

Transcript of *Frontiers of Commoning*, Podcast #39

Interview with Alnoor Ladha and Lynn Murphy

Authors of *Post-Capitalist Philanthropy*

June 1, 2023

**Ladha:** [00:00:00] If you do not have a critique of capitalist modernity, you are contextually irrelevant. But if all you have is a critique, you are spiritually and creatively impoverished. If we do not understand the oxygen by which we breathe – which is late-stage capitalism, neoliberalism, separation from the living world, materialism, rationalism, positivism, scarcity, control, entitlement, then we don't understand the context we're in. Yes, critique is critical, but we also need to create these embodied cultures of transition.

Announcer: This is *Frontiers of Commoning* with David Bollier.

**Bollier:** My guests today are Alnoor Ladha and Lynn Murphy, co-directors of the Transition Resource Circle and co-authors of a provocative new book, *Post-Capitalist Philanthropy: Healing Wealth in [the] Time of Collapse*. Today we're going to talk about activism, [00:01:00] philanthropy, and system change, and the paradoxes of capitalist philanthropy.

This will be a conversation about the deep assumptions of modernity and the limited worldviews of science and economics. We'll talk about economic rationality and capital accumulation, individualism and private property, and how conventional philanthropy can help us inaugurate a new civilizational transition.

But we need to conceptualize a new economic and social order. What are the new narratives we need? We're going to talk to Lynn, who's a strategic advisor to foundations and nonprofits working in the geopolitical south. Once a senior program officer and fellow at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, she resigned as a conscientious objector to 'neo-colonial philanthropy,' in her words.

Alnoor is an activist, journalist and political strategist, and community organizer. He was co-founder and executive director of the global activist group, The Rules from 2012 to 2019. He's now the council chair for Culture Hack Labs, a not-for-profit consultancy that helps [00:02:00] organizations and activist movements change their narratives of possibility.

Alnoor and Lynn, welcome.

**Ladha:** Thank you for having us, David.

**Murphy:** Thanks, David.

**Bollier:** This is a massive, ambitious, complex topic that you grapple with in your book. I'm not quite sure where to begin, but tell me why you wanted to write a book about system-change, philanthropy, and cosmology, which are three words that really don't crop up in the same sentence that often.

**Ladha:** Well, I guess the starting place in some ways was our resistance to writing the book. I don't think either of us wanted to write a book on philanthropy. The more we dug deeper into the philanthropic industrial complex and its relationship with capitalist modernity and neoliberalism, you realize that philanthropy is the upstream, that philanthropy is funding most of the social movements, you know, unless they're volunteer, sort of Gandhi-ite organizations, which is not the norm in the social movement space anymore. They're funding the entire civil society, N.G.O. [00:03:00] complex. And so philanthropy in some ways is the appropriate starting place. And how did philanthropy get created? Well, in the main sense, really, it is an externalization of capitalism.

A few people have amassed so much wealth that they're now determining the agenda for a civil society. Ostensibly, we're told that this is for social benefit, but actually they're getting huge amounts of tax breaks, social, political power, and undermining democracy itself. And so, in some ways, you can't think about new economic systems and alternative systems without grappling with the paradoxes and complexity of philanthropy.

**Bollier:** You use the term 'philanthro-capitalism,' which is often described as this unholy merging of the two. Tell me more about that.

**Ladha:** In some ways, the only type of philanthropy there is in the institutional sense is philanthro-capitalism. This was a term initially coined by an *Economist* editor named Matthew Bishop.

In seriousness, in earnest, he was writing a book in the 2000s to say that the Bill [00:04:00] Gates's and the Elon Musks of the world will somehow be our white Messiah saviors. And then Vandana Shiva has recently written and compiled an editorial book that has many essays, under this rubric of philanthro-capitalism, and she goes to the heart of it: they don't even see the irony in accumulating huge amounts of wealth through extractive destructive means, and then doling out some change to people who they deem worthy in the first place.

And so it's a closed-loop cycle that perpetuates inequality, creates ecological collapse and climate change, and actually concentrates wealth even further, wealth and power and decision-making.

**Bollier:** So, to that extent, they're using that term with a straight face, not with any sense of implied or veiled criticism.

**Ladha:** Unfortunately, that's the old Marx line 'first tragedy and then farce'. That's the state of philanthropy right now.

**Bollier:** Lynn, you worked in the belly of the beast, so to speak. Tell me [00:05:00] your journey to this topic and what you learned from within the institutional philanthropy complex.

**Murphy:** I was kind of an accidental former philanthropoid, and I say philanthropoid because of the way that you have to take on the mimetic structure of the institutional logic [in which] you're operating. And I was working on what was then often called global development and international education, and with a piece of how do you improve the quality of schooling for the poorest children.

