

# **Thinking with Interdependence: From Economy/Environment to Ecological Livelihoods**

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Chapter for *Thinking in the World Reader*

## **Introduction**

The world calls us to respond: to the rising inequality between those who struggle daily for sustenance and the tiny minority that is drowning in financial wealth; to the unprecedented global displacement of human beings from the lands they call home—more than 65 million people seeking refuge from violence and socio-ecological devastation; to communities of color in settler colonial societies around the world, besieged by the white supremacist violence of policing, prison, and enforced poverty; to the white working class despair, anger, and resentment over the growing impossibility of dignified work and a stable future; to the escalating dynamics of fear, blame, scapegoating, and division that these converging processes bring forth.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, as human communities battle over the construction of new walls between and within them, an anthropogenic geological-scale expulsion of CO<sub>2</sub> continues daily to push the planet's climate system toward irrecoverable destabilization. In the USA and Australia we watch appalled as the powerful coal lobby pushes for expanded fossil fuel mining and burning, while politicians in one country abandon environmental regulation and in the other blame the failure to cope with extreme heat on the unreliability of renewable energy.

One could be forgiven for concluding that humans today, especially those residing in our nooks of the minority 'developed' world, have decided to stop thinking for themselves, and certainly of others. In the 'post-fact' era, critical thought is not encouraged, and creative, empathetic thinking is deemed suspect. Yet never before have there been stronger calls to attend to the world and wake up from the anesthesia-inducing flow of information about who we can be, what we can and should have, and which "others" might be standing in the way of our self-fulfillment. These calls should form the conditions of possibility for thought, should indeed *force* thought—not merely as the agential act of a rational, individual self, but as an emergent collective response with, as, against and for the world.

But cries such as these are falling on the deaf ears of just enough of the voting population of powerful nations around the world to be institutionally ignored. The ability to *think with* the challenges of climate change and the suffering of fellow humans, let alone other species facing extinction, is blocked. How might social theorists and action researchers work to open new pathways and help prompt a mass thinking event of the magnitude that will be needed to move on from ‘The Enlightenment’ to ‘The Sustainment’?<sup>2</sup>

In this short essay we seek to both challenge and think beyond some key contributors to this shared blockage: contemporary articulations of ‘the Economy’ and ‘the Environment.’ For the moment we capitalize the ‘Es’ to denote their common articulation as singular, distinct, coherent, and law-governed domains, though our aim is precisely to *de-capitalize* them (in both senses of the word, pun intended). As we describe in more detail below, the distinction between these two domains, and the particular ways in which they are each constituted in conventional contemporary discourse, severs us from transformative, ethically-infused encounters with our constitutive interdependencies. By dividing our *oikos* (habitat) into two tension-ridden domains, and by articulating these domains in terms of a law-governed sphere of (capitalist) market activity (the Economy) and a separate, law-governed nonhuman sphere of resources (the Environment), this pair of categories makes it exceedingly difficult to develop collective accounts of and interventions into *how we are actually sustained*, and *with whom/what we are actually interdependent*.

In today’s world complex negotiations of multi-species community and livelihood have been deflected into modes of non-thought such as ‘jobs vs. environment,’ or ‘cost/benefit analysis,’ or ‘necessary trade-offs.’ These are formulations that appear to provoke serious collective consideration, yet in practice block the creative potentialities of thinking. They assume too much about what the world is made of, what is inevitable, and what may yet be transformed. In Isabelle Stengers’ terms, following Deleuze, this is “stupidity”—not an ignorance that can be attributed to particular individuals, but rather a collective affect that is born when the contours of the world are ossified, frozen, and change is rendered impossible. “Stupidity,” she notes, “is active, it feeds on its effects, on the manner in which it dismembers a concrete situation, in which it destroys the capacity for thinking and imagining...”<sup>3</sup> This non-thought allows us to maintain diabolical illusions of hyper-separation, whereby *Homo economicus* makes a (paid) living free of dependency on “handouts” from others, and humankind stands apart from obligations to planetary ecological processes. It is a recipe for the scapegoating of those in our midst who ‘take from hard working people’, or those at some

