

# **Thinking About Commons, Common Goods, and Community**

# Good, Old-fashioned American Pie

Made on Whidbey Island by  
Whidbey Pies













# The Atmosphere is a Global Commons

- The U.S. per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are the highest in the world.
- Emissions go into the atmospheric global commons and work to raise temperature.
- Oxfam says the highest 10% of wealthy folks create 50% of the CO<sub>2</sub> pollution causing climate change.
- The web has a site which shows where any income falls on a world scale.
- The 10% income mark is \$40,000 per year.
- Is the pie a useful metaphor for our behavior in the commons?



# Three “knowings”

- We know we are taking things from the commons and we are dumping stuff back into the commons.
- We know what the common goods are.
- We know a great deal about climate change.

These “knowings” are worldwide, close to universal.

**Given these “knowings,” why don’t things change?**



# WICKED PROBLEMS

Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber. “Those problems that lent themselves to straightforward solutions they called ‘tame problems.’ Those that were inherently too difficult to solve they named ‘wicked problems.’”

“...wicked problems are ill-defined, ambiguous, complicated, interconnected situations packed with potential conflict.”

“Probably the best example of our time is climate change. ... We’ve certainly never solved anything like it before. Stakeholders are everyone on the planet, every nation, every company.” Paul Rosen

“...the characteristics of problems that make them wicked: ‘they are unstructured—causes and effects are extremely difficult to identify.’ They are complex and uncertain and engender a high degree of conflict and little consensus ‘on the problem or the solution.’ The problem space ‘comprises multiple, overlapping, inter-connected subsets of problems that cut across multiple policy domains and levels of government.’ And wicked problems ‘are relentless. The problem is not going to be solved once and for all despite all the best intentions and resources directed at the problem.’ Edward Weber, et al

**“It is dangerous to have only a little learning about wicked problems. A shallow and limited knowledge may produce more problems than solutions, more failure than success. ... what is needed is deep thinking—drilling down into the concepts, principles, and applications that are all part of wicked problem knowledge.”**

**Going Meta:** “Going meta means to stop simply thinking or reasoning or talking and move up to the next level to examine how we are thinking or reasoning or talking. ... Meta-work begins by interrupting whatever we are doing, examining how we are doing it, and then making changes so that things start to work better.”

**“...embrace the mess.”**

# The steps to take with a “wicked” problem

- Find the problem
- Own the problem
- Create the problem: “Wicked problems are not discovered, nor are they uncovered.” You create them when what you want isn’t happening.
- Define the problem, then name it.
- Identify obstacles
- Recruit, enlist, and engage others. “Wicked Problems” require community work.
- Create an Action Plan

**“The only way forward is to create an actionable problem. ... We are on our way to creating an actionable problem when we have set clear and attainable goals, assessed our present situation with respect to these goals, identified the obstacles that exist in the gap between the desired future state and the present situation, and have a plan to attack the most important obstacles that are blocking any movement toward our goals.”**

From Margaret Renkl, “How to Keep Your Own Soul Safe in the Dark.” NYT, Dec. 9, 2024

In his essay ‘A Poem of Difficult Hope,’ which appears in his book ‘What are People for,’ Mr. Berry argues that the success of any protest should not be measured by whether it changes the world in the way we hope it will. **“Much protest is naïve; it expects quick, visible improvement and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come,”** he wrote in 1990. **“If protest depended on success, there would be little protest of any durability or significance. History simply affords too little evidence that anyone’s individual protest is of any use. Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope for more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one’s own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.”** So I am taking comfort from Wendell Berry, who has lived a life of ceaseless protest against the desecration of the earth and its creatures. Even at 90, he is not asking himself what the point is.

Rebecca Solnit, *“Hope in the Dark”*, 2004

“**Hope calls for action**, ... To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.”

“...keep away from ... ‘the Conversation,’ [liberal analysis] the tailspin of mutual wailing about how bad everything was, a recitation of the evidence against us—one exciting opportunity the left offers is of being your own prosecutor—that just buried any hope and imagination down into a dank little foxhole of curled-up despair.” “Perfection is a stick with which to beat the possible. ... leftists. ... Their grumpiness is often the grumpiness of perfectionists who hold that anything less than total victory is failure, a premise that makes it easy to give up at the start or to disparage the victories that are possible. This is Earth. It will never be heaven.” “...**perfection is a yardstick by which everything fall short.**”

“Americans are good at the mingled complacency and despair that says things cannot change, will not change, and we do not have power to change them.”



Don't depend on results,  
make right ACTION with  
your community your  
north star.

