communal rituals and joyful encounters [...] allow for community bonding and what we might call a 'moral mood,' both of which facilitate pro-social behavior [...]. If there is no baseline sense of empathy for others—what

¹⁴ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 12, 24.

¹⁵ Jeremy Waldron, *Liberal Rights: Collected Papers, 1981–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 250–51.

¹⁶ Alain Badiou and Slavoy Žižek, *Philosophy in the present*, ed. P. Engelman and trans. A. Thomas and A. Toscano, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 26–48.

¹⁷ Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality*, p. 15, 103.

Adam Smith (1759/1982) considered essential for society—then the options considered are likely to harm others. If there is no sense of concern for all living entities, then actions that harm those outside the circle of concern will not receive a second thought [...]. There are two ways cultures can be set up, with either an emphasis on competition or on cooperation. In the natural world, competition is a thin icing on a thick cake of cooperation [...].¹⁸

Evolutionary biology too emphasizes this “thick cake of cooperation” as it notes that *homo sapiens* are a “hyper-cooperative species”¹⁹ in which “reciprocal altruism”²⁰ structures not only dyadic exchange and kin relations but large societal networks. ‘Cooperativity’ is the base for interactions among highly mobile persons and groups even absent long-term contact.²¹ Amid present-day mobility and urban anonymity, generous gestures continue to prompt generous responses not only dyadically but also expansively, in network fashion.²²

Moving more foundationally, we suggest that these biological and sociological findings are unsurprising because separability-amid-situatedness is structural to the world. Persons are separate and distinct yet in situated in relation *because* separability-amid-situatedness is foundational to laws of nature, to existence itself. To unpack this claim, one might begin by saying that being, the possibility of existence itself, results from the source of all that is. There could be nothing at all, but in fact there’s something. Franz Rosenzweig called the source of all something

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 27, 110.

¹⁹ Paul Schmid-Hempel, Institute for integrative biology (Zurich, Switzerland), personal communication, 15 May 2015.

²⁰ Robert Trivers, ‘The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism’, *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 46, no. 1 (1971), pp. 35–57; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and its Evolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²¹ Evolutionary benefits to hunter-gatherer societies (95 percent of our evolutionary history) included improved hunting among cooperative rather than competitive clans and more likely survival of offspring as families and communities helped each other. See Robert Seyfarth and Dorothy Cheney, ‘The Evolutionary Origins of Friendship’, *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 63 (2012), pp. 179–199.

²² Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives—How Your Friends’ Friends’ Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009).

“the eventfulness of the limitless possibilities that will come to exist.”²³ After the kabbalist Ein Sof and F.W.J. Schelling, this source is not so much what precedes effects as what is realized as it yields effects. As existence results from this source, something of it inheres, metaphorically speaking, “in” all existing things in order for them to be. Every particular participates in this source for its existence. In theological voice, Aquinas wrote, “God himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things [beings] [...] in all things God works intimately.”²⁴ In Merleau-Ponty’s words, divine “transcendence no longer hangs over man. He becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer.”²⁵

On the one hand, particular beings are radically different from this source—differences in materiality/immateriality and finitude/infinity. On the other, particulars intimately partake of the source of existence to exist at all. We partake of the source of existence—something radically different from ourselves—in order to exist. *This difference yet intimate relation is the way anything comes to be.* The grammar of existence is distinction-amid-relation, separability-amid-situatedness. Kirk Wegter-McNelly words may serve to summarize: cosmos is “a place in which entangled independence-through-relationship is the fundamental characteristic of being.”²⁶

There is, in short, no other way to be. Persons, like all existing things, are separate and distinct from each other yet also situated in relation. Existence as distinction-amid-relation, or separability-amid-situatedness, makes humanity and society also a matter of distinction-amid-relation. Each becomes who she distinctly is through nexes of relationships, which inform her just as she informs them. Each bears the traces of those relations. On the one hand, we recall our distinct identical twins and the singularity of each person, yet on the other, “the

²³ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), Kindle Edition 2812.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1-5, trans. Fathers of the Dominican English Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia, q. 105, art. 5.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 71.

