

**Molly Thornton**  
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## **Deep Economy**

Deep Economy suggests solutions to the current errors of the failing free trade capitalist system by calling attention to the ecological and social factors limiting its current trajectory of unlimited growth. McKibben's alternatives place emphasis on small scale local economies and economic valuation of subjective issues from wilderness conservation to quality of life. These solutions attempt to identify sustainable economic possibilities that can be affected within the framework of the current global economy.

The United States is currently suspended in a precarious system of markets and economic functions removed from the physical world, occurring in a quantitative plane where the natural earth and its inhabitants have been summed up into predictable, measurable units, if granted value at all. McKibben posits that it is ecologically impossible for the economy to continue without reincorporating facts of our physical and emotional realities. Growing issues related to sapped resources and soaring carbon dioxide levels are increasingly difficult for businesses to claim no responsibility for as the influence of industry on environmental degradation surface. "The creeping recognition that economics, even in its ever growing mathematical sophistication, had become abstracted from the actual planet we inhabit has spurred the steady development of an increasingly impressive new school of ecological economics. (26)"

Ecological economics include valuation of services, resources, and even emotions previously exempted in relation to economies. McKibben and others come to this fundamental addition to traditional economic thought by allowing for subjectivity in a field taken for granted as objective. Traditional economists have attempted to analyze economics as an isolated, simplified social science. This has caused unquantifiable values such as happiness and to be left out entirely, and others such as health and education to be evaluated in terms that lack the ability to reflect a true indication of good health or proper education. Value judgments on what constitutes "sufficient" or "good" differ based on variables that American institutions and individuals lack the ability to evaluate on a global level. However, the cultural bias involved in determining economic values is forgotten and assumed not to have any moral implications, once they have become equations and functions.

Traditional economics also rely on the notion of perfect information, assuming that economic decisions are made with all needed factors available for consideration. Economic theories also expect humans to make rational choices, based on knowledge of variables and ability to choose the best options for economic success. Equitable access to information and education are falsely assumed. The assumption of rationality ignores personal, cultural and social influences that would not be considered "rational," but absolutely sway the decision making processes of humans.

Economists have evaluated market and development issues as if they were disconnected from environmental and social systems. The damage from this disconnected thought is finally surfacing as issues such as deforestation, diminishing fossil fuels, and loss of arable land become dire concerns. Hyper-individualism and consumer culture have become plagues as developing countries work towards achieving happiness through the accumulation of stuff. Western culture has become the definition of modernity, tempting generations and societies resisting tradition and seeking development to become mass consumers. McKibben blames ideas such as "the better off one country is, the better we'll all be," for encouraging other countries that they can and should become like the U.S. even as the planet is struggling to sustain just one country like ours.

Developing countries are encouraged to strive for growth, based on a belief that economic growth is inherently good. Growth has been equated with prosperity, when in fact it more commonly results in greater inequality, enriching the lives of the very few already in the highest economic brackets, resulting overall in more insecurity than progress. "Nations don't

get richer; people in them do, and often not very many of them. (195)“ Leftist thought commonly calls for redistribution of wealth, but McKibben suggests that this is not enough. Spreading out current accumulated wealth does not change the system, allowing for inequality to come back just as quickly as the economy can produce and consumers can buy more.

Solutions like Bill McKibben’s in *Deep Economy* are based in an understanding that economics will never be an objective science. By recognizing the variability of value and needs expressed by communities and individuals, an equitable economic system can be formed. An advantage to small scale economies is the opportunity for a “community” defined by a geographic, cultural, and political boundaries can reach consensus on some shared values outside the mathematical scheme to include in economic questions. Many biological services and resources as well as issues related to quality of life have normative values, which have been reflected as zero dollars in the economic sphere. Ecological economists are searching for ways that the current system can begin to consider these non-commodities.

McKibben includes several examples of organizations and ecological economists working towards this with efforts like an “index of well-being” measuring education, environmental quality, and community vitality. A biological component has been created to quantify “ecosystem services” like pollination and decomposition. There is also a struggle to incorporate costs like embodied energy, and externalities that create waste and pollution into the costs of products. Even if we can find ways to assign numeric values to currently non-evaluated inputs and outputs, there is a threat of reductionism. Cultural values and life-sustaining natural resources will in some ways always be unquantifiable.

Ultimately, I find McKibben’s solutions fall short of the actions necessary to create the kind of shift necessary for a deep economy. McKibben offers examples of entrepreneurial ventures like the “Rabbit King” who received his first rabbits from Heifer International, and then trained others to breed and care for rabbits, and passed on some of his rabbit’s offspring to them, enabling others to take on a business of their own. McKibben equates this to “spreading modest-scale farming technology to hundreds of thousands of homes, emphasizing always that people must advance within communities, not as individuals.” Individuals who take part in rabbit farming become capitalists, which McKibben argues is a positive change as it makes the individuals active participants in their economy.

Transforming passive participants into individual profit-seeking business people does not appear to me to indicate a deep level of community or alternatives to traditional economics. The Rabbit King does enable a deepened level of community interaction by personally training those others to carry on the trade. However, I do not understand what will stop these ventures from becoming large scale, profit-seeking enterprises without concern for community ties. Besides an initial mentorship, community values are not inherently built in to this model. This seems dangerously similar to models of business that have the ability to erupt into geographically dislocated mega-corporations. There is nothing to limit a successful rabbit farmer from expanding his business into an agribusiness.

The theory of local economies treads a fine line between isolation and globalization. On the one hand there is a risk of small entrepreneurial ventures, like independent rabbit farmers, growing up into businesses competitive in a global market. Every business has to start somewhere, and without enough built in values or limitations small local businesses have the potential to become the next big box threat. However, on the other end of the spectrum, local economies have the challenge of not placing too many limits. Determining environmental and social values important to the function of the community is a great place to start, but also risks creating an isolated market. The limits of a community may be defined in many ways including geographic and political, but more than likely include cultural and moral components as well. Communities threaten their own sustainability if their values are dependent on homogeneity or lack the ability to accommodate diversity and change. Communities with too tight a definition of themselves, their values, and the application of their values to a local economic system will become isolated.

One solution is to incorporate cooperation between local markets. In this way, economies can sustain themselves, but also benefit from a diversity of goods and meet needs by participating in exchanges with other communities. However, I find that the greatest challenge lies in the ideology of community. It will be incredibly difficult to implement any of these strategies in a meaningful way without a huge change in mindset. Hyperindividualism even plagues some of the most forward thinking environmentally and socially conscious designers, engineers, and economists. For as long as Americans attempt to put the world in a better direction without analyzing the limits of our worldview, we will continue to take actions that are insensitive and inappropriate. The greatest challenge is working to make community more than a catchphrase, but a true living body built by collective thought and care for others, with innovative solutions that nourish the needs of each other and the earth.