

## Three Cities Seeking Hope in the Anthropocene: London Inspiration

*This extract is Part 2, section 6 of Rod Oram's Three Cities: Seeking Hope in the Anthropocene, BWB Texts Series, Bridget Williams Books Ltd., Wellington, New Zealand, 2016.*

How to make complex issues simple came suddenly to Kate Raworth at an Oxfam seminar in February 2012. She jumped up and drew two circles on a whiteboard, labelling the outer one 'environmental ceiling' and the inner one 'social foundation'. In between she wrote 'the safe and just space for humanity'.

Raworth called it the Doughnut Economy, the place where inclusive and sustainable economic development thrives. The concept and diagram went viral, something I discovered while researching economists to interview in China.

I chanced upon a You Tube clip of one using the diagram to explain how his country has to develop. I've now used it in almost every presentation I've given in the past three years.

'I was absolutely amazed how much resonance it's had. I was completely gob smacked,' she recounts as we talk in a backstreet cafe near the River Isis a short distance from the centre of Oxford. 'It had people saying, "This really opens up the debate." It puts values front and centre, whereas economics prides itself on being values free.' The best that economists might say is 'there may be some externalities but we can correct for them later'.

Lifeless economics had frustrated Raworth in her years at the United Nations Development Programme and Oxfam. 'It's time to vandalise the economics textbooks,' she declares: Mainstream economics – as taught in universities, debated in the media and put into practice by governments – is based on outdated theories and flawed assumptions, leaving it dangerously ill-equipped for guiding us today. Alternative approaches – including ecological, feminist, and evolutionary economics, along with systems thinking and Earth-system science – have valuable insights if we are to achieve human rights and wellbeing for all within the means of this one planet. It's time to put these insights at the heart of a new economic toolkit. To that end she is writing *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, to be published in 2017.

The environmental ceiling of the safe and just place is the nine planetary boundaries documented by the Stockholm Resilience Institute. These include climate change, biodiversity loss, land use, chemical pollution, ocean acidification and freshwater use. The social foundation consists of the necessities we need for societies to function effectively: food, water, income, education, resilience, voice, jobs, energy, social equity, gender equality and health.

At its core, economics relies heavily on Newtonian mechanics, believing things always swing into equilibrium. But clearly they don't, as we see in countless ways such as finance spiralling out of control to cause the global financial crisis or rampant fossil fuel use causing climate change, she argues.

What is more:

We have a culture that's so 'economistic' in its language such as efficiency, growth, productive. We've stripped out the language of values. Politicians hardly ever use words like justice and fairness. We've put money in the place where morals used to be, as Michael Sandel, the Harvard political philosopher, says. We also have very low ecological awareness. Everybody at school learns about human lungs, heart and liver and their own personal health. But far too few kids today know anything about the planet's essential life support systems on which we depend. If we don't understand that, we see the environment as some sort of luxury good traded off against the economy.

The complexity of economic and environmental systems is another barrier to people understands of the problems, to their willingness to push for remedies, and to their desire to change their own behaviour. So too is speed – financial markets move far too fast to understand, and climate change too slowly. As we grapple with how to get a feel for the speed and pulse of systems we can take inspiration from nature, Raworth suggests. For example, in a murmuration of starlings a vast number of birds act instantly and collectively to wheel, dive and climb through the sky to protect each other and avoid predators. Yet, they do so by obeying only three rules: move in the same direction as your neighbour, remain close to them, and avoid collisions: It's about learning the new language, the new feel of what an economy needs to look like, how it needs to be, and who we are in it. In a sense we are all economists. If top-down policies don't work, we can all say 'I'm going to move my money to an internet bank, I'm going to move my labour to a co-op. Then we start to raise the volume of this alternative economic space. This means we can amplify the language, the framing, the visions of what that looks like. The more those become evidently desirable, the more people start doing it, the safer it becomes. This is not just about 'doing a little less bad', as Madonna would say. For businesses it's about becoming net positive for the planet, paying a minimum wage and doing all the things we have to do on the social foundation and the planetary boundaries.

While some companies have made admirable commitments to greater sustainability and can show some progress, questions remain about how deeply embedded the new goals and values are. Take Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch consumer goods company. It has adopted a range of big sustainability goals under the leadership of its chairman Paul Polman, such as halving water use while doubling sales. 'I believe in what he's doing. But he's still very sackable. What happens when profits come apart from the vision? What gets sacrificed? The Vision? Or Paul Polman?' In Britain the interdependence of society, science, business and the arts has found expression since 1754 in one particular organisation. It still operates from the building near Charing Cross it has occupied since 1774, much modernised in ways functional and sympathetic, of course.

'Our mission is to create the conditions for the enlightened thinking and collaborative action needed to address today's most pressing social challenges,' declares the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Among its clarion calls are to 'enrich society through ideas and action' and being 'committed to finding practical solutions to social challenges'. Seeking enlightenment, I arrange to meet one of its economist fellows in the busy basement tearoom. Tim Jackson is the author of *Prosperity Without Growth*, the 2009 bestseller, which has been translated into fourteen languages. The research shows that, beyond a certain point, growth does not increase human wellbeing. Indeed, it creates significant damage.

'The clearest message from the financial crisis of 2008 is that our current model of economic success is fundamentally flawed. For the advanced economies of the western world, prosperity without growth is no longer a utopian dream. It is a financial and ecological necessity,' he writes. The work first appeared as a report by the Sustainable Development Commission, a policy advisory body created by the Labour Government in 2000 and closed down by the Conservative-Liberal government in 2011. These days he heads the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity at the University of Surrey. Since the publicly funded council's motto is 'Shaping Society', it seems the government still has some appetite for thinking. CUSP has five core themes, pursued in interdisciplinary ways with experts at home and abroad, including Bronwyn Hayward, a political scientist at New Zealand's University of Canterbury. These include the meaning and moral framing 'of the good life'; the role of the arts and culture in developing visions of prosperity; the political and organizational dimensions of sustainable prosperity; the social and psychological understanding of 'the good life'; and, systems analysis to explore narratives of sustainable prosperity.

Over a big pot of tea, we skim over some of the above before our conversation turns to economists. A few old British masters such as Adair Turner and Martin Wolf are grappling with some of the issues, he says. But it is 'mostly very young, very, very motivated economists' who are making the running.

One of them is Ben Dyson, who says the global financial crisis was the inevitable result of banks creating money by making excessive loans. These enormous debts continue to do immense damage to economies, households, individuals and the environment. The starting point for modernizing the monetary system is to put money creation back into the hands of government. Positive Money, as Dyson calls his campaign, 'is a movement to democratise money and banking so that it works for society and not against it.' 'Dyson has made extraordinary inroads into the public, IMF commentators and old-style neoliberal financial journalists,' Jackson says:

A younger generation is absolutely motivated by asking these fundamental questions about the system that most of the rest of us, right up to the governor of the Bank of England, are supposed to take on trust.

This generation has grown up with a sense that they either have to kiss goodbye to hope or they have to reinvent something for themselves. Their most vehement expression of bad things is about those that rob them of their social agency, their ability to interact in the world to change it for the better.

Their best remedy is an inherent recovery of social justice and agency.