Three competing visions of our future communities

Our social networks are deluging us with data; surely we can do more than simply make a profit from it? Three books set out their stalls

Small community investments can produce dramatic social returns
John Rensten/Getty

By **Pat Kane**

AS POLITICAL, economic and environmental controversies bubble and fizz around us, we cannot fail to know what our power elites think; their pronouncements and solutions are given free rein in the mainstream media. Yet what about the response "from below" – that is, from activists and communities?

People may ask this question out of social concern, seeking representation for the under-represented. Or they may see those people as a source of fresh data. A better understanding of our collective nature could, after all, bring about improved policies. If we understood how community and common endeavour work – to strengthen people's character, say, or to inspire them to be enterprising and ambitious – could that be the basis of a new political vision?

Three new books make the case for the power of the communal, but display fascinating overlaps and clashes.

George Monbiot's *Out of the Wreckage* draws its arguments from neuroscience, psychology and evolutionary biology. He begins by saying humans are "deeply weird" among animals in their "astonishing degree of altruism". We are the "supreme cooperators"; this has been our crucial adaptive advantage.

Mutual aid is the "central, crucial fact about humankind", says Monbiot. "Yet we remain, to an astonishing degree, unaware of it." He makes scientifically literate points about our storytelling capacity – the way we use stories to help us connect our emotional responses to our capacity for rational thinking.

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From these insights, Monbiot wants to build a grand narrative of change, with a pro-community account of human nature at its centre. He hopes a "politics of belonging" will dislodge the general assumption – installed by the post-war New Right – that it is our competitive individualism that drives societies and economies forward.

Community-based currencies like the Brixton pound are on the rise
Anna Ambrosi/Luzphoto/Eyevine

Like the diligent journalist he is, Monbiot enriches his biology-compels-community thesis with real-life examples. We are told how time banks in Japan have promoted bartering and the creation of self-help communities, and how the Australian Men's Shed Association is improving public health. We also hear of car-free "pocket parks" in South Korea, and the way "reading rooms" organised by The New Institute in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, are building conversations across cultures.

In the UK, the communal picture is complex and exciting: there are food assemblies, streets reclaimed as playing grounds, local currencies, and the grassroots projects of the transition town social. Lambeth council's Open Works initiative in London argues for the efficacy of community self-organisation. Devoting the equivalent of just 2 per

cent of local council tax to the project saw returns including improved mental and physical health, and falls in alcohol and drug dependency and in repeat crime.

This combination of science and practice feels like an electoral strategy waiting to be picked up. In the UK, one might imagine Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party, the Greens, or civic-nationalist parties like the SNP and Plaid Cymru being particularly eager.

Tweak the emphasis in Monbiot's basic idea, however, and one imagines quite a different politics of communality arising.

The fact is, humans are also "deeply weird" in their capacity for imagination, creativity and abstract thought. We hunger for stories that make sense, but we are also consciously artful with them ourselves, and reflexively alert to being caught up in the stories of others. As an account of the damage that stress and isolation can cause, Monbiot's chapter on "alienation" has much to commend it. But what jars is his assumption that our entertainments, consumptions and techno-pursuits are essentially "a mask the machine wears" – the machine being corporate marketing and finance. These "grey monoliths" need sparkly celebrities and interfaces to "induce a click of recognition". That "click" is revealing, and somewhat disingenuous. Doesn't Monbiot also want his well-fashioned story to trigger "recognition" in the citizenry?

Towards the end of the book, he urges top-down "regime change": electoral victories that might support a communal movement. But his vision of dutiful telephone canvassers working their way through email lists with scripts agreed by central HQ sits oddly with his previous celebrations of local autonomy and quirkiness.

This confusion indicates the limits of Monbiot's socio-biological sources. Humans want to create, as well as to belong. We have always reached for tools, techniques and technology to manifest that creativity: AIs, algorithms, automations and simulations are part of that history. So shouldn't that capacity be located at the heart of communities, rather than be considered a threat to them?

This is the case made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Assembly*. It is the latest in a series of collaborations between the pair, which have beguiled a generation of activists since the late 1990s.

The authors have been charting the rising power of "social production": customer services, content-creation and information-wrangling of all kinds.

This is an increasingly cooperative realm, say the pair – an "assembly" of humans and machines that current forms of capitalism are largely parasitic on, extracting profits from the thrum of our mutual responses. As we tap away on social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Google+, for example, our rich interactions are mined for advertiser-friendly patterns by these same corporations. But there are also sectors of what Hardt and Negri call "affective" labour – in care, retail and education – where the success of the enterprise depends on channelling the emotional and group commitment of the workers.

What if that collaborative commitment was pointed in a different direction, somewhere beyond the market or even the state? For that, new institutions might need to be invented – or perhaps old ones given new teeth. Both Monbiot and the authors of *Assembly* seek to establish a zone of resources that can support these invigorated communities, called "the commons".

For Monbiot, the commons is primarily about taxing land to build up revenues for a capital fund that could support a basic social income, among other things. For Hardt and Negri, "the common" is a more mysterious affair. It is glimpsed briefly in the events of the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the protests in Gezi Park in Turkey. It glimmers in free software projects, in festival cultures and in pro-migrant initiatives.

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The *Assembly* authors take heart from younger generations who are turning to each other for mutual support, since their prospects of work and home are riddled with insecurity and precarity. "For them, existence is resistance," say the professors, hopefully.

Yet the last 12 months in the UK have seen the youthful multitude turn, instead, towards a bearded patriarch. Aiming to seize those boring old ramparts of the state, the leader of the Labour party promised them the eminently attractive policy of ending tuition fees in further education.

"Oh Jeremy Corbyn" might well have been the community anthem of the year. But it was sung by those who pined for a less indebted road to career progress, as much as by those who would embrace the anarchic and "machinic" future anticipated by Hardt and Negri.

Creative destruction

In the meantime, the regulators steadily regulate. In *Technically Together*, Taylor Dotson is a little too exhaustive in his quest to dethrone key Silicon Valley assumptions. He argues, for example, that "creative destruction" is all that tech innovation has to offer, borne forward by individuals willing to break all communal ties.

But Dotson is probably right when he says that if you want to subject disruptive technologies to the test of community, then municipal and national oversight might be the best way to do it.

When Transport for London recently revoked Uber's carriage licence in the city, for a variety of public-interest reasons, the tribunes of the techno-future hissed through their teeth. But deployed properly, this is the kind of communal authority that could compel new, human-friendly enterprises (or "combinations" as Hardt and Negri might say) to spring up. What would a people's Uber look like?

"Community" gets a bad name, redolent of dusty halls, faded bunting and a lurking intolerance. All three books show us how the communal can serve the future, not just defend us from it.

Book information

Out of the Wreckage: A new politics for an age of crisis
George Monbiot
Verso

Assembly

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri
Oxford University Press

Technically Together: Reconstructing community in a networked world
Taylor Dotson
MIT Press

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