distance who ‘steal our jobs’; for denigrating those privileged hippies who ‘want to protect some engendered plant or animal’ or those who ‘jump the queue’ and, because of their difference, ‘threaten our way of life’. As long as Economy and Environment continue to divide and obscure our relations of sustenance, many of us will remain in a fantasy land, believing that action against climate change, solidarity with refugees and undocumented migrant workers, or protecting groundwater from profit-thirsty fossil fuel development is ‘not in our interests’, while a tax cut for billionaires *is!* The necessity of challenging and transforming these kinds of dynamics cannot be understated at this juncture of history.

What is to be done? How can we think *with* the world, with the fullness of the interdependencies that make us? How can we act in the midst of this thinking? Such work of exposing interdependence and its ethical demands is, simultaneously, an *impossible* and a *necessary* task. It cannot be done, and yet it must be engaged. This is the condition, perhaps, of life itself: call it, with Simon Critchley, the ‘infinite demand’, or with Jacques Derrida a justice always ‘to come’.<sup>4</sup> Call it ~~ecology~~, crossed out to mark its impossible necessity and necessary impossibility.<sup>5</sup> The challenge of rethinking economy and re-embedding economy within ecology is one that has been taken up by members of the Community Economies Collective ([www.communityeconomies.org](http://www.communityeconomies.org)), an international group of action-researchers who share an interest in exploring and supporting diverse practices of sustenance beyond the narrowly-defined boundaries of capitalist economics. Inspired by various threads of Marxian, feminists, postcolonial, and poststructural thought, and committed to embedding our work in the “here-and-now” of particular places and communities, we have developed a range of thinking practices that help us, and those we work with on the ground, to open and expand pathways for thinking interdependence and negotiating the ethical dynamics that emerge in our myriad constitutive relations. After elaborating the problem of Economy and Environment, we will present one particular approach to this work and conclude with some speculations about using these thinking practices in place.

### **The Economy and the Environment, As We Know Them**

It is, at this point, common sense: something called “the Economy” is the system by which most humans in industrialized nations effectively make their livings. It is composed of the dynamic monetary transactions associated with myriad producers and consumers, and is ultimately animated toward necessary, endless growth by the twin drivers of capitalist profit

and individual utility maximization. One cannot easily deny nor defy the Economy, as it is widely understood to punish those who go against its logics or demands and it stands as a central site of intervention for governments, policy makers, and the owners and managers of its central institutions—capitalist firms. At the same time, something called “the Environment” confronts us from beyond, from the *outside*: whether constituted as a collection of resources to be mined (carefully), a space for dumping and discharging the wastes of production, a set of services to be rendered ‘sustainable’ in their availability to human enjoyment and endless economic growth, or a sovereign limit-setting force of Nature, the Environment stands as a distinct, nonhuman realm to be variously ignored, managed, obeyed or “saved.”<sup>6</sup>

The Economy and the Environment constitute what we call a “hegemonic assemblage” in contemporary life. Despite their contingent, historical production as core categories of industrial modernity, these terms appear in common understanding to name pervasive and inevitable contexts within which human action must unfold.<sup>7</sup> They are “assemblages” (perhaps even two parts of one assemblage) in the sense that they are constituted discursively and materially, produced by various practices of measurement, representation, institution, and discipline, and rendered semi-durable by their inculcation as habits of materiality (forms of landscape, tools, etc) and subjectivity (imagination, desire, etc).<sup>8</sup> What these assemblages produce (and are, in turn produced by) is a *form of life*, an ontological formatting of a particular terrain in which certain kinds of problems and possibilities appear while others are rendered non-viable or pushed to the margins.<sup>9</sup>