And so I was working at the nexus of institutional philanthropy, the international development regime around this institution of schooling. And I bring that in because, schooling for me is the place where the logic of modernity comes in for billions of children, for youth, around the world. And it's a very new and recent project. And I found that both because of the institutional constraints within philanthropy and the Occidental mind that constructs modernity through [00:06:00] schooling, there was kind of a double bind that I couldn't get out of and then a continuation of the hubris of being a white woman, sitting in California, deciding about what education outcomes were valid for children in the geopolitical South.

And even with a lot of room for flexibility in terms of grant making or so-called strategy, you're still within these institutional logics. You're still within this "power over" paradigm. And as much as you can work on lines of solidarity, there's only so far you can go. So my journey into coming into capitalism and what we talk about with post-capitalism, what we can get into, was through this – working on advocacy, policy, the institution of schooling, which I could see the depth of the logic of modernity and said, We have to get to the roots of systems of domination and exploitation that are rooted in what we talk about, late-stage capitalism, or this latest chapter, [00:07:00] neoliberalism.

So that on the one side – and you asked a little bit about cosmology and why it is that we're bringing these things together – and in that regard, it was looking at the depth of the Occidental gaze, looking at the depth of how positivism was driving our entire way of seeing what matters; who gets to decide what matters; how what matters is then worked with. And it kept bringing me back into. We have to actually get underneath even epistemology to actually understand the ontology, the very gaze by which we're seeing reality itself.

**Bollier:** Let's explain or try to explore a little bit what we mean by the Occidental gaze and the positive perspective.

What are some of the meanings of modernity? How do they affect how money is dispensed or how judgments are made about what's worthwhile?

**Ladha:** I often think of this unholy trinity when it comes to the gaze of modernity. At the top of the pyramid is the idea of separation: that human beings are separate from the living [00:08:00] world; that the dualism that came from Enlightenment logic and was globalized around the world; that says that our mind and our bodies are dualistically separated; [that says] we have these God-like minds and these animal bodies that need to be tamed.

That logic then proceeded to create the so-called 'other' all around the world, and it merged with the colonialist imperialist project of Eurocentric domination in the 1500s. And so what it did was it said that the Christian, white male is at the top of that hierarchy, and every so-called other, especially indigenous people, brown and black bodies, female body, humans, et cetera, are all subhuman. And so the separation is deeply rooted in our alienation from the living world.

And then the left side, let's say, of this pyramid is materialism, which is that we can reduce the entire world to its constituent parts. The entire world can be reduced to the atom, the atom to the neutron, the proton, the electron and now with quantum physics, the quanta, [00:09:00] the quark, the photon, what have you. The entire project of scientific materialism is to reduce the world into this grand unifying theory of everything.

And then we get to the rationalism part, which is the third leg in this trinity, which says that not only can we understand the entire world through this lens of separation and materialism, that we are actually entitled to see the world in this way. And we're entitled to hold all the knowledge of the cosmos. And this is the eventual goal and the teleology of the human enterprise.

And it's within this, there's this deep anthropocentric hubris and arrogance, and there's this belief that we are on top of some progress arrow that's just moving forever to the top right of some quadrant, and that human beings are the most evolved species, and therefore we have the right to destroy the living world. And we have the right to perceive ourselves as these separate God-like beings on the planet as opposed to, let's say, the youngest, most immature [00:10:00] species on the planet.

**Bollier:** That's a fantastic overview of modernity. I was struck by a quote that you had in one of your chapters by Vanessa Andreotti, and I'll just read it quickly because I think it summarizes and extends what you just said:

“This structure of modernity has created a feedback loop that starts with fears, a fear of chaos, a fear of loss, a fear of death, a fear of pain, a fear of pointlessness, worthlessness, and meaninglessness that's become allocated desires for specific things. So, for example, the fear of scarcity becomes a desire for accumulation, and then these desires within the modern structures and feedback loops become entitlements. The desire for accumulation becomes, in turn, a perceived entitlement to property or ownership.”

So you're really kind of drilling down to some basic elements of the modern mind and what's driving things and situating philanthropy within that whole structure. This is not just some policy driven analysis of philanthropy.

It's like going down to the brass tacks [00:11:00] of what needs to be rethought, reinvented.

**Ladha:** Yeah, that, you know, our sense on this and when you said, you know, how do you link cosmology and philanthropy and the super-structure of neoliberalism is that these things are inseparable. The way in which we gaze at the world and perceive it as separate and inert and master-able influences the very way in which we acquire goods and services and extract resources from the Earth, which then leads to this externality of philanthropy.

And so they're all connected. And so we are told that philanthropy will somehow be part of the solution, that it's going to right the ills of capitalism, and yet it is a subset of neoliberal capitalism itself. It is an extension of the project of totalitarian domination.

