

BOOKS

[*Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, Bill McKibben, *Times Books*, 261 pages]

Price, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Caleb Stegall

IN 1947, two titans of 20th-century economic theory, Ludwig von Mises and Wilhelm Röpke, met in Röpke's home of Geneva, Switzerland. During the war, the Genevan fathers coped with shortages by providing citizens with small garden allotments outside the city for growing vegetables. These citizen gardens became so popular with the people of Geneva that the practice was continued even after the war and the return to abundance. Röpke was particularly proud of these citizen farmers, and so he took Mises on a tour of the gardens. "A very inefficient way of producing food-stuffs!" Mises noted disapprovingly. "Perhaps so, but a very efficient way of producing human happiness" was Röpke's rejoinder.

Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future by Bill McKibben is essentially a book-length recapitulation and exploration of the Mises-Röpke exchange. McKibben's task is first to demonstrate the failure of established economic theory to provide an adequate and sustainable account of human well-being and second to develop an alternative paradigm that offers a more durable way forward. On the former count, *Deep Economy* must be considered a rousing success. On the latter, more difficult score, it is disappointing. McKibben provides valuable insight and important stories of resistance, but he would

have benefited from a more thoroughgoing appreciation of the insights of the communitarian Right.

Deep Economy begins with some simple questions: What does it mean to be rich? Is more necessarily better? Why aren't we happy? McKibben argues that while our preoccupation with utilitarian economics has produced unprecedented growth and material wealth, it has faltered when it comes to providing human happiness and satisfaction. For example, McKibben points out that the established measure of economic growth—the Gross National Product—incorporates perverse incentives for economic exchange such that the most productive (read "happy") citizen is "a cancer patient who totals his car on his way to meet with his divorce lawyer." Obviously, evaluating human welfare requires a more supple set of tools.

Far more alarming to McKibben, however, is that the "American way of life"—easy mobility, hyper-individualism, mass consumerism, and the commodification of all things at the altar of the market—has made our society dangerously unstable. "Peak oil" (the phenomena of global oil demand outpacing declining supplies) and global warming feature prominently in McKibben's argument. He likewise cites studies and

abundant growth and progress driven by a nearly insatiable appetite for the earth's accumulated stores of cheap fossil energy is nearing an end. It is clear that our political and economic elites are mostly in denial about what this means for our social order. It is clear, whether one buys McKibben's global-warming alarmism or not, that our sprawl mania is ecologically unsustainable, causing dangerous depletions of natural resources from top soil to water. It is clear that the financial sector is hopelessly overburdened with a legacy of cheap money (which means high debt) backed solely by the presence of cheap oil. It is clear that policy makers in Washington are intent on continuing to provide centralized subsidies to this stumbling behemoth thereby squelching the possible development of true alternatives. Finally, it is clear that as the billions of consumers in the developing world come online and begin to want and expect what we want and expect, the age-old law of scarcity will reassert itself with a vengeance.

Thus the age of "happy motoring"—as James Howard Kunstler has dubbed it—is all but over. McKibben is justifiably worried that the collapse of the postwar economy may bring down the tattered remnants of the social arrangements

WHILE OUR PREOCCUPATION WITH UTILITARIAN ECONOMICS HAS PRODUCED UNPRECEDENTED GROWTH AND MATERIAL WEALTH, IT HAS FALTERED WHEN IT COMES TO PROVIDING HUMAN HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION.

anecdotes describing Americans' general sense of malaise and unease, the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, our obscenely high rate of incarceration, and so on—all despite the continued growth of GDP. This litany amounts to well-trodden ground, and McKibben ably covers it again.

For anyone paying attention, the suggestion that our current economic and social arrangements are like a rickety house just waiting for the roof to fall in is not a hard sell. It is clear that the era of

(not to mention the ecological foundation on which they were built) that stood for centuries. The totality of these complex arrangements are encapsulated for McKibben in the word "community," which is the real subject of his book. Much of *Deep Economy* is taken up with the stories of those who are trying to salvage the wealth of true communities before they completely slip from living memory.

It is at this point that McKibben's assets as a journalist become most valu-

able to his argument. His prose is lively and engaging, anecdotal rather than systematic. McKibben tells of his “year of eating locally” during which he attempted to obtain all his food from the valley in which he lives. In the course of this experiment, McKibben details the massive global food industry which produces, packages, and delivers virtually every bite to our lips across an average of 1,500 miles. Trying to eat locally was simply an “artificial attempt to persuade myself that some other view of ‘the economy’ was even remotely plausible, that in the absence of the industrial food system I wouldn’t starve.”