What is it that appears? First, we are confronted with a seemingly-inevitable landscape of conflict and tension. The *oikos* is divided by these two articulations, and we find ourselves dependent on two spheres of life that are effectively at war. We are warned of what the Economy will do to us if we take a step towards, for example, curbing carbon emissions or allowing more people to settle in our communities and nations. Meanwhile ‘the Environment’ has either an infinite capacity to absorb pollution and recover from degradation, or a delicate ‘carrying capacity’ that cannot possibly withstand an increased population footprint, especially (so the population discourse often tacitly implies) of certain *colours* of feet. For those who are threatened with job loss, with not being able to pay the rent or mortgage, or with the inability educate their children, ‘the Economy’—i.e., wage labour and debt—appears to be something in which they are obliged to participate at the threat of extinction, and ‘the Environment’ appears a something whose care merely detracts from

these desperate priorities (if, in fact, it needs care at all, since the “environmentalists” appear here as little more than a privileged special interest). This frustrating agency deficit married with a victim sensibility is easily whipped up into simplistic and misdirected antagonisms, while at the same time a coterie of experts are empowered to repeatedly reinforce this scene and pronounce the constraints within which we must live. Thinking—as a transformative practice of engaging a dynamic and possibility-filled world—is shut down.

The second set of consequences produced by the hegemonic articulation of Economy and Environment is the rendering-invisible of a whole host of constitutive relations that lie outside the sphere of either the capitalist market or purified Nature. On one side, the capitalist Economy appears as the singular site for the production of livelihood while at the same time excluding or marginalizing vast swaths of human sustenance activity—all of the crucial labor and relationships that cannot be capitalized, monetized, or in many cases even measured. On the other side, the Environment appears as external Nature while rendering invisible all of the complex ways in which human and more-than-human worlds are constitutively interwoven, inseparable—made up of myriad interdependencies that continually transgress all divisions between nature and culture, wild and cultivated, urban and rural, creation and production. Trapped between the twin poles of Economy and Environment, with both claiming the crown of the sovereign, the whole actual world of interdependent planetary sustenance is made exceedingly difficult to see, to engage, and to collectively negotiate. This hegemonic articulation, to use another of Isabelle Stengers’ terms, serves to *anesthetize* us to the demands of our complex interdependencies and to the ethical responsibilities and vulnerabilities they call forth. To build new pathways for action and possibility in this era of planetary ecosystem destabilization, the assemblage of Economy and Environment (as we know them) must be unmade.

### **Tipping the Assemblage**

How does one unmake an assemblage? We begin by recognizing that no assemblage is ever finally completed; hegemony is never total.<sup>10</sup> The assemblage is at once a site of *instituting* worlds and a site in which worlds are always already *becoming-otherwise*. “A territory,” write Deleuze and Guattari, “is always en route to an at least potential deterritorialization”.<sup>11</sup> As powerful as Economy and Environment may be to map the terrain of possibility in contemporary life, these articulations fail to capture everything, fail to cover

all space with their measurements and modes of discipline, and are in fact shakier and less stable than their “common sense” appearance might suggest.

It is precisely the task of amplifying this instability that J.K. Gibson-Graham has taken on in her critique of “capitalocentric” models of economy and in the development of a notion of diverse economies.<sup>12</sup> The Diverse Economies framework, which is often introduced via the image of a floating iceberg (Figure 1), helps to identify and amplify the myriad practices and relations that continually “escape” the hegemonic narrative of the Economy. These practices are shown below the waterline, submerged under those activities that are seen as part of the ‘real’ economy—working for a wage or salary in a job connected to business and transacting commoditized goods and services via the capitalist market.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1: The diverse economies "iceberg" (Original by Ken Byrne, modified by Ethan Miller)