**Bollier:** Lynn, tell me some stories of how you experience that and as a program officer, how some of those things manifested.

**Murphy:** Well, I worked a lot in different...well, the grants, I should say, that we were [00:12:00] giving, we were working a lot in different communities, in different places around the world. And the first thing that I saw again and again and again was the reification of what is community. It's treated as if community is an entity that is somehow almost static across place, and it is very context illiterate.

And even with that nuance of context, the system itself cannot handle the complexity that it requires to recognize that context is alive, that it breathes; that it is informing; that there is a way in which place, setting, peoples, language, culture, linguistics, mimetics is all part of the complexity of what comes together, whether it be social or ecological programs that are trying to move in certain ways. So it was at that level of the depth that I kept seeing it again and again, and the inability of the institutional logic to be able to handle various [00:13:00] cosmologies and sit in the friction between various cosmologies, and then from that place try to listen rather than assert. And then what shall we do?

So this was the thing that I just saw come again and again and again and again, and there was no way around it other than a re-, not just -imagining, but a taking all of us into an inner journey to work with the mimetic landscape of how we perceive reality itself to change our very way of being, to approach the way that we're changing our doing in a contextually relevant and sensitive manner.

**Bollier:** And I assume that both of you were impelled to do this book because there's so little deep critique of philanthropy out there, at least going to this level.

**Murphy:** I have often found that part of why I ended up continuing as a consultant with various foundations is after I stepped out and resigned, there was still those that wanted somehow another perspective, or someone to really [00:14:00] show where the project of colonization and modernity was still influencing all of it.

But what I saw again and again was the action became, 'Tell us where we're wrong and kind of whack us, but then we don't have to actually change our behavior very much.' So the action becomes the critique rather than the response and the re-creation or reorientation.

And so for us it was like, okay, if we're going to work on this, and we're going to work on this at a moment where we're in the meta crisis, or the poly crisis, or the Anthropocene. There's a moment that we know we're in a major moment of collapse, cascading. How do we find a way into a more honest gaze of what is this enterprise?

A more honest gaze of what is going to require not just philanthropy, but the whole philanthropy-NGO-industrial complex to actually meet this moment and respond. And so this is what kind of led us into questions of cosmology, questions of what is a just transition plus what...we actually use [00:15:00] your language...plus ontological shifts or OntoShifts. This both/and way that we need to approach this moment.

**Bollier:** So really it's taking a larger perspective on philanthropy as a symptom of capitalist modernity and all of its pathologies, from the individualism to the scientific materialism, the corporate power, private property. I mean, that seems such a tall order to tackle.

How does one imagine a post-capitalist philanthropy? How do we get there? Or is that the right question?

**Ladha:** There's a line in the book that says, if you do not have a critique of capitalist modernity, you are contextually irrelevant. But if all you have is a critique, you are spiritually and creatively impoverished.

To unpack that, the first part is if we do not understand the oxygen by which we breathe, which is late-stage capitalism, neoliberalism – this very particular chapter in this long march of capitalist modernity: separation from the [00:16:00] living world, materialism, rational positivism, scarcity, control, entitlement, et cetera – then we don't understand the context we're in, and so we have to start with a structural, historical, constellational worldview. But if that's where we end. And so the first part is really a call to presence for the new age and people who are trying to bypass the kind of deep historicity and the ongoing coloniality of this moment.

And then the second part is if all you have is a critique, then you are creatively and spiritually impoverished. And that's really a call to presence for the Left. Yes, critique is critical, but we also need to create these embodied cultures of transition.

**Bollier:** You had mentioned in your book that a post-capitalist world is one that is post-anthropocentric, trans-rationalist, post-transactional, anti-patriarchal, post-hierarchical, anti-colonialist, and anti-racist.

Tell me how those begin to get some [00:17:00] coordinated traction as a different vision and how philanthropy can start to help that journey.

**Murphy:** So there has been a lot of discussion, I would say in recent years and probably got accelerated through the pandemic, of people understanding the inner work. And often we'll talk about resiliency, or there's work that looks at trauma.

A lot of that is still rooted in a lot of a Western tradition. It's still trying to heal us to be more effective in functioning and better, if I could say, citizens of modernity. For us, we're trying to go one step deeper into actually when we speak about other values, sets of solidarity, empathy, altruism, nonviolence, inter-beingness itself, we're trying to get not just to values that are floating around outside as some sort of mimetic structures that we can catch and try to eat. But we're saying that there's something within us that we have to cultivate other states of being, other ways that we [00:18:00] are perceiving this world, other knowledge systems, the way that we make sense of the world, other ways that we're actually living kinship and reciprocity.

