

# An Interview with Oli Mould

2021 JANUARY BY YATES NORTON

Oli Mould gave a talk titled ‘Anti-individualism, empathy and solidarity: toward a collective common creativity’ at Rupert as part of the 2020 programmes on care and interdependence. More information [here](#). In this interview, the curator of the public programmes, Yates Norton, speaks to Oli about the ideas he explored in that talk in relation to the pandemic.

Q. It’s been several months since you spoke at Rupert and explored a need to recognise interdependence and care as foundational aspects of living ethically. You charted a history of the rise of self-interest and individualism and how these tendencies had become naturalised in and by Western culture. Now we are in lockdown in a global pandemic and much of what you have written about has come into sharp relief. Can you speak about your experiences of this crisis in relation to the ideas of care, creativity and love you have been exploring?

The first wave of the pandemic, back in February and March 2020 was horrible for many people, not least because of the fear of the unknown situation—economically and biologically—that presented itself very, very quickly. But certainly here in the UK there was an explosion of mutual aid projects run by local communities, concerned residents, faith groups and even local youth clubs that swiftly mobilised to get food and shelter to the most vulnerable. While it was a horrific time for many, the outpouring of care and protection to the most vulnerable in our society was almost automatic. It showed that in times of acute crisis, people do mobilise in the right way. This has waned a bit in the subsequent months, or perhaps it has become more institutionalised as ‘bigger’ units have mobilised (like the government and NGOs) to replicate the services. Either way, the self-interest that characterised the rampant neoliberalism and governmental policy of

the first two decades of the 21st century seemed very fragile indeed during the pandemic.

Q. Both cultural and healthcare systems have been systematically devalued by many governments pursuing a neoliberal agenda. In what ways do you think the cultural and healthcare sectors learn from each other?

Through practice. Healthcare requires a holistic approach that requires multiple skills, people and crucially time. A broken leg may be easy to fix but the suicidal tendencies that caused that person to jump off a bridge and break their leg in the first place is not. There are multiple strands to caring for people, but too often it is compartmentalised and therefore not properly addressed. The same is true of cultural provision and participation; it is a collaborative social effort that cannot be atomised for profit. Cassie Thornton's book *The Hologram* speaks very convincingly of a mutual aid style health care system that is collaborative, holistic, long-term and crucially democratic, and as such has proven to be very effective in not just curing people but curing communities. Cultural co-operatives have been created during the pandemic too that operate along similar lines.

Q. In your book, *Against Creativity*, you argue that creativity isn't found in an individual, but in the relations in which we are embedded and how those relations are configured in such a way that 'something is produced out of nothing'. Throughout the book, you disentangle creativity from specifically artistic practices and from the ways it has been co-opted by neoliberalism. As I understand your thesis, creativity can be regarded as socially and environmentally conscious work as well as acts of organization that support mutually beneficial and supportive relations that are in opposition to individualism and competition. You note how such truly creative modes of working can be found in care work and the NHS, not necessarily the arts. In a truly creative world, would we be able to do away with the category of artist completely and, actually, creativity itself? Is there a way in which both these categories are inextricably tied to capitalism and neoliberalism?

I have become increasingly exhausted with the use of the word ‘creativity’ in capitalistic and related discourses. I still think the word is worth rescuing, but it is tiring to hear it uttered alongside things like fast food consumption, Brexit, fossil fuel production and other massively damaging processes. The same is true of the word ‘artist’. I am adamant that there are important socio-economic processes that require rescuing; institutions and people that are pushing for a more just, common and sustainable world need to use the notion of creativity more. Climate activists for example are extremely creative, but too often they are labelled as subversive or deviant. Co-operatives or those championing UBI are creative but they are never narrated as anything beyond ‘political’. I think there needs to be a bigger effort to characterise those actions and politics that are striving for a utopian world beyond capitalism as engaging with creativity and art. It has been done before with the Situationists etc. and can be once more.

Q. In your formulation, creativity today is ambiguously situated between a creativity that involves finding creative ways to survive and make do—as so many marginalised and oppressed communities know—and creativity as an imposition as you find in neoliberal ‘flexibilisation’ of work that has been called ‘creative’. Consequently, is there a way in which creativity is inextricably tied to exclusion, marginalisation and exploitation? For instance, often in periods of austerity and crisis you can find truly creative acts of DIY hacking.

Indeed! I think creativity is very much part of the political process of change beyond the status quo. What was considered ‘normal’ has been thrown out of the window in the last six months, and as we look for whatever a new normal might be, we are being creative. And as you say, I think it is those on the margins of the ‘old’ normal who are fighting most vociferously for a radically different ‘new’ normal, while those in power struggle to maintain the status quo: go back to work, open the shops, keep university campuses open, the billionaires have made more money than ever etc; it is the powerful that are fighting for the same, the rest of us are pleading and fighting for change. That to me, is what creativity is about.

Q. Although you don't use the word 'imagination', it seems to be also key to your work and understanding creativity, especially if we think of imagination as both individually embodied and social. Can you speak a bit about imagination and how it might relate to creativity?

I think imagination is an important concept here. Max Haiven does some very good work around that in relation to creativity and the commons and I think it is worth exploring. Imagination though does seem to have more of an individualistic strand to it than creativity, at least in its original conception. Creativity now, of course, as we've seen, is very much individual, but imagination always has been. But you're right, it hasn't been co-opted as much (although it is still a word you hear very much in advertising motifs) so maybe there is some merit in using it more politically.

Q. You have explored creativity in relation to disability or what you call 'diffability' to emphasise different forms of ability. Can you speak a bit more about this?

I think that those of us who are disabled will often experience the world beyond that which the 'normal' allows. Or putting it another way, I think that capitalism thrives off a very singular consumption pattern. It has variation within it of course, but ultimately, we all consume the same products generally the same way. Anything or anybody that doesn't or can't experience the world in the way that capitalism operates, to me, is inherently creative because they provide a door to a new way of living in the world. As we understand more about the experience of disability and other oppressed identities, the more access we have to worlds and experiences to which capitalism is (so far) unconcerned. Taking advantage of this to disarm capitalism and create more democratic and just worlds, to me, is vital. This is why we need as much diversity as possible in powerful positions. Change won't happen at all if these experiences are not articulated beyond how they are individually experienced.

Q. Your next book will look at ethics as guides for our life today and I remember you emphasised the importance of love here. Can you tell us more about this project and how you are looking at love?

The new book, *The Seven Ethics Against Capitalism: Organising a Planetary Commons*, will be out in the autumn of 2021 with Polity Press. One of the most important of those ethics is love, the theorisation of which I build with Sreko Horvat's work in his book, *The Radicality of Love*. Based in the Christianarchist tradition, I see love as vital to propelling the commons as a viable way of organising society instead of capitalism. But not love as is narrated by Disney or Hallmark; love as a truly compassionate and unconditional act. Love is about forgoing the comforting ground, to deliberately make yourself uncomfortable to make those less fortunate than you, more comfortable. In so doing, you are spreading privilege around instead of hoarding it. It's a simple idea, but one that is incredibly difficult to operationalise largely because we often lack empathy and the ability to 'feel' people's position in society. But by acting lovingly with everyone we meet, and scaling it up to institutional level—something that we've seen done with the explosion of mutual aid in the wake of covid-19—then anything is possible, even a world beyond capitalism.