McKibben describes less artificial attempts as well. He introduces the reader to small farm experiments in Vermont and Cuba, both redolent of Röpke’s citizen gardens in Geneva. Burlington is home to the Intervale, a 200-acre stretch in an industrial area that at one time served as the city dump and is now leased in small plots to citizen farmers who share equipment, know-how, and good times. The Intervale provides 8 percent of all the fresh food consumed in Burlington. When

BURLINGTON IS HOME TO THE INTERVALE, A 200-ACRE STRETCH IN AN INDUSTRIAL AREA THAT AT ONE TIME SERVED AS THE CITY DUMP AND IS NOW LEASED IN SMALL PLOTS TO CITIZEN FARMERS WHO SHARE EQUIPMENT, KNOW-HOW, AND GOOD TIMES.

Cuba faced global isolation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, its system of food production had to change radically. “What happened,” writes McKibben, “was simple, if unexpected. Cuba learned to stop exporting sugar and instead started raising its own food again, growing it on small private farms and in thousands of pocket-sized urban market gardens.” Moreover, “in so doing, Cubans have created what may be the world’s largest working model of a semisustainable agriculture, one that relies far less than the rest of the world does on oil, on chemicals, on shipping vast quantities of food back and forth.”

The upshot of these experiences demonstrates that “if all you are worried about is the greatest yield per acre, then *smaller farms produce more food*. ... You get more food per *acre* with small farms; more food per *dollar* with big ones.” Subservience to the economic prime directive of maximizing every dollar actually diminishes the quality and potential quantity of our food supply—not even mentioning the cultural, communal, and political goods that attend production on small farms. As one Intervale farmer, who also happens to be the chairman of Vermont’s House Agriculture Committee, said, “There’s an incredible resurgence of people in a directionless society suddenly wanting to find their roots. There’s real satisfaction in producing your own food.” Or put more succinctly by one newly minted Cuban farmer: “[Before], I was fat, a functionary. I was a bureaucrat.”

McKibben describes similar stories of plausible alternative economies in a dizzying array of sectors and places around the world: from rabbit farmers in China to a community-owned general

store in Wyoming to locally produced radio entertainment to creative mass public transportation in Brazil to peasant farms in Bangladesh. For McKibben, the lesson in all of these stories is that we remain capable, if pushed, of defending and developing what he dubs the durable “economics of neighborliness.”

For all of these virtues, *Deep Economy* falls short of its more ambitious goal of laying a theoretical framework for thinking about human happiness, community, and, well being. To the simple question, “Why aren’t we happy?” McKibben offers no compelling reply to the obvious rejoinder from most Americans: “Speak for yourself, I am quite

happy.” Or perhaps more honestly: “I rather enjoy being unhappy in my sprawl, my weekend getaway, my three car garage, and all of the accoutrements of lumpenleisure” (another Kunstlerism). Here *Deep Economy* would have benefited from the more compelling argument, articulated by communitarians of the Right (from Tocqueville to Robert Nisbet) that hyperutilitarianism makes citizens less free.

As Tocqueville argued, a benevolent yet centralized power will “cover the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform” until man’s will “is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided.” By this process, society “is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd” of an “innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives.” This form of total control is “combined more easily than is commonly believed” with “outward forms of freedom” and can even be established under the “sovereignty of the people.”

Absent this insight, McKibben is left with the far weaker argument that hyper-individualism simply makes us unhappy. “We need, in short, a new utilitarianism,” announces McKibben—a utilitarianism to measure human happiness. To that end, he turns to economist Richard Layard who writes, “We now know that what people say about how they feel corresponds closely to the actual levels of activity in different parts of the brain, which can be measured in standard scientific ways.” McKibben concludes that the “idea that there is a state called happiness, and that we can dependably figure out what it feels like and how to measure it, is extremely subversive. It would allow economists to ... stop asking ‘What did you buy?’ and to start asking ‘Is your life good?’” To the contrary, claims granting vast new powers to elite experts do not strike me as subversive in any good way. It is at this point that I wish McKibben would have recalled the far more subversive and anarchical wisdom of Wendell

Berry (to whom *Deep Economy* is dedicated) who wrote, "As soon as the generals and the politicians / can predict the motions of your mind, / lose it. Leave it as a sign / to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go." Instead, McKibben's only recourse is to the stale status-quo of social-science data purporting to assign "happiness scores" to various socio-economic groupings.