Other ways that we're working for restoration not for means to ends, but to try to come back into the harmony with life force itself. In the secular sector of philanthropy and NGOs, to use the word 'sacred' is almost taboo, and yet, life itself is sacred. And so we're invoking: How do we come back into right relationship with life force itself?

How do we see that and... our very way of being? And in this way we can start to then work on what is a Just Transition plus this ontological shift, these ontological shifts. So we're not saying get rid of rationality, we're saying that it needs to sit alongside other ways of being and knowing, and it's not that it's elevated over one or another.

**Bollier:** This must explain really your accent on the mystical [00:19:00] and the mythological and somatic ways of knowing. You know, the body knows things beyond rational argumentation and that you have a lot of exercises actually in your book for trying to listen to your heart and your body and try to get beyond some of the cognitive prejudices we might have. Talk a little bit about these exercises and how we might cultivate some of these other ways of knowing.

**Ladha:** So I think this is like the critical question for us to grapple with and to be in inquiry about, and we don't necessarily have the "answers," right? Nor do we believe in like an objective truth with the capital T.

We believe in multiple simultaneous ontologies. And maybe for the audience, we just unpack ontology. And I'm sure people who listen to the Commons podcast know, but, you know, 'onto' comes from the Greek word for being, and ontology is essentially the philosophy of being, it's the is-ness of the world, how we define reality.

And historically, it sat [00:20:00] between epistemology and metaphysics. And so epistemology is 'Why do we know what we know?' And metaphysics is the, the bigger questions, 'meta' like over the physical world. 'Why are we here? Where do we think we're going? What is the role of the human enterprise in the broader congress of life?' And all of that.

And one of the things we say in the book is, we refer to the work of Karen Barad, who talks about ethico-onto-epistemology, which is a mouthful. She's a quantum physicist and then became a philosopher and is, you know, one of the grandmothers of post-humanist, post-anthropocentric philosophy.

What she's saying is that you cannot separate our ethics from the way we see the world and why we think we know what we know; that these distinctions in academia are false distinctions. What becomes central then is ontology itself. So the very gaze by which we look at the world, how we see, relate, dissect, interact with the world is actually creating, [00:21:00] a path dependency for how we then behave and how we assimilate knowledge.

The thing we think we're approaching is determined by the lens by which we're approaching it. And in some ways it's so basic, right? These philosophical terms belie the fact that this is the most basic approach to understanding reality itself.

Indigenous cultures are initiation cultures, and part of the role of the initiation of the adolescent is to be born again into a cosmology that is relational; that is village minded; that is about a broader inter-being, so we can live for something beyond our shallow small 's', self-identity. And that is really the call that we're trying to bring into this book and bring into the philanthropic space.

We are in a trauma culture and we want to transition into an initiation culture, and they have very similar patterning. You have the severance from the [00:22:00] world, then you have the integration back into the world, and then you have the person you are post-initiation. And trauma does very similar things: it severs us; it makes us reconfigure into the world in a new way, and then we are this hybrid being that has incorporated the traumatic events.

In order to move to an initiation culture, we have to know what we're doing. We have to move beyond the live-work-consume-die paradigm that we're born into. And this is also central to the education project. None of us have ratified neoliberalism as the operating system we want to live in. But as soon as we're born, our entire education is directed towards vocational means to go to university, so we can be doctors, lawyers, accountants, architects, what have you, to prop up capitalist modernity. And so if we're going to address the deep civilizational ills, this meta-crisis that we're in, we're going to have to step back and reassess the gaze, which we've been entrained, conditioned, and [00:23:00] socialized into.

And there's no one way to that. When we look at indigenous cultures or mystical traditions, the entire aim of those cultures is the transcendence of subject/object. The entire aim is to transcend the idea that I am the subject that has full agency and choice, and everything around me is an object to be 'objectified' or 'commodified,' to reenter the stream of life that is more ecological and systems-based rather than linear, Cartesian, Newtonian conceptions of the machine metaphor.

We are taught that we are these central cogs in this machine as opposed to one part of a living ecology that is in active dialogue with us. If we are beings within a being within the Gaian entelechy, within the whole system worldview, then we are in dialogue with this animate being. We are part of it, and it is part of us. And so that shift in gaze also then relates to a [00:24:00] shift in dialogue, a shift in practice.

We move to consent, we move to requests for support. And so part of what we say in the book is like we could go think about all the acupuncture points for the neoliberal system and try to logic our way to a new way of being, but without changing the ontology and the consciousness, creating new structures is going to replicate the same thing.

And non-dualistically, we could work on our 'inner-work,' and consciousness and ontology, but without new structures, we are going to replicate the same neoliberal paradigm. And so it's like ontology feeds structure and structure feeds ontology.