# Bold Assertion

**“It’s the economy, stupid.”**

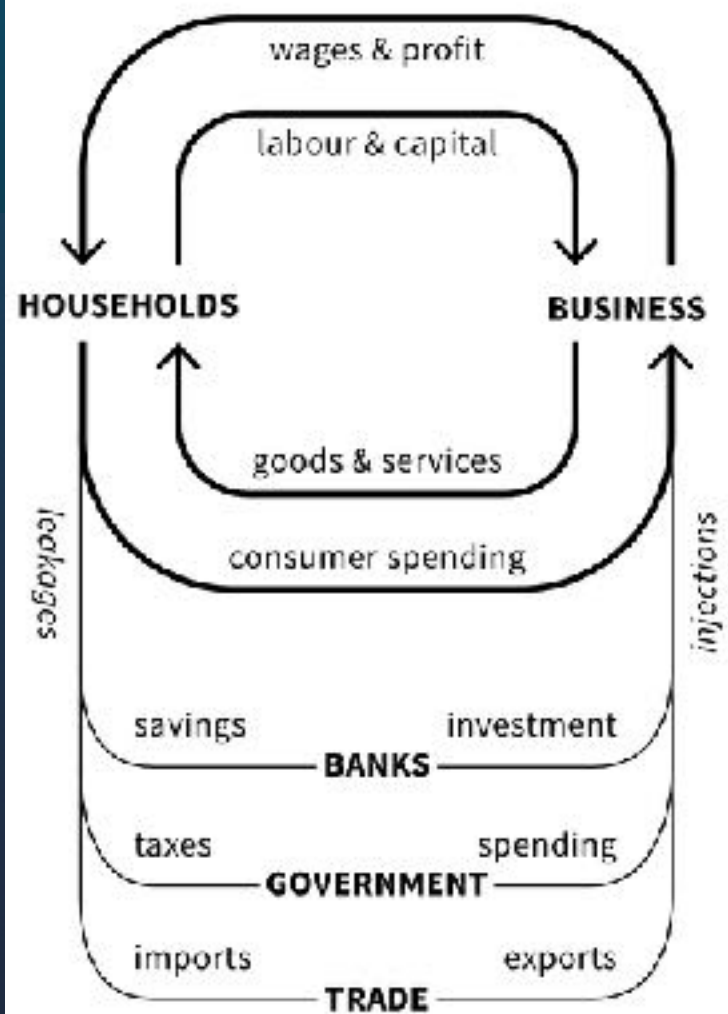
Spoken **to** James Carville

# Kate Raworth, “Doughnut Economics”, 2017

- We need an updated story of who we are as human beings. Hint: It is not the self-interested, perfectly rational, completely informed, human computer known as *homo economicus* envisioned in classical economics.
- We need new images of our economic activity. The images influence our economic behavior in strong and subtle ways.
- We need new thinking tools like complexity theory, systems analysis, evolution algorithms to remake our economic thinking.

**Economics is a story we tell ourselves.**

### The Circular Flow Diagram



The Circular Flow diagram, which for 70 years was the defining depiction of the macroeconomy.

# Business

- Businesses are created to make a profit.
- A second dominant concern is survival.
- Profit flows from providing something of value, a good or service, to a customer at a cost that is less than the amount the customer is willing to pay.
- Price is a key variable as it reflects supply and demand. Price is best determined by a free and unfettered market.
- Customers are mostly free to choose whatever products they want. Within limits no justification is required. Money talks.
- Businesses are mostly free to provide what the customer wants.

# Business

- Businesses have a “tame” problem. They all know what they are trying to do, make a profit. It’s a “tame,” but often very complex problem. There is a significant risk of failure.
- Businesses are opaque. The customer can’t, and usually doesn’t want to, see what the business is doing to provide product.
- Businesses are generally complicated and messy inside. Making a pencil is amazing. One professor made a semester course of it.
- Businesses have to respond and adapt to external economic forces.
- Businesses are really good at making stuff. The weight of stuff goes up every year.

“Freedom of speech and political liberty are not the only important freedoms. The ability to spend your money as you wish matters, too.”

“In support of the gambling boom in America”, Economist, 12/5/24

“...where is the rich society that says: ‘Halt! We have enough?’ There is none.”

“There can be ‘growth’ towards a limited objective, but there cannot be unlimited, generalized growth.”

“Non-renewable good must be used only if they are indispensable, and then only with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. To use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence,...”