²⁶ Kirk Wegter-McNelly, *The Entangled God: Divine Relationality and Quantum Physics* (New York, NY: Routledge), p. 136.

individual is a fact of existence,” Martin Buber wrote, “insofar as he steps into a living relation with other individuals.”²⁷

One may get a sense of this also by looking at the sub-atomic level, where the trajectory of each sub-atomic particle is different from those of its neighbours yet each is formed in light of them. While remaining distinct, each particle develops and moves through its milieu by inter-formation. Physicist Carlo Rovelli writes that all existing things, “are continually interacting with one another, and in doing so each bears the traces of that with which it has interacted.”²⁸

Thus, a theologically informed ontology not only provides an account of why reality is relational but also resonates with some of the most ground-breaking findings in contemporary natural sciences. Indeed, the latest developments in biology, physics, philosophy, and ethics open the door to a revived theology and a renewed import of religion in debates on the universe and human nature. Hitherto, it had been assumed by most mainstream scientists that forms of life are the product of essentially natural, random processes—such that if we ran evolution again, life would look very different.²⁹ However, there is increasing evidence to suggest that evolution shows biological convergence and is not random: if it ran again, the world would look much as it does.³⁰ Here one can go beyond old divides (creation versus atheism; intelligent design versus natural evolution) and argue that recent research sheds new light on the teleology of life. Natural selection is no longer thought to be the main driver of biological change but rather a process within a bigger process. Life displays a certain kind of inherency, such that the beings which come about are a product *also* of their own, intended integrity—

²⁷ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), p. 203.

²⁸ Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (New York: Penguin, 2015), pp. 69–70.

²⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1991); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Stephen Jay Gould, *Punctuated Equilibrium* (London: Belknap, 2007).

³⁰ Simon Conway Morris, *The Crucible of Creation: The Burgess Shale and the Rise of Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, new ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Simon Conway Morris, ed., *The Deep Structure of Biology: Is Convergence Sufficiently Ubiquitous to Give a Directional Signal?* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008).

intimating the possibility of being linked to transcendent principles, including those of relationality.

4. THE DIFFICULTIES OF SEPARABILITY AND SITUATEDNESS SEPARATED

If the foundation of human existence is separability-amid-situatedness, going against our foundation will yield difficulties. In particular, seeing separability and situatedness as separated rather than mutually constitutive—allowing an overdose of one untempered by the other—damages the viability of both individuals and communities. We first discuss the problems of excessive situatedness and then of undue separability, the greater burden in advanced economies and often exported to developing nations.

Untempered by regard for the unique person, situatedness may become, as Hannah Arendt diagnosed, a means of suppression, the collapse of the person into the mass under authority's boot.³¹ Within groups, it serves to buttress existing power structures, "old boys clubs," and prejudices and to stanch change. Among groups, it yields binary, us-vs.-them thinking that justifies aggression. Peter Berger was right to note that those who too sharply criticize modern separability "should pause and question whether he wishes to include in the denunciation the specifically modern discoveries of human dignity and human rights."³² Though the modern era did not first discoverer of human dignity or rights, it has ensured them for broad sectors of the population.

Like Arendt, Berger focuses on the grip of situatedness top-down, but the grip from the crowd too is pernicious. Keith Thomas has described early modern villages as dominated by "the tyranny of local opinion and the lack of tolerance displayed towards non-conformity or social deviance."³³ In these villages—where "ethnic and religious solidarity and attendant intolerance [...] provided the

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 478.

³² Peter Berger, 'On the obsolescence of the concept of honor', *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XI (1977), pp. 339–47.