**Bollier:** It's funny, your description is analogous to the journey that my co-author Silke Helfrich and I had in writing our book because at a certain point we realized that the economic framework, the modernistic, rational framework of conventional commons scholarship was just not going to get us there.

And indeed, much of the language was pointing us in the wrong [00:25:00] direction. Yet, we quaked a little bit at going as deep to ontology and epistemology because we're not professional philosophers, but we knew that that's where the answers for the change were going to be. In a way, politics has become ontological because it's embedded at such a deep level these days. And indeed, power itself these days projects its own ontologies, which then become controlling without having all the nasty problems of coercion, or you can just internalize all these values. What I'm saying is: I'm resonating very much to the journey you've taken, albeit within the philanthropic structures, that we need to go deeply to this ethnico-ontological epistemological shift.

That's a huge mouthful, and I'm afraid it's so abstract that it doesn't... what do people do with it in their everyday lives? Maybe that's the question, how do you operationalize it?

**Ladha:** One thing I'll say is that *Free, Fair, and Alive* was a huge influence on [00:26:00] us.

**Bollier:** Well, thank you. I mean, there are so many of these strands and rich authors out there, like Karen Barad, you had mentioned, and many others who are getting down to this level.

But the problem is consolidating and popularizing some of this, let alone operationalizing it. My pet theory is that the commons, without maybe some of this intellectual apparatus, gives a way



of practice and experience for one to start to get into the right frame and worldview. To start to acculturate yourself.

Because I do wonder how a program officer sitting in a high tower in Manhattan is going to read your book and then say, “Oh, now I'm going to do this instead.” We have these challenges of how to move this out.

**Murphy:** This is where I was reflecting on your earlier question of why do we have exercises and other things in the book, and so I just wanted to offer: When I was that program officer and I was again looking at the institution, the legacy of schooling and what happens for [00:27:00] billions of people and is one of the key entry points into the neoliberal system and the expansion and massification of that schooling into every corner of the planet.

What I continued to see was this institution that was colonizing mind and body, and we acknowledge often the colonization of mind, but we don't acknowledge the colonization of body. And that literally we're sitting in chairs in tiny little rows and not moving. And so when I left the foundation, I went and I actually studied human movement because I was looking at this so-called age of Enlightenment that I saw us getting to more and more of a dissociative state into the supposed rationalist technical mind, but was much more in an amygdala hijack, if I can say it that way. That wasn't actually in the limbic system and/or in the neocortex. And so I went to understanding body-speak and the mind-body connection as a way of seeing that nature is not something out here.[00:28:00] That we ourselves are nature. That this body is every much part and parcel of this living world, and it's back to this life force itself.

So we put these reflection exercises and others in the book not that they are the right way, but as a provocation for us to find our way into a praxis that gets us into whatever division we've set up in our lives.

Whether it be the mind-body split, whether it be that I perceive Alnoor as separate from me, or I perceive that I am my egoic thoughts, rather than that I may be the gut biome informing even the words that are coming out of my mouth. And/or you know, we put art in the book as well. Whatever it is, that's going to allow us to open up our gaze.

And I feel that movement, and we know this now from cognitive science and many other things, this embodied cognition, this way of actually knowing in the body is one of the key ways that allows us to [00:29:00] start this gateway into some of the ontological shifts that are necessary.

**Bollier:** It remind me of the often quoted JK Gibson-Graham quote, “If to change ourselves is to change our worlds, and the relation is reciprocal, then the project of history making is never a distant one, but always right here on the borders of our sensing, thinking, feeling, moving bodies.”

You know, it captures that nicely. We can always start with our bodies and ourselves, and then start to build out the structures we need. I mean, it reminds me that I think that we need to have a broader, richer conversation between the white West and indigenous cultures to start to have a richer dialogue. We're all stuck in modernity. We're all in hybrids not strict, pure binaries. So let's open up that conversation.

**Ladha:** Yea, well, one of the things we talk about in the book is that under the onto-shift section is this move from monoculture, neoliberalism as monoculture, right? If [00:30:00] neoliberalism had its way, we would all have Apple computers and Nike shoes and be eating Monsanto GMO foods.

That's the logic of this thing. It's conglomeration, it's monopoly, it's globalized totalitarianism. And so the antidote logic to that is polyculture. Many ways of knowing and being. This is where we invoke this idea of trans-rationality, bringing in many tongues, many approaches, many types of logic, including intuition, including listening to the wisdom of plants, including listening to our ancestral whispers.

To make it very concrete: Lynn used this word 'praxis' and I think that's central. Praxis is theory and practice being applied in this kind of cyclical, discursive way. So you contemplate something, you spend time with the theory aspect of it, and then you try to apply that into the world and over and over and over. It's an unending process.

