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Interview by Mark Karlin with George Monbiot,
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Becoming Unstoppable

"We do not need to change human nature. We need to reveal it."

You begin **your book** with the importance of the stories we accept as our personal narratives as members of society. How did we end up with the neoliberal story prevailing?

► Starting with the formation by Friedrich Hayek and others of the Mont Pelerin society in 1947, the neoliberals, with sponsorship from some very rich backers, built a kind of International. They set up think tanks, sponsored and captured academic departments, brought journalists and editors into their meetings, and managed to insert advisers into key political departments. They knew that, when Keynesian social democracy was broadly accepted by parties across the political spectrum, that they had no chance of immediate success. But they were patient. Across the course of 30 years, they built their networks, refined their arguments, and brought more and more people into their orbit. They knew that when an economic or political crisis came along, they would be ready to go. As Milton Friedman remarked, "when the time came that you had to change ... there was an alternative ready there to be picked up".

But most importantly, they had something which their opponents did not: a new story. Every generation or so, political stories need to be refreshed or replaced, partly because the politics they seed runs out of steam or becomes corrupted or weakened by attacks, partly because people become bored and complacent. This is the grand mistake that those of us who want a generous and inclusive politics have made: we have failed to produce a new, well-developed political story since John Maynard Keynes wrote his *General Theory* in 1936. Our failure to do so is a formula for eventual collapse.

Neoliberalism is, at heart, a self-serving racket: an elaborate theory that serves as an excuse for the very rich to release themselves from the constraints of democracy: tax, regulation, decent pay and conditions for their workers, care for the living world and all the other decencies we owe to each other. But the reason it caught on is that it was framed within the classic political narrative structure, that has worked again and again throughout history, that I call the Restoration Story. This goes as follows:

Disorder afflicts the land, caused by powerful and nefarious forces working against the interests of humanity. The hero — who might be one person or a group of people — revolts against this disorder, fights the nefarious forces, overcomes them despite great odds and restores order.

This is a fundamental metanarrative, to which we are innately attuned. They fit their politics around this structure, and told their story with panache and persuasive power. The reason we are stuck with neoliberalism, despite its manifest failures, particularly the financial crash of 2008, is that its opponents have produced no new, coherent Restoration Story of their own. The best they have to offer is a microwaved version of the remnants of 1950s Keynesianism, which simply will not work in the 21st-century.

This is what I seek to address in [Out of the Wreckage](#), which learns from the success of neoliberalism and other movements which have used this narrative framing, and tells a whole new Restoration Story that I believe is appropriate for our times.

Implicit and explicit in your book is the contention that people are by nature altruistic and communal. Given the current triumph of the rugged individualism narratives in most developed and extracting nations, what evidence underlies your contention that we inherently are part of a belonging society?

► Over the past 20 years or so, there has been a remarkable convergence of findings in neuroscience, psychology, anthropology and evolutionary biology. They all point to the fact that humankind, as [an article in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*](#) puts it, is “spectacularly unusual when compared to other animals” in our degree of altruism. There’s a list of references to scientific papers on this subject in [Out of the Wreckage](#).

We also have an astonishing capacity for empathy, and a tendency towards cooperation that is rivalled among mammals only by the naked mole rat. These tendencies are innate. We evolved in the African savannahs: a world of fangs and claws and horns and tusks. We survived despite being weaker and slower than both our potential predators and most of our prey. We did so through developing, to an extraordinary degree, a capacity for mutual aid. As it was essential to our survival, this urge to cooperate was hard-wired into our brains through natural selection.

But the great tragedy we confront is that this extraordinary good nature has been hidden from us. Partly by our own perceptions. We have an inherent tendency to look out for danger. The violent and destructive behaviour of the few is more salient in our minds than the altruistic and cooperative behaviour of the many.

Of course, in any nation, there are people who do not share the general tendency towards altruism and empathy. We call them psychopaths, and they comprise about 1% of the population. Unfortunately they are disproportionately represented at the top levels of

government and business. The current US president is a good example. We see them, and the way they behave, and tell ourselves that this is what human beings are like. It is not. It is what 1% of human beings are like.

But the other reason for this tragedy of misperception is that we are immersed in a virulent ideology of extreme individualism and competition, which tells us, against all the scientific evidence, that our dominant characteristics are selfishness and greed, and that this is a good thing, as it stimulates enterprise, which produces wealth, which will somehow trickle down to enrich everyone. This is the central ideology of neoliberalism, which valorises and centralises our worst tendencies, and celebrates the inequality and domination that results. One of our principal tasks is to replace this false story with what the science tells us about who we really are. We do not need to change human nature. We need to reveal it.

What is the difference between provision of services by the state and the role of robust communities?

► I do not want to dismiss the importance of state provision. It remains crucial. The character of a society is determined by whether or not the state provides good public services and a robust social safety net. When governments fail to defend their people in this way, insecurity and precarity rule, and society as a whole becomes harsher and more susceptible to fear, hatred and reaction. But we make a mistake if we imagine that we can leave everything to government alone.