³³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 527.

atmosphere”³⁴—one finds also the *mix* of tyranny from the top and crowd. That is, both conformity pressures and the sort of top-down control that the counter-Enlightenment Louis de Bonald meant when he sought to replace modern empiricism, or “the authority of evidence,” with “the evidence of authority.”³⁵

In short, situatedness absent separability may become what Luigino Bruni calls the group as “a gigantic I,”³⁶ conformist and repressive, vitiating personal talent and initiative. Protests against authoritarian control in China, Latin America, Iran, and the Arab world reflect the top-down problems that Arendt describes. Protests against conformity pressures and oppression from the crowd are seen in many elements of the #metoo movement, in efforts for LGBTQ inclusion and in the continuing work against racial and religious prejudice.

By contrast, separability untempered by situatedness has the detractions of what Charles Taylor calls “the immanent frame.” The individual’s detachment from the group and one’s environment is foregrounded, and the mutual constitution of separability with situatedness dims. One sees one’s circumstances immanently, lacking an overarching picture of the reciprocal impact between oneself and surrounding world. Owing to the scientific and technological advances of early modernity, Taylor notes in *The Secular Age*, a sense of place within nature and among other persons all in a larger cosmos was replaced by the thrill of detached autonomy and lordship over nature.³⁷ Francis Bacon talked of subjecting nature to impediments and constraints; Leibniz, of the “rack” and “torture” until nature yielded to man. The new fascination with the power of human reason (for instance, to turn nature into an obedient tool) contributed to rationalist and idealist epistemologies and an inflated sense of self-sufficiency in the “immanent” world.

On Taylor’s account, as science brought the advantages of innovation and rising living standards, the disadvantages of an enlarged sense of self-sufficiency came alongside. One was a diminution in the value of group effort for a common

³⁴ Barry A. Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 64.

³⁵ David Klinck, *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist, Louis de Bonald (1754–1840)* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996).

³⁶ Luigino Bruni, *The wound and the blessing: Economics, relationships and happiness*, trans. N.M. Brennen (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), p. 59.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

future and its replacement by instrumental, contractual arrangements for individual pursuits and benefit. Producers and suppliers, for instance, may indeed work with each other under the parameters of a task-specific contract, but this differs from the parties working together on an understanding of reciprocal dependence and common future. Another early modern shift was the idealization of individual endeavour and self-reliance and decreased concern with the impacts of those endeavours on society, today called 'externalities.' My-pursuits, my-firm, my-party as *habitus* and *Zeitgeist*. Such shifts yielded, Taylor observes, boosts to competition and the assumption that others are similarly competitive. These others thus need to be guarded against, often by rights-based legislation, in what Tocqueville called the "tumult" of "this incessant conflict of jarring interests—this continual stride of men after fortune."³⁸ The Hobbesian fear of grabbing by others sets one to inconsolable competition and an agonistic stance towards others.

Anomie too may follow, for idealized separability may leave one not freely flourishing but lost. As relational networks provide values and goals worth striving for, their breakdown leaves one free to choose but with little guidance as to why one choice is preferable to another. One becomes *not unsatisfied but unsatisfiable*. "The modern buffered self," James K. A. Smith writes, "is also sealed off from significance, left to ruminate in a stew of its own ennui."³⁹ Even assuming one could develop priorities and purposes separately, on one's own, one would lack the networks, policies, and institutions at the community and governmental levels to realize them.

In short, Taylor, Smith and others observe, with modernity's increasingly mobile populace—separation by opportunity or enforced by land enclosures, the job hunt, or other duress—ties to the commons thinned. Indeed, the commons itself faded in priority along with notions of our networked impact and responsibilities. As Narvaez observes,

Economics, since the Enlightenment and especially since the world wars intentionally disacknowledges relationships to others. The contrast extracted by European history seems to

³⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004, [1830–35]), Vol. II, Ch. X, pp. 522–529, quote at p. 524.

