

Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future
[Times Books] 2007

By Bill McKibben

Review

2007

Thomas A. Burns, PhD.

Chiloquin, Oregon

McKibben argues that the ever expanding growth model of the economy that the world of nations has become committed to over the last 200 years is not sustainable into the future for the following reasons: 1) it is built upon and subsidized by fossil fuels, which will soon be depleted, 2) the burning of fossil fuels is a major cause of global warming, which threatens the entire ecology upon which human civilized society depends, 3) natural resources are not sufficient, even without these fossil fuel problems, to support a world-wide standard of living comparable to what America and the western world enjoy, and 4) the prevailing Adam Smith economic perspective, which underpins the expanding economic model, has resulted in “hyper-individualism” encouraging the endless pursuit of acquisition while diminishing the commitment to community – with the result that in spite of their voracious acquisitive behavior, these humans suffer from a reduced quality of life and level of happiness.

The answer for McKibben is a return to a local/regional economic model that seeks sustainability, not growth, and which is more energy efficient, more communal, less polluting, and more happy/healthy – if somewhat more expensive. McKibben provides a wealth of data to support his complex of contentions, and the book is valuable for this reason alone. McKibben recognizes that his data is more suggestive than decisive, but the breadth of the data over a worldwide scope is impressive to reveal both the problems associated with the expansion model and the potential advantages of the local, community oriented approach to economy.

McKibben’s argument rests on the validity of his contention that there is no substitute for cheap fossil fuels and that, without fossil fuels, the hyper efficiency model built on the assumption of ever larger scale production and distribution is not sustainable. McKibben may be right – that there is no cheap energy source alternative, or that such a source cannot be developed and comprehensively distributed/substituted in time to curtail the collapse that is destined for the fossil fuel dependent expanding economy model. I am not so sure. As much as I appreciate McKibben’s celebration of the need for a greater community sense in developed, media-computer-virtual oriented, hyper-individualistic, energy

inefficient America, I can still see a path to alternative cheap energy, if a few technical blocks can be addressed in the areas of 1) solar energy [photovoltaics], 2) energy storage [batteries and transmission], 3) hydrogen fuel cell technology, 4) geo-thermal technology, and 5) ultimately in fusion based nuclear energy. If the developed world were to collectively sponsor a Manhattan scale project to address these issues, it could well be possible to come up with cheap, universally available, non-polluting energy sources that can more than replace fossil fuels.

Of course, McKibben is correct that even with a cheap and comprehensively available energy alternative there still is no way to support a worldwide standard of living [with its associated level of overall resource use] comparable to that of the current western world. The need to scale back western excesses, and to conserve and to recycle resources is a critical part of any realistic view of the continued viability of the expansion model. But these efforts can be seriously addressed at the same time a cheap energy source is pursued, and together they can support the contention that the economy can continue to expand to the point of achieving a reasonable world standard of living. We need to hear a critique of McKibben's work first from the expansion economists and then from those really knowledgeable about the energy technology and resource fields before we adopt the local economic model "out of necessity" that McKibben is proposing. After all, McKibben is neither a professional economist nor an energy expert, and he has selected his evidence to support his thesis.

The need to address the problems associated with the ever-expanding economic model [hyper-individualism, excessive wealth accumulation among the rich few – individuals and countries, and all the ills that come with loss of community at appropriate scales] is needed, whether there is a cheap energy source alternative for fossil fuels or not. And it is really this concern that is at the underlying motive of McKibben's work. We can respect McKibben's assessment of these problems without accepting his assumption that the expansion model is inherently unsustainable because there is no cheap energy source alternative for fossil fuels.

McKibben's arguments are short on considering the nutritional and health issues associated with the agribusiness food production system under the expansion model. He celebrates the local and organic food models for their lack of pesticide effects, and he mentions the micronutrient absence in most chemically based monoculture production, but nutritional and health issues related to food produced in the agribusiness model are much deeper than these matters. And of course, with a source of cheap energy, large-scale agribusiness can adopt an organic approach to food production; so going

organic and addressing the nutritional and health issues does not preclude a continued commitment to an expansion based agribusiness model. Add the best aspects of the works of Michael Pollan [The Omnivore's Dilemma], Jonathan Foer [Eating Animals], and Allan and Lutz [Life Without Bread] to McKibben's work and the overall argument that McKibben wants to make is substantially bolstered.

McKibben also does not make any effort to include or assess the importance of the spiritual component [not necessarily a religious component!] in human relations and human communities. I would argue that this spiritual element is a key ingredient of human happiness and the basis for committing to community in the civilized state; so if McKibben wants to celebrate community, he had better find a way at some point to constructively address the spiritual aspect of the human experience. It is the spiritual perspective on reality that counters the material perspective and that provides the basis for alleviating the hyper-individualism and excessive materialism that McKibben deplors. This is the next deeper layer in the McKibben argument for community, a layer he has not yet addressed, whatever the situation may be with respect to the dependency of the expansionist economy on cheap energy and its effects on community.

In spite of what is not in Deep Economy, McKibben has offered us a valuable and challenging work and an important contribution in what should be a central discussion within the American and western world.