Parallel work is unfolding relative to the domain of the hegemonic Environment, as posthumanist ecological thought increasingly challenges hyper-separated notions of an external “Nature” and begins to map the complex inter-becomings of a more-than-human

ecological “mesh”.<sup>14</sup> What emerges from this work—intimately connected with and expressive of transversal practices on-the-ground—is a profound sense of the world that lies “beyond” the hegemonic assemblage, a “world of becoming” in which we are *connected* in ways we barely imagined, *responsible* to and with each other in ways we can barely grasp much less fully respond to, and *called* toward new possibilities for world-making that we have only just begun to glimpse.<sup>15</sup>

But amidst all of this, we are still gripped by the Economy and the Environment. Their power in shaping imagination and possibility is real. We must face the ways in which we *depend on* the very assemblage we seek to undo—embedded as we are in the workings of the Economy and invested as we must be in certain modes of engaging the Environment. “If you blow apart the strata [the sedimented structure of assemblages] without taking precautions ... you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe”.<sup>16</sup> How, then, are we to respond? Deleuze and Guattari propose that we make radical, effective change not by simply ripping up the entire current order of things, not by “wildly destratifying,” but rather by “gently tipping the assemblage”:<sup>17</sup>

This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.<sup>18</sup>

To think the new and to make the new, we stand where we are, all the while rendering this place into something other than it has been—finding all of the ways that our current reality is already otherwise and already becoming more of this otherwise. We amplify these becomings (lines of flight), experiment with their possibilities, all the while recognizing that some mode of ongoing stability is necessary for life to continue. Strategic displacement, in other words, demands *belonging*—both for the economically disenfranchised and for those for whom the hegemonic assemblage still seems to ‘work’. Exposing ethical interdependence calls for some comfort that one’s whole world (whoever one might be) won’t come wholly unraveled in the process.

If revolution means ripping all of reality apart and building anew, we refuse revolution. But we also refuse ‘reform’ in the sense of a moderate tweaking that never asks earth-shattering questions or seeks to radically alter existing modes of life. Revolution and reform are political practices of stupidity, the first animated by the twin utopian refusals to either locate oneself in time and place (succumbing to the thought-stopping fantasy of the

Perfect) or to recognize the complex implication of means and ends; the second animated by the cynical refusal to participate in the birth of radically new possibilities for life and livelihood. We seek, instead, to proceed by destabilizing dominant assemblages while anchoring ourselves to practices upon which we already rely. We want to develop tools to help emerging movements think/act in this space: the lived space of ethical negotiation of diverse livelihoods; the ongoing production of the *oikos* and its inhabitants; the ongoing production of commons and uncommons amidst this interdependence.

Much of our past writing has focused on rethinking and reframing “economy” from a hegemonic space of capitalist dominance to an always-indeterminate space of diverse relations, identifying existing practices of alternative economic subjectivity and ethical negotiation as sites for (potential) transformation.<sup>19</sup> More recently, and in multiple collaborations, we have sought to bring more-than-human human ecological relations “in” to this expanded economic space of becoming.<sup>20</sup> The language of “community economy” has been a central strategy for fostering counter-hegemonic assemblage-tipping, where “community” refers not to locality or shared identity but to the raw, ethical exposures of co-existence in our myriad relations of sustenance.<sup>21</sup> As we reflect now, however, on the dense, anesthetizing articulations of the Economy and the Environment described above, we are called to experiment with a different language to express this broad project. What if we were to stop re-signifying “the economic”—continually battling its hegemonic connotations—and instead mobilize a different, more transversal language for the articulation of transformative relation and movement beyond the Economy/Environment machine? Building on both the substance and spirit of past work, we seek to transpose now into a new key.