Again, the question of community is not a question of happy feelings but one of social power, as Robert Nisbet so forcefully argued. This truth is illustrated clearly by a group of villagers McKibben visited in Bangladesh. An international expert was selling genetically enhanced grain, allegedly to resolve vitamin deficiencies in local diets. McKibben notes that rather than object on the more decadent, happiness-oriented, Western grounds that genetically modified food is "icky" and "not organic," the Bengali wisely understood that the true stakes were much higher. They "instantly realized that the new rice would require fertilizer and pesticide, meaning both illness and debt." In fact, they recognized rather easily what we Americans seem so slow to grasp—that giving up access and control over their own food supply meant giving up real power over their own lives.

The primary characteristic of the disease McKibben describes so well is only hinted at in *Deep Economy*, but never adequately named. That characteristic is not too much freedom but rather the loss of the freedom of communities to exercise real social power and authority due to oppressive and totalitarian systems of centralized political and economic control by bureaucrats, experts, and functionaries. To start a recovery project with a "new utilitarianism" of "happiness scores" is to fit the wolves with tailor-made wool. Lord spare us both the blowhards from the Department of Commerce and the busybodies from the Ministry of Happiness! ■

Caleb Stegall practices law in Kerry, Kansas and is at work on a book on prairie populism.

[*The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor*, William Langewiesche, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 192 pages]

How I Learned to Stop Worrying...

By Justin Logan

IN 1963, President John F. Kennedy described his alarm over one possible course of world politics. "I am haunted," Kennedy admitted, "by the feeling that by 1970, unless we are successful, there may be 10 nuclear powers instead of four, and by 1975, 15 or 20."

To the relief of many, Kennedy was overly pessimistic. By 1970, only China had joined the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France as the fifth member of the nuclear club, and by 1975, there were only six nuclear states, India having tested in 1974. Even today the nuclear club has only nine members. Still, nuclear technology is more than 60 years old, and its proliferation is governed by an agreement that will turn 40 next year. It is unlikely that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty will constrain the spread of nuclear weapons indefinitely, and with North Korea having attained nuclear status and Iran apparently trying determinedly to do the same, the stresses on the NPT are severe and growing.

The accepted view on all of this is that the NPT will hold because it must. The uncertain world that lies beyond its reach is so frightening to many, including much of the arms-control community, that we dare not countenance it.

Not so for William Langewiesche. In his new book, *The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor*, Langewiesche concludes starkly, "Diplomacy may help to slow the spread [of nuclear weapons], but it can no more stop the process than it can reverse the progression of time. The nuclearization of the world has become the human condition, and it cannot be changed."

This revelation comes early on, and it sums up the sense of fatalism that

pervades the book. Langewiesche opens with an icy discussion of the American use of nuclear weapons against civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, followed by a similarly antiseptic description of the physics of nuclear weapons. A national correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*, Langewiesche is a skillful writer, and both treatments induce awe and queasiness, reflecting our deep ambivalence about our nation's relationship with nuclear technology. Langewiesche cannot resist pointing out that by any fair definition of the word "terrorism," the American attacks on Hiroshima—and certainly on Nagasaki—constituted the gravest acts of terrorism the world has ever seen.

This discussion sets up an explanation of how revulsion over Hiroshima led the founding fathers of the nuclear bomb to create the Federation of American Scientists, a group that to this day attempts to educate policymakers and the American public on the implications and dangers of nuclear weapons. The book also offers a brief explanation of the logic of the NPT—it was intended not to constrain, let alone reduce, the number of nuclear weapons in the world but rather to limit membership in the club of nuclear nations—before moving swiftly on to Langewiesche's bread and butter, investigative reporting.

He frames this section by putting the reader in the position of the head of a non-state group attempting to acquire nuclear weapons for first-use against the United States. Recounting the many obstacles to achieving this goal, Langewiesche takes readers on a tour of the southern Caucasus, Kurdistan, and other locales in which he has investigated the nuclear trade. Langewiesche has a deep-seated cynicism about the U.S. government's efforts to constrain the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and he highlights numerous instances of American fecklessness and lack of seriousness.

One particularly galling example is the case of the formerly closed Russian town of Ozersk, a place that now houses tons of highly enriched uranium and plutonium in shakily secured facilities. The Russians—paranoid but not without real