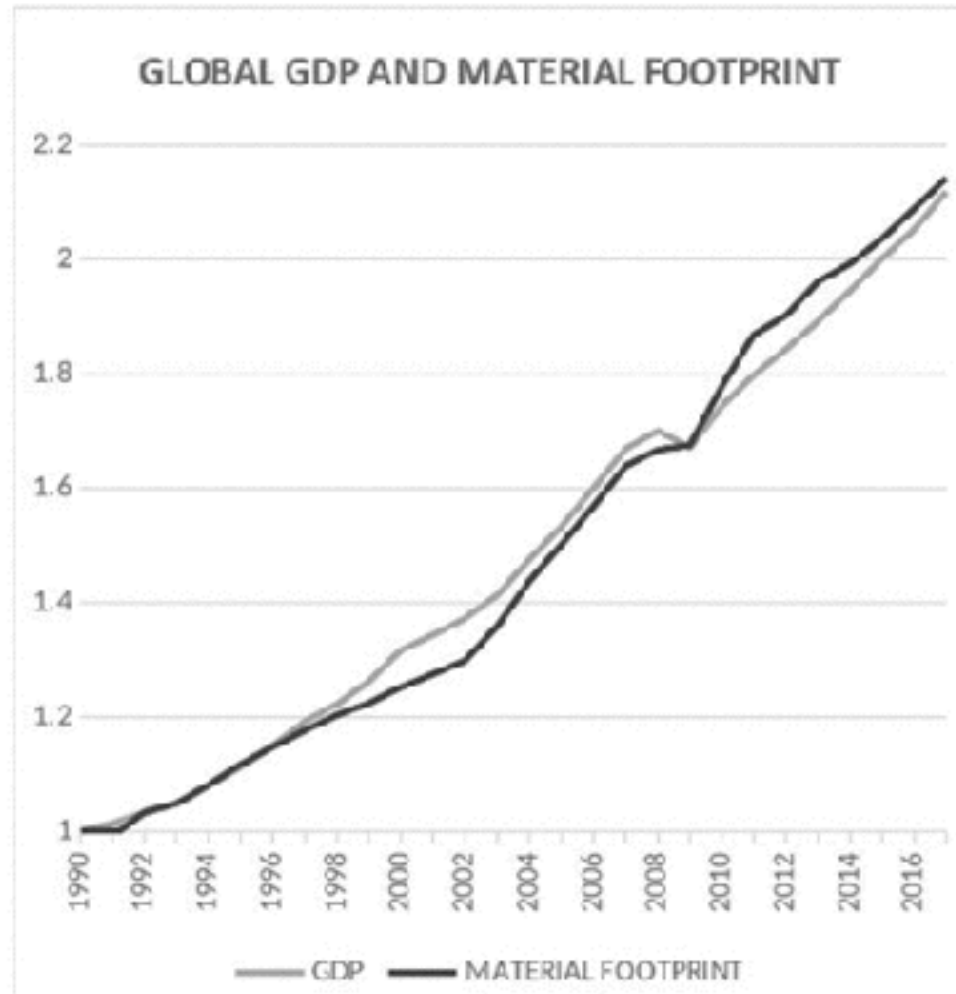
**“The strength of the idea of private enterprise lies in its terrifying simplicity. It suggests that the totality of life can be reduced to one aspect—profits.”**