The problem with relying only on government is that it contributes to alienation. The state delivers services from on high and tends to push people into silos to ensure they receive the right provision. Alongside other alienating forces, it can undermine social cohesion and the sense of belonging, if it is not balanced by community action. It can also leave us feeling dependent and highly vulnerable to budget cuts. In fact, many people now suffer the worst of both worlds: mutual aid and self-reliance were eroded by the necessity of state provision, but now that state provision is being withdrawn, leaving people with neither.

So we need, in pursuit of the new vision I'm seeking to promote, that I call the Politics of Belonging, to revive community life. There are two ways of doing so that interest me.

The first is the development of a rich participatory culture: community projects designed to bring in as many people as possible, some of which will require very little commitment or skill, which gradually proliferate into what practitioners call "thick networks". There are some spectacular examples, like the movement in Rotterdam that began by turning a disused Turkish bath house into a public reading room, and ended up spawning 1300 projects and community enterprises. Eventually, you reach a tipping point, at which

community participation becomes the norm rather than the exception, and so many social enterprises, cooperatives and other community businesses are formed that they begin to comprise a major part of the local economy.

The second is the reclamation of the commons, one of the four great sectors of the economy, that we always forget. (Our debates tend to focus on only two: the state and the market, neglecting both the commons and the household). The commons means resources owned, managed and shared equally by a community. It has been relentlessly attacked by both state and market. I believe that the restoration of the commons is crucial for the restoration of community, democracy, a sense of belonging and the living world. It is the commons that makes sense of community. In the book, I give examples of what this means and how the restoration can take place.

What is the Single Transferable Vote system and why is it important to writing a new story of belonging?

► This is the simplest and most direct form of proportional representation. At the moment we have, in countries such as the UK and the US, electoral systems that are designed to concentrate power and keep democratic aspirations in check. They ensure that some people's votes count for more than others. In the UK for example, our first-past-the-post electoral system creates two classes of voters: the majority, who live in constituencies in which power is unlikely to change hands, and can therefore be safely ignored, and a minority (reckoned at 800,000 out of 45 million electors) of floating voters in marginal constituencies, who must be courted and flattered and assuaged with all the resources at parties' disposal.

Proportional representation means that the number of seats allocated to a party in a parliament or congress should reflect the number of votes cast. Of the various forms of proportional representation, I favour the single transferable vote because, while it is directly proportional, it also sustains a sense of local attachment. Voters choose their representatives by name from geographical constituencies. It possesses a crucial political quality: simplicity. Voters write numbers on the ballot paper beside the names of the candidates they favour, in order of preference. If their first choice of candidate already has sufficient votes, or has no chance of election, their vote is switched during the count to their second choice.

How would participatory budgeting work?

► I think it would be better to ask how does it work? It's been working with great success in Brazil since 1989, and in other places more recently.

In the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, where it began, about 20 per cent of the municipal budget — the portion devoted to infrastructure — is allocated by the people. The process begins with public meetings that are used to review the previous year's budget and elect local representatives to the new budget council. Working with the people of their districts, these representatives agree local priorities, which are then submitted to the budget council. The council weights the distribution of money according to local levels of poverty and lack of infrastructure. In Porto Alegre, around 50,000 people are typically involved in the development of a budget. Yes, 50,000. Never let anyone tell you that people aren't ready for participatory democracy.

Brazilian cities with participatory budgets have experienced sharper declines in infant mortality and better healthcare and sanitation than those using traditional budgeting. The number of clinics, schools and nursery places in poor areas increases; water supply improves; rivers are cleaned up; poverty declines faster than elsewhere. The poor and their problems can no longer be ignored.

Local gangs and mafias lose their power, as people have other means of securing social protection. The exchange of favours and corrupt practices declines. The language of government changes, allowing anyone to understand the issues at stake and the means by which decisions are made. Good infrastructure comes to be seen by citizens as a right, rather than as a favour to be handed down from on high.

But exercising control over part of the municipal budget is not enough. We need to find ways to extend the process in two directions: to allow citizens to determine a greater portion of local budgets, and to introduce participatory budgeting at the state and national levels. This is initially difficult, but I believe there are various clever ways in which it can be done. It has to begin with the recruitment of sympathetic governments that are prepared to start experimenting with raising the scale of the model.

What is your answer to an individual who asks, "How do I begin to step into this new story of communal belonging?"

► I believe that the Big Organising models developed by the Sanders campaign in the US and the Corbyn/Momentum campaign in the UK provide a thrilling template for how we can change politics at the national level. The technique is in its infancy, and its use in both campaigns was experimental. But in both cases, from a standing start and under highly inauspicious circumstances, these models gave the candidates a real chance of gaining power.

Since then, the techniques have been developed and refined, and it's not going to be long before we see a series of spectacular wins by genuinely progressive candidates on the back of this model. But it can also be deployed, especially in conjunction with the very useful tactics developed by the Indivisible movement, in pursuit of specific campaigns. I feel we

are only just beginning to see what proliferating networks of volunteers using digital technology as well as direct human contact can now achieve. If we get this right, it is my belief that we will become unstoppable.