

“Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future”

Bill McKibben

Review by Pavel Borecký

Have you ever wondered how far your everyday activities could reach out? When emptiness of your fridge is just unbearable there is nothing fascinating about a late evening stroll to the closest supermarket. Or maybe everything. Your consumer choice may push both developed and developing economies closer to the edge of ecological suicide.

The latest book of Bill McKibben sets off to unmask the fringes of the globalized economy and question the idolized position of growth. A Dry topic, one might sigh. Leftist utopism, replies another. Yet, the mastery of the author lies in well-measured scaling of narrative, convincing argumentation and first-hand observations collected through a global journey. This journey stretches from Chinese factories and American small-scale farms to Cuban eco-communities or European cities. All these factors combined with current public post-crisis shock made the book one of the top bestsellers in US.

The main argument is crystal clear from the very beginning. More no longer equals better. More stuff simply does not make Westerners happier, even by an inch. Drawing upon history and recent statistics McKibben assumes that industrialization freed people to leave for cities which they have continued doing ever since. Expanding market economy inevitably led to deeper specialization and new means of communication to globalization. Yet, in summary this “loss of scale” threatens ecological stability, hyper-individualizes our Western society and “flattens” people in developing countries. Even Nobel-awarded scientists confirmed that “consumption is excessive”. The question we must ask is why we continue if the planet is no longer able to sustain the speed of the growth and societies are suffering from the equality it is creating as a result?

McKibben builds the book up on his own experiment of a year eating locally. Living in one of the smallest American states, Vermont, a demanding yet enriching experience opened the world of small-scale farming and ethical consumerism up for him. At the end of the experiment he finds himself connected not only to land, its riches and annual dynamics but the community of people around it. Life suddenly makes much more sense to him. This lesson drives him and the reader of the book on the journey of re-localization.

Our societies are as fast-cheap-and-easy as the resource which feeds their growth – fossil fuels. However, targeting mainly the US, to get rich, you must get dirty. Throughout the book McKibben criticizes mammoth-size organizations such as Wal-Mart, Clear Channel or World Bank whose rhetoric of concentration, openness and effectiveness destroyed our emplacement within the world as food business swallowed small producers and destroyed communities who thrived on them. On top of that, supranational bodies inflict neo-liberalism into developing countries as a driving force of development. „Export-oriented, growth-at-all-cost“ western policy at the end enriches only few and merely modernizes traditional poverty. People are forced into slums as cheap manpower.

McKibben positions himself as a pragmatic visionary, not apocalyptic prophet who rushes to save the world single-handed. He sees the future in a new generation of economists who have finally started to ask inconvenient questions while rethinking research methods from “autistic” to more empirical ones. Even if he systematically calls political leaders into action to leverage the efforts of small-scale farmers, socially-responsible organizations and idea-makers, he assumes that the shift towards a more sustainable future will be driven from the bottom-up by a rather slow mixture of hope and fear.

Even though new scientific narrative can finally influence global policy and help to shatter down Western lust for More, images floating across the planet can be surprisingly persistent. McKibben is convinced that until we change ourselves, people in developing countries who mimic our current model will not follow. Problem is thus in our minds. Treating economy as a living entity to be “recovered” we tend to think of our “cowboy” economy as an ultimate goal not as a pursuit of happiness. The final proposition may sound radical, yet necessary: less efficiency will be Better. Only when we exchange our surplus of solitude for companionship and developing will societies have a chance to secure sufficient material welfare.

“Deep Economy” of Bill McKibben is a red-pill type of a book which makes you reflect upon your own personal “setting”. It actually made me more aware of how much I am occupied by ideal of every-day efficiency. Together with the author I believe that all human beings share wish for dignity, security and identity. But only some of it can be achieved by economic growth. Let our economies grow deeper in place and fruit the belonging community along the way I recommend this complex and skillfully crafted book to everyone who loves the feeling of putting the pieces of a puzzle together.

Paperback: 272 pages, Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin (March 4, 2008)