**E.F. Schumacher, “Small is Beautiful”, 1973**

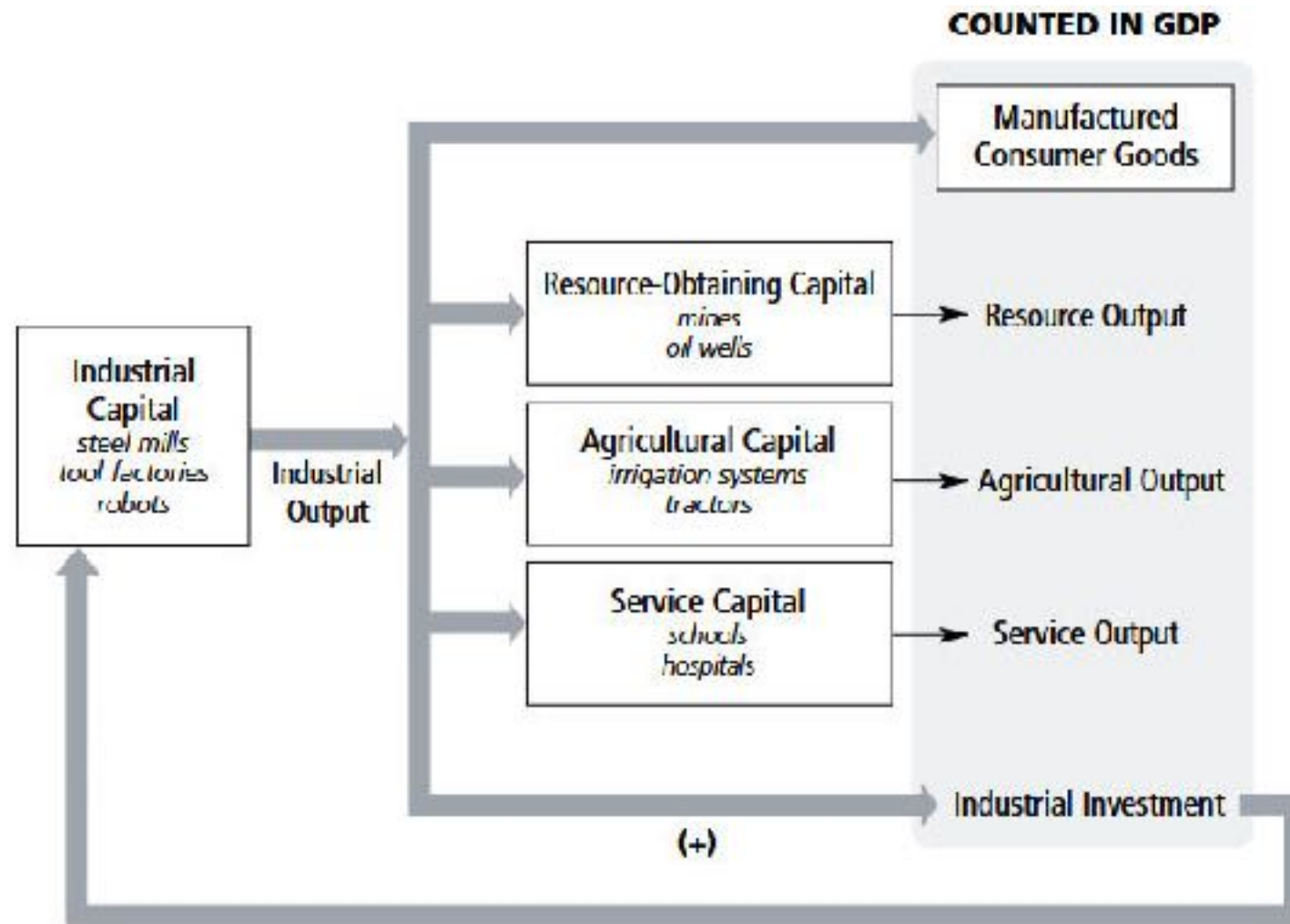
# The Bipartisan Majority

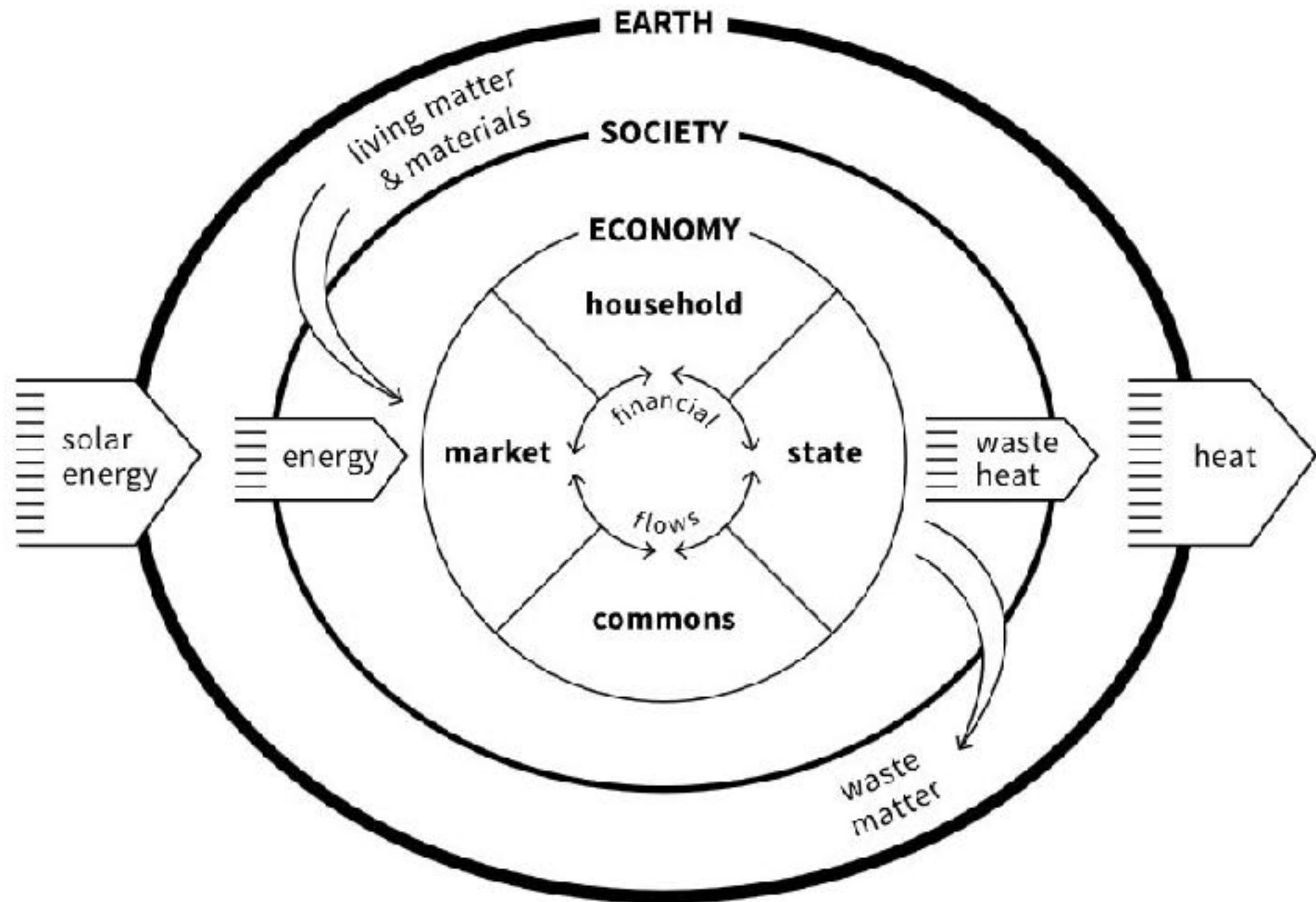
- Ranges from Christian Evangelicals to business leaders. Major financial institutions to folks who never looked at the Wall Street Journal.
- **Make the GNP bigger.** Limits to Growth analysis using system thinking and tools says constant bigger won't work.
- **Free markets fix everything.** There has never been a free market.
- **Growth is good.** Raworth, be agnostic about growth.
- **Don't tell me what to buy. Freedom to buy.**