And so, for example, this computer that Lynn and I are dialing in from is sitting on a wooden [00:31:00] table, and the way we've been socialized into seeing this table is dead, inert matter that has no value besides its utilitarian function to me in this moment. And I'm entitled to do with it what I want, right?

That's how deeply somatically, cognitively, spiritually, colonized my lens is. Now an alternative ontology, I'm not even saying this is the right ontology, but an alternative ontology, we can call it a mystical indigenous ontology, would be to say that this piece of wood is kin, that I am in deep relationality with. It has sacrificed its life to be with us here now; it has its own agency; we share atoms, we share oxygen. We are in an ecosystem, in a web of life that has entangled us in ways I will never be able to understand with my rational mind. And, as such, it is proper that I am in dialogue with this being that I ask for its consent [00:32:00] as best as I can, and that there is some, at the very least two-way, if not sort of infinite exchange between the two of us. Now, we can say that this ontological shift is not a turn of key, right? It's not like you can just go from materialist, rationalist, separatist worldview to a relational, animistic, quantum, queer worldview immediately.

But our deep time ancestors lived in this way. This way of seeing the world lives in our DNA. It lives in our epigenetics. It lives in cultural constructs that still exist today and that we can access this way of being, and that the inner and outer work are not separate, right? The idea that I'm going to operate in the world as a capitalist, dealing in abstract thought, treating everything like its inert matter, walking around the world entitled, and then I'm going to go do my twenty minutes of meditation, my transcendental meditation twice a day, and I'm somehow going to achieve a state of enlightenment is part of the neoliberal [00:33:00] fallacy, it's part of the spiritual trap of what we could call spiritual materialism.

That something else is being asked of us. You know, as Karen Barad says, we meet the universe halfway. That when we shift our gaze, wave functions collapse into superpositions of possibility that the living world is aware of our intention and our consciousness and our ontology, and that requires practice because we have these atrophied muscles from living in capitalist modernity for however long you want to define it, 5,000 years.

**Bollier:** And just to give that idea a little support and extension, there is quite a surge of interest in what is sometimes called the new animism or simply acknowledging that plants, trees, mushrooms are this big, interconnected web of aliveness. We're starting to realize that the Earth is not inert. We've sort of known that, but it scientifically has not been developed as much.

So, I think it's interesting that there are a lot of converging trends, not just from people who are cultural theorists, [00:34:00] but as you mentioned, Karen Barad was a physicist. Now we're seeing a lot of plant biologists and eco-philosophers and others starting to develop this notion. So it's kind of an interesting moment with these different converging disciplines saying, "Oh yeah, life is relational, life is alive." It's not what we received after 500 years from the Enlightenment of the separation and rationality that you mentioned.

**Murphy:** Maybe it's worth just pointing out that we're remembering when I say that it was intentional and here I'm borrowing from the work of Jason Hickle and others that points out how intentional the stamping out of this relational way of being, the stamping out of the commons, the stamping out of the animate ways of seeing and introducing dualism itself in separate subject/object. And it's, when I say 'remembering,' I say, and why I say the body again, it's coming back to something that has been a [00:35:00] very intentional project at this last wave of where we see capitalism over, I don't know, 800 years or so, that was used as a justification to dehumanize and to enact slavery, genocide, and also to thingify, to commodify the living planet.

So this is why we're trying to get to these root systems and find ways for where we can open this ontological gaze. These ontological shifts, as it is, and we say shifts with an 's' because it's not any one thing. It's all of us, as you said before, are caught in the constructs of modernity, or I often talk about we're in checkmate of capitalism, and yet there's still something that we're trying to cultivate within ourselves, within our relations, within the way that we perceive reality and therefore how we then behave and respond to move us in another way.

**Bollier:** You talked in your book about some philanthropic alternatives that can maybe help [00:36:00] develop this relationality within philanthropy, such as the Three Horizons framework that Bill Sharpe has developed. I know the Just Transition is often cited in that regard. I know I would cite the commons as a vehicle for this. Other people like Bayo Akomolafe talk about investigating fishers, borderlands, and marginal spaces where the not-yet worlds can arise.

Talk a little bit about these kind of practical operational things that a program officer, a foundation president might embark upon and not just have a seminar room discussion about these massive abstractions.

**Murphy:** I can start with just a couple of words because often the Bill Sharpe framework is one that people may be familiar with. It's pretty simple and pretty elegant in that way. And it was one of the ways that we were trying to map where different people were. And so horizon one, in this framework, the way we interpret it is Horizon One is kind of our reformist agenda.[00:37:00] So it's the Green New Deal; it's working on democracy, it's working on, in some ways even, equity, but equity within a capitalist system.

And so then Horizon Two would be, well, 'what starts to push us out of these deeper logics of domination and modernity itself, to move into a transition out of it.' It's a disruption of the status quo, the very deepest level, and this is where some of the work of the Just Transition tries to situate itself, or does situate itself.