³⁹ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 64.

break in fact with all the anthropology of the other cultures': . . . we have maximized procedures that keep us from always owing, always depending, always giving back' (Latour 2013: 449). Such theory breaks the gift economy that rules the natural world—the cycle of giving and taking.⁴⁰

A few examples from current political economy

Today, undue separability is one way to describe the neo-liberal worldview that individual, entrepreneurial action taken in relatively unregulated, competitive markets is the best generator and distributor of societal resources. We are not suggesting that neo-liberalism's disadvantages, highlighted by Thomas Piketty and fellow economists, emerge solely from such separability.⁴¹ Rather, our argument is that the idealization of separability emerged synergistically with modern changes in technology and epistemology. This idealization in turn reinforced those changes to further separability and diminished concern for the common good.

To be sure, certain periods throughout the modern era have had greater appreciation for the commons—for instance, the period from Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson in the USA and many aspects of the post-1945 settlement built by both Christian and Social Democrats in Europe. Yet the present emphasis on my-pursuits, my-firm, my-group—a '*solo social* imaginary' vaunting the individual or the group as the "gigantic I"—is an untenable paradox.

Current economic practices emerging from such a 'solo social' include the low capitalization and high-risk instruments of lightly-regulated finance sectors, which seek soaring profits for certain investment houses but have little concern for societal impacts built into them.⁴² These were seen in both the 2008 Great

⁴⁰ Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality*, p. 182; the quote is from Bruno Latour, *Modes of existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) p. 449.

⁴¹ Thomas Piketty, *Le capital au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Ed. Seuil, 2013), trans. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Brank Milanovic, *The Haves and the Have-Nots. A Brief and Idiosyncratic History of Global Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

⁴² David J. Rothkopf, *Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They Are Making* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 2008); Cynthia Freeland, *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else* (London: Penguin, 2013).

Recession and in the cyclical booms and busts of the present economic settlement, as even conservative economists acknowledge.⁴³ A second practice is privatised Keynesianism, whereby the public sector shifts its responsibilities onto individuals.⁴⁴ As real wages remain stagnant, citizens incur ever-more debt to pay for what should be common good resources such as education and health care. The loss of these common resources further hollows out the sense of a shared society and future. A third practice is the out-sourcing of manufacturing and service sectors while the outsourcers bear few obligations to worker retraining or regional re-development in the 'left behind' areas. This has been a source of a race to the bottom in wages, labour conditions, and environmental protection⁴⁵ and has been a factor spurring recent populism.

Another practice is tax flight, where multi-nationals incorporate in low-tax locations and contribute little to the areas in which they operate and on whose infrastructures they rely. A fifth is bonus structures that reward high financial turnover and high share prices. These operate as perverse incentives for management not to invest in long-term growth and innovation but to buy back shares, thereby artificially inflating the company's share price and their bonus payments.⁴⁶ As these profits are often under-taxed owing to corporate tax loopholes, local and national governments have fewer resources for re-training, regional re-development, research, and infrastructure on which these corporations rely.

Ironically, under these conditions, certain markets have become not competitive but monopolized. Intellectual property—patents, trademarks, and copyrights—is increasing held by a small sub-set of corporations for longer periods of time, resulting in high profits rates. This is especially evident in the pharmaceutical, hi-tech, biotechnology, and entertainment industries. Higher

⁴³ Charles Kindleberger, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

⁴⁴ Colin Crouch, 'Privatised Keynesianism: An Unacknowledged Policy Regime,' *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, Vol. 11, no. 3 (August 2009), pp. 382–399.

⁴⁵ Jacob S. Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: the New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ David Sainsbury, *Progressive Capitalism: How To Achieve Economic Growth, Liberty and Social Justice* (London: Biteback, 2013).

prices for consumers and a ‘great divestiture’ have followed.⁴⁷ Monopoly corporations, other big businesses and banks, and network platforms (Amazon, Facebook and Google) benefit as well from ‘monopsony,’ the power to dictate prices to suppliers for substantial corporate benefit regardless of impact on others in the supply chain, on users, or on the common good.⁴⁸

Finally, under conditions of excessive separability, political economists such as Mancur Olson and Elinor Ostrom note, individuals and societal groups who have an interest in acting together are often unable because of the vested interests of persons or groups who have their own but not the common benefit in mind—who see themselves as *separated* from the commons or for whom the commons never appears as a concern.⁴⁹ Such parties may be more effective in implementing self-benefitting policies because they are fleeter, have greater resources, or have lower costs than larger, unorganized groups have when arguing for their position. This not infrequently leads to minority or sectional interests (and their lobbies) dominating the economic and political arenas by capture of legislative and regulatory bodies.