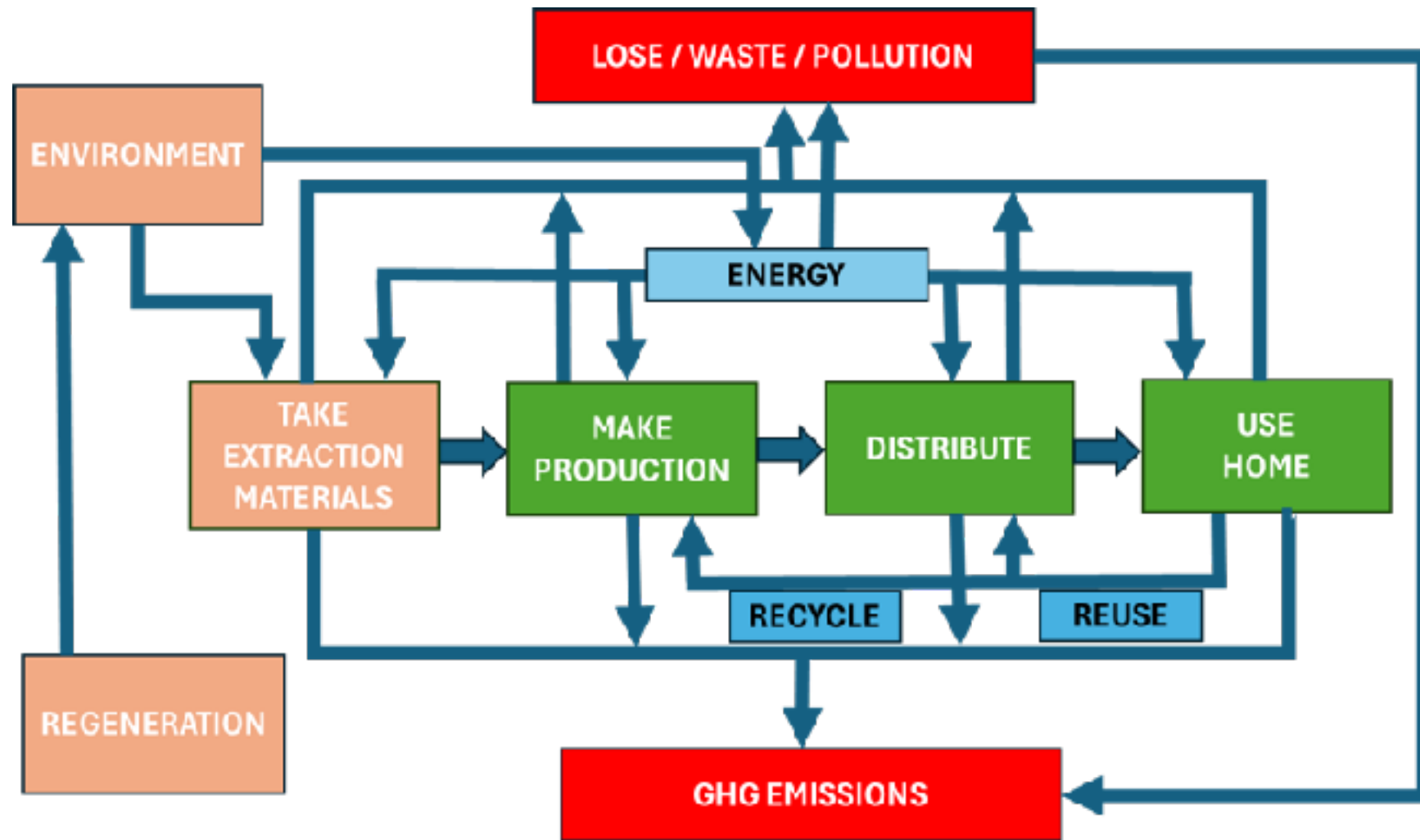




Source: materialflows.net, World Bank

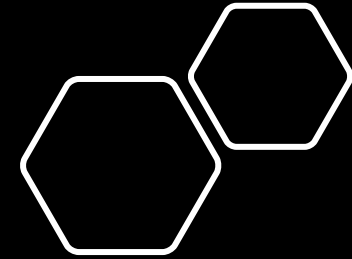
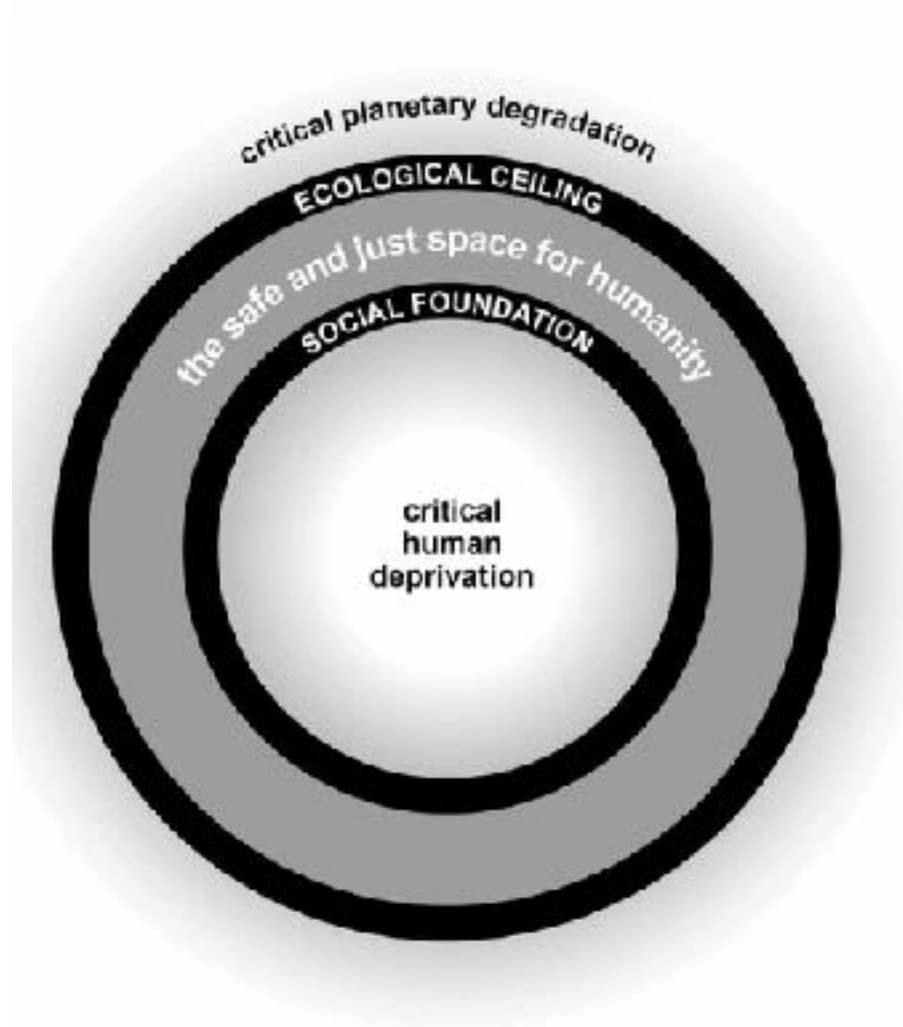