Horizon Three would say what actually would be a post-capitalist reality itself, and this is the unknown, in a way. And so as we were doing some of the research for the book, what we kept noticing again and again is that sometimes the content, for example, the Just Transition may be situated in Horizon Two, but the tactics and the funding were still very much in the Horizon One, reformist agenda kind of status quo. So how we pursue the Just [00:38:00] Transition is still within the ways that we have seen movements organizing, or the way that we're still trying to work within moving equity or moving the deck chairs around the Titanic, as Alnoor likes to say. And so for us, we were trying to listen deeply for: What is this transition pathway?

What is it that's going to actually walk us out of these systems towards something that's unknown? So back to that foundation president or this program officer. There's some basic things that are not necessarily new, but we're offering ways in, and we don't have the answer because the very thing that we're trying to interrupt is our addiction to solutions themselves.

These solutions are inextricably linked to the very logic of what got us into this mess in the first place. So the space of Horizon Two is where we feel is very kind of fertile and fecund. So, at a basic, just the beginning stage might suggest, we don't [00:39:00] know how long capital is going to have value. We know that we are entering a time with a lot of planetary feedback loops.

We know we're entering hyperinflation or deflation and there's going to be a lot of volatility. So the provocation is, Why not use capital in this moment to liberate capital in service of life? So that would suggest getting rid of endowments more than just spend out in a lifetime, but more actively and transition some of what's now held in endowments to Land Backs or to the commons or other things. We could get into this more about what we speak to within that.

But it's both moving these resources in ways like liberating the flows of capital alongside this work of the ontological shifts. So it's actually asking for a different relationality in that process. So that would suggest perhaps giving five to ten year unrestricted both grants or giveaway of the [00:40:00] endowments to those that people are in relationship with.

So we're not trying to again say, this is the answer or the way we're trying to find, what is the notion of kinship that's not power over, but more radically I would say, move the monies into the hands of those who are often stewarding the protection of biodiversity right now, or those who are actually in the geopolitical south, who are at the front lines of many of the movements that are having to be in active resistance while their active resistance is also of living in coherence with life.

**Bollier:** I'm struck by how this larger framework of discussion helps provide a really powerful rationale for what in isolation might be seen as crazy. Or really out there, you know – solidarity, philanthropy, or restorative economics. It's like, "that's crazy," but if you put it in this larger framework of getting to that different ontological shift, it makes much more sense. And you actually do mention [00:41:00] some of these shifts, like shifting decision-making to grantees, having deeper relationships of trust with grantees, and others. You mentioned shifting endowments and resources to community sovereignty, you know, having quicker time horizons for grant making, things like that are ways that you can begin to approach that different worldview of philanthropy and have a positive effect in making the transition.

But I'd like to hear Alnoor.

**Ladha:** Yeah, no, I love this provocation of applied ontology. I'll give it a shot, right? Here's some of the premises I play with. We have maybe at best, ten to twenty years left of capitalist modernity and this current way of living. You cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet; and we have a growth/debt-based system.

So this system is a self-terminating logic. It's going to collapse on its own weight. You can call it whatever you want. End times, the Eschaton, whatever. So now the question is to the program officer or the president, let's say at Ford [00:42:00] Foundation, Who do you want to be archetypally at the end of time?

Do you want to be a money hoarder that's doling out small amounts of grants to those people you deem worthy from a colonized, hierarchical, patriarchal lens? Or do you want to declare to the living universe that is aware of your action – because you are not separate from a consciousness level – there's one of us here having a distributed, cognitive, spiritual experience, and none of us are free until all of us are free as the old abolitionist saying goes. And who will you be when there's no guns and no money, metaphorically, for technology and resources?

Who's going to fly your private plane? Who's going to guard your gilded gate? Probably no one. And so this money is not yours. It's the world's collective wealth. It's the world's collective endowment that you have disproportionate stewardship over right now.

You do not deserve that. You are not more industrious or intelligent. You are probably a mix of lucky and greedy if [00:43:00] you are sitting on disproportionate capital right now because that has come from genocide, imperialism, colonization, enslavement, et cetera, right? All capital is tainted historically. It was invented in Western Europe around the same time as colonization and debt-based currency was imposed on peoples around the world.

And so there's spiritual and karmic implications to being a money hoarder at the end of time. And most people around you will not have that conversation because most One Percenters have Byzantine courts surrounding them that they employ. And somebody who's employed through your capital and your accumulation is not going to tell you what you're doing, has deep, spiritual and material consequences.

That's a form of applied ontology, which is there's something bigger happening here that you have no idea about, and you have to archetypally choose if you are going to give that money away and realize it's a burden, and that there's people out there who are better served to steward that capital in the form of, let's say, biophysical assets, Land Back [00:44:00] projects, post-capitalist infrastructure, the commons, and that the starting place of all ontology is ignorance.