This ‘collective action problem’—the power of minority interests to hobble advocacy for broad-based goods—is aggravated by legislation and regulations that grant management of common-pool resources to private corporations. It may be aggravated also by state nationalisation as this allows the central state to dictate to all sectors and regions, hobbling local and other intermediary groups. Both models, privatisation and hyper-nationalisation, may undermine the participation of individuals and their

⁴⁷ Massimo Florio, *The Great Divestiture: Evaluating the Welfare Impact of the British Privatizations 1979–1997*, new ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Barry C. Lynn, *End of the Line: The Rise and Coming Fall of the Global Corporation* (New York: Doubleday, 2005); idem., *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

⁴⁹ Mancur Olson, *Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons. The evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

representative groups–intermediary, civil society institutions–in policy making and common-pool resource distribution. Below we suggest an alternative.

5. GOING WITH SEPARABILITY-AMID-SITUATEDNESS AND THE COMMONS

Because persons are distinct entities in networks of relation, a social imaginary that accounts for these together—that goes with the grain of humanity’s foundational inter-connectedness—yields more productive outcomes than one that does not. The question becomes, Narvaez writes,

which worldview do we select and, thereby, which type of society do we create—one that emphasizes cooperation or one that emphasizes competition? [...] modern life is set up against full engagement [...]. Individualistic striving for materialistic goods is encouraged over other values (which elevates inequality, crime, and ill-health).⁵⁰

Accounting for separability and situatedness together requires not an economic or legal codex but a process of reciprocal consideration, of seeing and *seeing to* the networks of relations and physical infrastructures that inform individual identity and broad-based opportunity. Though touted as the guru of greed, Adam Smith proposed just this: in markets as in all of society, he wrote, each should “endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer.”⁵¹

Reciprocal consideration brings out two things: common needs/goals and differences. If societies are to avoid the ills of *separated-ness*, differences need be approached with attention to the inter-linkedness of human life and future. This does not suggest ceding one’s views or granting others any and all desires but rather a process of understanding how others have come to their fears, needs, and

⁵⁰ Narvaez, *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality*, p. 214.

⁵¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. Raphael and A. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 [1759]), p. 21.

hopes and how we have come to ours such that this reciprocal understanding underpins policy.

Thus, politics need be concerned *first* about fostering reciprocal consideration in norms, education, societal practices, and policy, without which the present neo-liberal momentum, though recent in human history, will continue. Minority-interest capture is likely and public resources will be commandeered for elites rather than for broad-based flourishing. The task of politics is to ask: do societal arrangements cultivate among the citizenry, its leaders, and the next generation an understanding of our interdependent, reciprocal situation? Do institutions at the community, regional, and national levels provide the means for economic development, problem-solving, and decision-making based on the interdependence of those involved? How can politics take into account the links between the public and private and, moving away from the binary, how can it foster private support networks in communities, families, and religious networks that may also work with public institutions?

To be sure, policies and practices that achieve these goals do not proceed by normativity and consensus alone, absent law. Such an idealized view may underplay the heft of current neo-liberal momentum and thus the effort needed to return our societal focus to the commons, to persons amid their situations and relations. It may also underplay the differences among persons and groups in aims and needs, and on a separability-amid-situatedness view, sameness cannot be a requirement of reciprocal consideration. To the contrary, our situatedness among *different* people is what must be accounted for in policy and praxis.