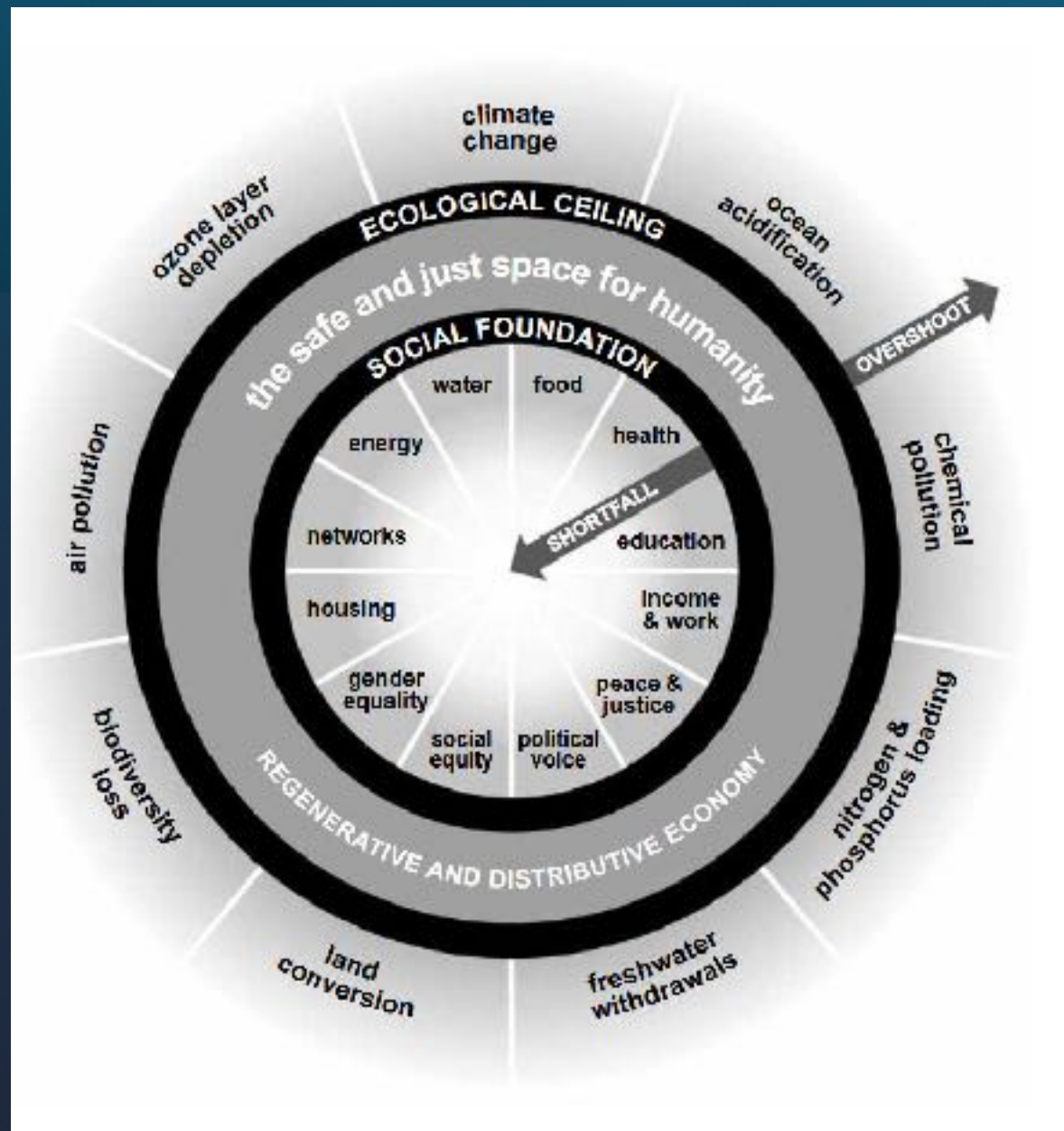




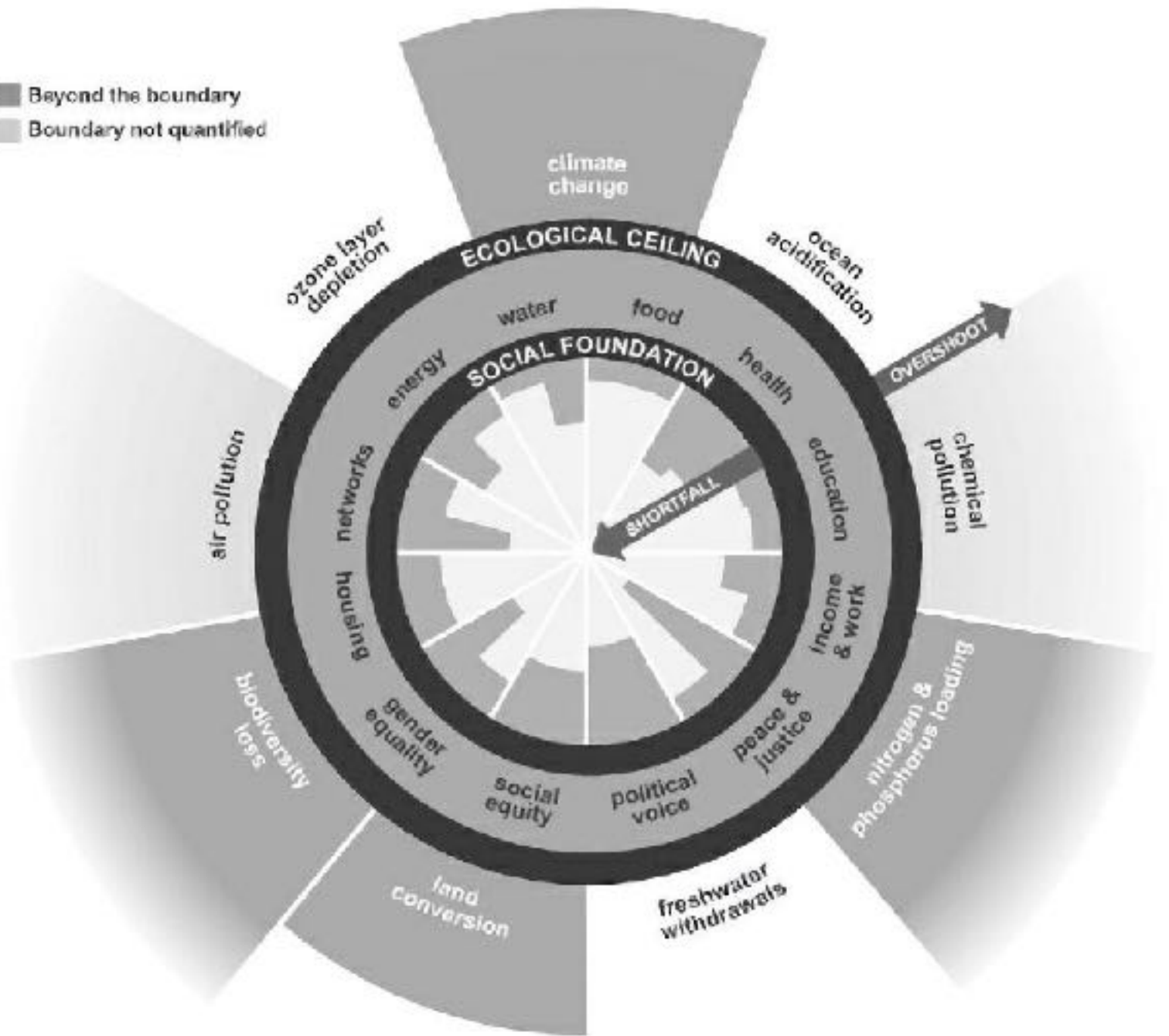
**ECONOMY'S GENERATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

## Essence of the Doughnut





- Beyond the boundary
- Boundary not quantified



An economist named Elinor Ostrom, who received a Nobel prize for her work, researched actual commons and discovered that people in a commons self-regulate as a group and people who break the rules are sanctioned. Hardin was imagining behavior based on economic theory rather than looking at real behavior. If there is no regulation, self or otherwise, Hardin is probably right, e.g., fishing before industry regulation.



# Whidbey Water Model

- 2004 USGA report: Whidbey gets 22 to 26 billion gallons of rain.
- Estimated 30% reaches the aquifer
- Population growth at 1%.
- Extraction is 100 gallons of water per day per person
- Rainfall will remain constant or increase over time of model per Washington State projections
- Rainfall will show more variability—more intense storms, perhaps fewer of them.
- Oak Harbor area, on Skagit river water, has 30% of pop drawing from the aquifer.

# Carbontrace.org

- [https://climatetrace.org/explore/#admin=Island--%20USA:48993:USA.48.15\\_1:county&gas=co2e&year=2023&timeframe=100&sector=&asset=3645874](https://climatetrace.org/explore/#admin=Island--%20USA:48993:USA.48.15_1:county&gas=co2e&year=2023&timeframe=100&sector=&asset=3645874)

# Commons on Whidbey

Water

Forests

Wetlands, streams, beaches,  
ecosystems

Soil

Ferry Transportation

Waste

Land & shelter

Wildlife

Place

Air

Energy

Social assets, culture &  
community

Values proposition

Education & schools

Knowledge

Roads & public infrastructure

# Commons on Whidbey

- Fish & sea life
- Noise & Light pollution
- Silence and sound
- Food
- Healthcare
- Support for farms & food production, soil
- Protection of natural systems that support all life
- Sense of place, connections
- Sewage & sanitation
- Children & future generations
- The future (ignored by economic models, heavily discounted)
- Taxes, policies, laws and governance