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DEEP ECONOMY: THE WEALTH OF COMMUNITIES AND THE DURABLE FUTURE.

BILL MCKIBBEN. HOLT PAPERBACKS, 2007

Reviewed by Casey J Rudkin, Michigan Technological University

A lot of current discussion about sustainability possesses a dual personality. On one hand, talk focuses on specific locations and solutions, such as “greening” a building or environmental use for a single parcel of land. On the other hand, many arguments take on the scope of national or global change. Bill McKibben, in his book *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, splits the difference, considering both the micro and macro aspects of sustainability while focusing on rethinking sustainability and economic principles one community at a time. *Deep Economy* is perhaps in part a response to current economic trends and the need for sustainability, but it is also a continuation of his work and an extension of his other books, notably *The End of Nature* (originally published in 1986 and later reprinted in 1997 and 2006), *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* (2007), and *Fight Global Warming Now: The Handbook for Taking Action in Your Community* (2007). His extensive work in the field of environmentalism is well known through his many contributions to magazines such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Mother Jones* as well as his articles in the *New York Times*. In this book, McKibben focuses specifically on what local communities, particularly in the United States, can do to create better ways of living, both for themselves and others.

One of the basic tenets of *Deep Economy* is McKibben’s proposition that we need to change our economic goals. He says, “Shifting our focus to local economies will not mean abandoning Adam Smith or doing away with markets. Markets, obviously, work. Building a local economy will mean, however, ceasing to worship markets as infallible and consciously setting limits on their scope. We will need to downplay efficiency and pay attention to other goals” (2). He expresses a belief in local communities, calling them “the key to physical survival in our environmental predicament and also to human satisfaction” (2), while understanding we are still tied together globally. It is this fundamental move that McKibben expounds upon in his book, citing examples in several arenas.

McKibben begins by turning his sights on the concept of growth. Since unbounded economic expansion has been a cornerstone for American economic thought, especially in the last fifty years, McKibben calls for a more thoughtful consideration of its methods and results. He critiques the current paradigm saying, “Growth is always the final answer, the untrumpable hand, and its logic keeps inequality growing, too” (13). The world is in an economic, environmental, and moral mess as a result of unchecked growth by a select few countries, and the final tally has not even been counted yet.

What McKibben points out is not just the folly of this rampant consumption but also the contradictory nature of its outcome on the very people who perpetuate it. He states, "What's odd is, none of this stuff appears to have made us happier. All that material progress—and all the billions of barrels of oil and millions of acres of trees that it took to create it—seems not to have moved the satisfaction meter an inch" (35). He further cites United States happiness and satisfaction levels that, according to some surveys, show consistent declines in these attributes among the populace since 1946. Refocusing economies on local communities would provide one antidote for the slide.

One way he claims this can be done is by turning to local food sources. He gives numerous examples of Vermont farmers trying to survive economically when the current system dismantled many of the mechanisms through which they would normally produce food. As an example, McKibben writes of eating locally for a year and quickly discovering how much he missed some simple foods like lettuce after the summer harvest was long past and oats year-round. While foodies in the United States may balk at not having tree-ripened mangoes at their fingertips in every month, the concept of local eating is a sound one in terms of both flavor and resource use. Left unchecked, this way of life will continue to decimate our planet, eventually collapsing for lack of ability to support itself. However, McKibben offers the local solution to this global problem. "Local economies would demand fewer resources and cause less ecological disruption; they would be better able to weather coming shocks; they would allow us to find a better balance between the individual and the community, and hence find extra satisfaction" (105).

Another example McKibben gives in his book is a switch to local currency. While this idea may seem far-fetched and not feasible at first, a look at the prevalence of Linden dollars, the currency in the computer world of Second Life, should convince the skeptic that this is an idea that can be implemented locally from small economy to small economy. In his own wallet, McKibben offers that he holds "Burlington Bread," a local currency that can only be spent with merchants in the greater metropolitan area around Burlington, Vermont, next to United States dollars. He talks about these local economic efforts as beneficial but difficult to start. He points out, "About four thousand 'complementary currency' schemes are in operation around the planet; they aim to supplement national money, not to replace it. Few if any of the projects have grown very large; existing mostly in a small ghetto of vegetarian restaurants and politically committed masseuses, they provide a medium of exchange mostly useful for backrubs in college towns" (162).

If quality of life is the issue, local economies may be the answer, but one has to find or create this knowledge in one's own community. McKibben provides ideas, like those above, as starting places. In addition, McKibben's work provides space for academics, room for scholarly explorations of these ideas. Likely because of his position as the scholar in residence at

Middlebury College in Vermont, he left academic footholds for others to carry on research within their own chosen fields. By including multiple perspectives from consumers to producers, McKibben creates opportunities for people studying such diverse topics as economics, business, agriculture, engineering, social policy, and technical communication. Furthermore, *Deep Economy* is heavily notated, and the citations provide a breadcrumb trail for scholars into the theories and practices of sustainability. The author not only provides readers with ideas about sustainability and local economies but also the means to explore them in depth according to each reader's specialty.

One criticism I have with the book is that McKibben often gives wonderful examples of local practitioners of sustainable practices, but readers are left without an in-depth look at their operations. I recognize that *Hope, Human and Wild*, does this for two international communities, but a greater depth would be useful for some of the examples in the United States. Because so many of these people are in remote areas, scholars would find it difficult or impossible to do any follow-up research of their own. While the best course of action for study may be to find local examples, a greater scope of information on each of McKibben's examples might have given the book more depth and avoided the feel of an economic travelogue or of trailing in the wake of a zealous sustainability globetrotter. Still, by giving examples of local communities around the world and showing people who have limited economic and tangible resources making more satisfying, efficient, and sustainable choices, McKibben has given us all local food for thought.

Casey J Rudkin is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University. Her dissertation focuses on the intersection of food, culture and instruction sets. She is especially interested in food preservation practices of the Keweenaw from early settlement to present and how those practices were recorded and preserved. Casey lives with her husband and fellow PhD student, James, and their two daughters, Boudicca and Zobeida. Her family picks its own wild berries, makes its own jams and jellies, grows, harvests, dehydrates and cooks down its own tomatoes, but still enjoys the benefits of a locally delivered pizza.