Law is in play also because it is a part of the social imaginary that guides more?s and conduct. In an imaginary where substantial separability and competition are normative, law will reflect and reinforce what Russell Pearce and Eli Wald call “autonomous self-interest” and the view of lawyers as “hired guns” who try to get away with as much as possible for their clients’ benefit and their own.⁵² By contrast, under an imaginary of the commons—where separability-amid-situatedness and reciprocal consideration are foundational premises—law will

⁵² Lawrence A. Cunningham, ‘A prescription to retire the rhetoric of “principles-based systems” in corporate law, securities regulation, and accounting’, *Vanderbilt Law Review*, Vol. 60 (2007), pp. 1409–1494, quote at p. 1423.

reflect and promote “relational self-interest.”⁵³ The interests of client and lawyer are here seen as woven into the interests of society and its future. It is “the view that all actors are inter-connected, whether [as] individuals [or in groups] ... [and] cannot maximize [their] own good in isolation.”⁵⁴

Law, on such a view, is a means to achieve common goals and projects, to further one’s goals ‘woven into’ shared societal ones. The agonistic framework of the law suit is understood not as a first but as a last resort when negotiations and other means of addressing conflict have failed. Importantly, the imaginary of the commons yields first-resort, usual practices of reciprocal consideration, preempting an agonistic framework and constituting concern for the common good into regular legal praxis.

6. EXAMPLES OF POLICY IDEAS FOR A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE COMMONS

From a more practical perspective, the guiding principle of the commons—reciprocity and mutual benefit based on shared interests and a common future—contrasts with both the excessive separability of many markets today *and* with the excessive situatedness of bureaucratized governmental control. The imaginary of the commons seeks instead to unlock resources that are generated by building long-term relationships in the community, nation, and internationally (through governments, trans-national partnerships, and NGOs) based on the active participation of persons and groups. They provide a counterweight to the central state *and* ‘free market’ as they promote individual agency, a degree of local self-government, and international associations large enough to address global-market practices of ‘separability.’

⁵³ Russell G. Pearce and Eli Wald, ‘The obligation of lawyers to heal civic culture: Confronting the ideal of incivility in the practice of law’, *University of Arkansas Law Review*, Vol. 34 (2011), p. 17.

⁵⁴ Russell G. Pearce and Eli Wald, ‘Rethinking lawyer regulation: How a relational approach would improve professional rules and roles’, *Michigan State Law Review*, Vol. 2012 (2014), pp. 513–536, quote at p. 514.

Therefore, the first idea for an economics and politics of the commons is to strengthen the autonomy and political power of democratically self-governing intermediary institutions so that they and the individuals within them can act alongside the state and market. Such bottom-up ‘collective action’ (Olson) offers an alternative to the policies of nationalisation (top-down situatedness), which has often led to inefficiencies and bureaucratized “handling” of people. It suggests an alternative also to privatization (separability), which may yield policies that favour elites, allow minority-interest capture, and are remote from the needs of citizens.

Connected with this is our second idea: a broad-based sharing of risks and rewards throughout the economy. Emerging from the idea of reciprocal impact and reciprocal responsibility throughout society, this risk-and-rewards distribution contrasts with immunizing private profit against both common good obligations (education, infrastructure development, etc.) and national financial loss and debt—the excessive separability that was a source of the 2008 financial crash.

We begin our discussion of risk-and-reward sharing with debt because soaring personal indebtedness is a key feature undermining the common good. In fact, creditors and debtors have *shared* interests—for example, in preserving the value of company assets for future profits, dividends, and jobs. Thus when large debt accrues, a mutualized, reciprocal model would argue for the partial conversion of debt into equity to protect companies against bankruptcy for the sake of both company financial health and worker employment. Large, institutional shareholders who are creditors would be bailed-*into* the company as investors in order to save failing banks rather than banks being bailed out by taxpayers’ money (as was done in 2008–09). The prospect of a bail-in may temper risk-taking by bank management and would spread the costs of saving businesses more equitably among large shareholders (with some public contribution). Moreover, converting some debt into equity turns shareholders into longer-term investors and may reduce the number of short-term speculators besetting a company. Those seeking short-term wins are usually disinclined to invest where they might become part of a long-term bail-in. Thus, the interests of shareholders become more closely aligned with the long-term interests of stakeholders—managers, employees, suppliers, and consumers—especially if management bonuses are linked to long-term rather than short-term performance.