I'll say that again: the starting place for all ontologies is ignorance. If we could just contemplate our ignorance and even start to grok the consequences of our behavior, we would behave very differently.

**Bollier:** The problem is when you're ensconced in large institutions and your identity and education and culture all reinforce that, it's hard to break that consensus, you might say, cultural consensus and break out of it. And so there's kind of a problem of breaking down these invisible structures that keep us immured within them. I mean, I suppose there's been instances of this many times in history, of course, but this is a particularly high stakes example of where we need to shift the paradigm that we're all imprisoned in.

Even the people who want to escape it find it difficult because their livelihoods, their survival may require participating in it.

**Ladha:** Yeah, and this is part [00:45:00] of what we say when we get into the praxis section, is we have to start by having a critique of capitalist modernity. But that's not enough, right? We have to move to being conscientious objectors of a life-destroying system, and that's uncomfortable for people. But if you want a Wikipedia page and, you know, a director title at Google and whatever they're selling on tap, you are going to be trapped by that existing system.

When you find your identity in community, in care, in the broader congress of life, you are anchored in something bigger than you.

And that was the aim of mystical, spiritual indigenous traditions. Of culture's worthy of the word culture, that the entire society led itself and led its people to these initiations, to these transcensions of subject object through whatever way whirling dervish, plant medicine, mantra, yantra, tantra, silence. And that this inner work and this outer work are [00:46:00] inextricable; that we are declaring to the living world who we are at every moment. And that is a much more interesting assignment than being a cog in the neoliberal wheel.

**Bollier:** The mission, the book title that I've encountered recently, *Hospicing Modernity*, finding ways to extricate ourselves from modernity and rediscover some of these ancient ways of being. That's part of the challenge now as well. It's sort of a worthy, creative challenge that we all need to start to engage with and find the fulcrums and places to plant our feet to move forward on.

**Murphy:** In a way where Alnoor and I sat with our recasting the Bill Sharpe's Three Horizon, and the end of the book, we look at this piece of what if the first part of this, the recast of horizon one, in a spiral logic is that we need to surrender. And what we mean by this and the way I feel it within myself and what I would say to those who are [00:47:00] sitting in their jobs on a daily basis is have a really honest conversation innerly with where we are addicted to comfort, to certainty, to knowing where we are addicted, to distract ourselves, to alleviate whatever anxiety comes up within us when we actually sit in, not the future phenomena of the meta crisis, but what is here right now.

That there's a really deep inner work of actually surrender and letting go of control, letting go of certainty. And I would say this too, the way that foundations try to look at, you know, impact investing and trying to get to the outcome. All of that is like, it's like the leaves of the deeper roots of the trees of a very deep inner reckoning with this.

And the second piece that we offer is that perhaps where we are as -- and I'm going to say species, humans, walking on this planet right [00:48:00] now -- is that perhaps we're in a moment of deep initiation as a species right now. So, if that's the case, how can we actually reckon with and traverse this threshold that we're on, where we're sitting both within the checkmate of modernity and capitalist modernity in this latest chapter of neoliberalism, and people have mortgages and they have to buy the food, and pay for the Zoom accounts and all of that.

While we're also reckoning with the thousands of years of these consequences of what we've been doing and what are other ways that we can find our way into kinship, into right relationship with the more-than-human realm, into even the restoration of the soils that we put concrete over continually. And so how do we reckon with this moment of meeting the threshold?

And in this third, our Horizon Three, if you will, in this spiral logic, is that then we're finding a way to both find our way back into right relationship with life and death. Alnoor started off [00:49:00] talking with initiation ceremonies and trauma culture, and there's something in initiation that acknowledges, it cozies up to, the preciousness of life that is inextricably linked to death.

And so we're trying to find our way back into the continuum of life and death that quantum physics and others talks to us about. But we somehow have separated ourselves out of, through the holograph of projection of this Cartesian logic realm of form. And in that way, we're kind of invoking walking each other into the unknown.

And so this may sound really mystical for the person who's sitting there in their daily life in what I call J.O.B.s. And yet it's a call for us to actually come back into an honest reckoning with where we are right now and how not to give solutions, but to continue to ask, Who shall I be and how in answering who shall I be, then how do I respond?

**Bollier:** [00:50:00] Well, Alnoor and Lynn, I want to thank you for offering a very beautifully designed, eloquent book on this topic and provoking some discussions that need to happen not only in philanthropy, but more broadly. So thank you for bringing this to our attention, and I wish you the best of luck with the book.

**Ladha:** Thank you, David. Thank you for having us.

**Murphy:** Yeah, thank you so much, David.