Another example of risk- and profit-sharing is better 'value chains' grounded in trust and shared decision-making among stakeholders as they discuss risks and profits. While employee 'compliance' remains necessary for corporate performance, it is insufficient for a well-running company as it can undermine mutual trust and cooperative behaviour within the firm. Therefore, it is productive and profitable for companies and industries to involve the main stakeholders in decisions regarding risks and profits, including remuneration, working conditions, and business strategy.

Such discussions might bring about 'living wage' cities and regions, where all workers are paid wages that support them and their families without individuals having to take on second jobs or turn to welfare.⁵⁵ They might also more equitably distribute profits by establishing a link between salary increases and productivity growth for workers and management. While the economic fruits of increased productivity today often accrue to top management and large shareholders, the proposed model would more fairly distribute productivity benefits, reducing employee dependence on credit and increasing their motivation, innovation, job retention, worker willingness to pursue further training, and employer willingness to invest in workers so that they have the skills to share in business decisions, risks, and rewards.

We also propose a new public 'trust' to replace the current patent system, which favours large corporations over small- and medium-sized businesses and social enterprises. A public trust for pooling technological advances would benefit business more equitably and, preserving their patent rights, help smaller and new enterprises grow.

As the work of Michael Porter and Mark Crane shows, a focus on reciprocal consideration and 'shared value'⁵⁶—strongly connecting worker and societal concerns to company policies and profit (beyond the window-dressing of much Corporate Social Responsibility)—means greater attention to 'externalities.' This has been shown to improve not only worker and community well-being but

⁵⁵ John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1914); and *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of Our Present Distribution of Wealth*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

⁵⁶ Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Crane, 'Creating Shared Value', *Harvard Business Review*, Jan.-Feb. (2011), pp. 2-17.

company profitability. Firms as ruthless and monopolistic as Nestlé in Europe, Unilever in the United Kingdom, and Wal-Mart in the United States are starting to see the costs of socially and environmentally unsustainable practices. If one over-controls employees, (too much compliance, too little trust and shared decision-making), if one frequently hires and fires workers, pays suppliers as cheaply as possible, buys out local rivals, and disregards local communities and the environment, the costs in broken trust, ill will, and damaged corporate reputation outstrip benefits. One is left with unreliable, unmotivated workforces, poor-quality suppliers, botched component parts, misdirected shipping, the resulting drop in demand, and diminished local talent in increasingly impoverished and undesirable habitats.

Such problems often arise in cases of consolidation through mergers-and-acquisitions and the creation of global supply chains, which have additional control problems of their own. As Barry Lynn has shown, this includes outsourcing to a single supplier, which then dominates a whole sector. For example, there are vast trading companies that supply all the carmakers and supermarket chains and are thereby ‘too big to fail.’⁵⁷ This in turn induces a ‘race to loot and scoot’—increasing profit margins by squeezing wages—before the system threatens to implode and to take down the whole economy, as with the 2007–08 financial crash. Corporate consolidation also yields other forms of concentration of ownership and control. In 2017, two-thirds of the total number of sectors across developed economies were characterized by a greater concentration of ownership and control than in 1997. This includes many of the old industries, including tobacco, food, construction, retail, the car industry, and Wall Street. These and other sectors have more than one producer but the dominant players are in fact giant trading firms, designed to govern entire production systems, like Wall-Mart. They do not so much eliminate competition as shift it from a horizontal plane—competition with other producers or providers—to a vertical plane—competition with workers, suppliers, customers, and the communities where businesses are located. None of this is compatible with a political economy of the common good that preserves the shared wealth of the ‘commons’ and enables all to participate in it.

⁵⁷ Lynn, *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction*.

Reciprocity among businesses, regions, and consumers would need also a greater diversity of banks so that capital is channelled not only into existing large firms but into small- and medium-sized firms throughout the country and so that all sectors of the economy and a wide variety of work are supported. One option is to create regional investment banks funded by both public and private sources and managed by a tripartite structure of government, employers' associations, and trade unions. Another option is mutualized banks, local credit unions, and community-based investment trusts.⁵⁸

Public-private investment banks might be dedicated to certain regions or industry sectors and linked to corresponding professional associations in those areas. Such associations would guarantee among members minimum standards in production quality, labour conditions, and trade. They could also develop region- or sector-wide training programs that fuse the teaching of academic skills with technical training and help instil a sense of vocation throughout their sector, which would in turn strengthen responsible business behaviour. Membership in a sector-wide association could be required for a professional license, but to avoid association-monopolies, employers and employees would choose from a range of associations in their industry. This would also diversify the range of employers' associations and trade unions (many of which suffer from bosses who neglect the views and interests of their ordinary members).

Following from the above, a social imaginary of the commons would revise corporate law to make social purpose and decision- and profit-sharing the conditions for obtaining an operating license. For example, the 2006 UK company law stipulates social responsibility as the entrepreneur's legal obligation, but it is subordinate to profit-maximisation. A revised law would link economic profit to societal benefit, which would mean that companies either voluntarily develop common-good projects, such as environmental protection, apprenticeships, and through-life training, or else pay into a national fund that finances such initiatives.

Changes in the law would also replace the current corporate incentive structure with one that awards and rewards the common good. That is, behaviour that is

⁵⁸ Adair Turner, *Between Debt and the Devil. Money, Credit, and Fixing Global Finance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); John Kay, *Other People's Money: Masters of the Universe or Servants of the People?* (London: Profile, 2015).

about doing a job well for the sake of all those affected by a job well done. Awards refer to public recognition of societally beneficial practices that are not an expected *quid-pro-quo* within contractual exchange (though they may be desirable). Rewards denote public recompense for behaviour that blends self-interest with social benefit; they include the possibility of monetary payment such as tax breaks or preferential treatment in government procurement.

Crucially, businesses that provide for the common good could be given membership in prestigious professional associations known to uphold higher common good standards, which could give these businesses a market advantage. This would promote competition in quality, excellence, and ethos.

In sum, the long-term health and profitability of businesses become more likely with common-good, mutualized policies because they go with the grain of our separability-amid-situatedness. Such policies should not, therefore, be thought of as “coming from without” and as external *constraints on* business but rather as *coming from* the situated, relational nature of business itself. With this understanding of the conditions for human flourishing, including the flourishing of business, there would be far less need for draconian laws (top-down government regulation) or taxpayer-funded inducements, which deplete the common resource pool.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have argued for a social imaginary of the commons, separation-amid-situatedness, as an ontological basis for politico-economic ideas and praxis. This social imaginary—and not only economic formulae—is critical to our shared future because, while common-good economic and political policies are in development, they lack broad-based implementation. And they lack implementation, we suggest, because both large sectors of the public and its leaders have lost sight of our networked, relational ontology. In short, it’s not economic or technical know-how that’s missing but the undergirding social imaginary or worldview to support and sustain common-good praxis. Absent this, there is insufficient popular and political understanding of the inter-linkedness of business, communities, persons, and environment at the macro and micro levels: how does inter-linkedness affect *your*

job and neighbourhood and that of your family and friends? Without such popular understanding, there is not much culture of the commons from which common-good politics could emerge.

We thus return to the political tasks we believe are *first*: societal and educational institutions that promote public understanding of our interdependent, reciprocal situation; community and national agencies that foster economic development, problem-solving, and decision-making based on the inter-dependence of those involved; and political arrangements that link public and private efforts to build the common good and that draw on the creativity and energy of personal relationships that, as biology tells us, are our 'wiring.' Without this, we will ever be working against the grain of our natural situation that is also the basis for our shared culture.