### **Thinking with Interdependence: Ecological Livelihoods**

Instead of thinking along the lines of an Economy and an Environment, we propose to experiment with reconstituting the landscape of current action and possibility in terms of *ecological livelihoods*.<sup>22</sup> This term *livelihood* is commonly used to indicate, quite generally, the work of sustenance. It has been used in English, via a variety of spellings (*lifelode*, *liflade*, *lyvelode*, *lyveliod*, *livelyhoode*, and others) since at least the 13th century.<sup>23</sup> It is certainly not a wholly neutral term, but it also lacks the historical baggage and disciplinary power that comes with ‘economy’ or ‘economics.’ It evades categorization relative to the Economy/Environment pair. It is a term of *practice*, of experience, a simple articulation of



complex lives lived and negotiated from the inside, *par le milieu*, rather than categorized from without.<sup>24</sup> Livelihood is what unfolds in the space of life's action, the middle-space in which the hegemonic division of Economy/Environment blurs and dissolves into the power-laden specificities of encounter and negotiation. Having not been wholly captured by a particular hegemonic metrology, it indicates a diversity of activity, a variety of skills and knowledges, a plethora of possible sites of action, and multiple configurations of ever-changing relations and processes that cannot be captured by a generality. Livelihood is, in this way, a minor (as opposed to a major) category: it resists unification under a singular standard of measure, image of action, or domain of life.<sup>25</sup> When invoked, it most often comes linked to particular contexts, stories, and strategies: How do people make a living here, and there? We do it in *all kinds* of ways. Moreover, livelihood also has the nice resonance of *lively*, which beckons toward some kind of normative commitment to *joy* in the Deleuzian/Spinozan sense of enhancing a body's capacities through connection, and it also serves to remind us of the 'lively matter' in which we participate and from which we continually emerge.<sup>26</sup>

The language of 'livelihoods' as an intervention in the field of development is not, of course, a new proposition. It has been previously mobilised in a number of forms, from Karl Polanyi's *The Livelihood of Man* to the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' in international development practice.<sup>27</sup> In all of these cases, this language is used to displace the hegemony of paid-work and monetary exchange via capitalist markets: humans make livings, through all kinds of paid and unpaid, reciprocated and unreciprocated activities and in relation to all kinds of institutions, motivations, and contexts. At the same time, however, these approaches all tend to merge the economic and social without challenging an articulation of 'the environment' as a domain of resources. The *human* remains at the center of action, and (often in the form of individuals and households) still navigates—even 'optimizes'—amidst a world of objects or resources. To develop a truly 'transversal' articulation that cuts across and through the hegemonic categories and opens new ethical and political space, livelihoods must be articulated in a more radically *ecological* sense.<sup>28</sup>

By 'ecological' we do not refer to a synonym for 'environmental,' nor to its common mobilisation as a kind of scientific holism. Rather, we mean it as precisely that which escapes domestication or even signification, "not the name of a totality but of the impossibility of any such totality".<sup>29</sup> This is Timothy Morton's sense of ecology in *The Ecological Thought*, the mind-boggling interdependence that we can never master, never know, and that calls us toward an ethics we have only begun to explore.<sup>30</sup> Livelihoods would indicate, then, not the

ways in which we—the ‘autonomous’ agents—make a living for ourselves in relation to some ‘outside,’ or in the midst of ‘enabling resources’ and ‘constraints,’ but rather the complex, reciprocally-negotiated composition of habitat (*oikos*) and that which inhabits (*us*, along with *others*). Livelihoods must refer to an ‘ecopoiesis’: the active creation (*poiesis*) of *oikos*.

The point here, we must emphasize, is not to propose that thinking in terms of ecological livelihoods is more “accurate” to what is “really happening”—in other words, that we are seeking to reveal a new truth with our approach. We are committed to an understanding that language can be performative, helping to bring into being that which it names.<sup>31</sup> To speak of ecological livelihoods is to propose an intervention: What kinds of relations, connections, and possibilities might be opened by a language that refuses to distinguish an Economy and an Environment as the ultimate spheres in which we must live? What might it *do* to say, instead, that we make our livings in diverse ways, in complex power-laden relations of interdependence that cannot be reduced to or contained by the hegemonic articulations? This is an *experimental proposition*.<sup>32</sup> How, more specifically, can this proposition encourage thought? How might it, in the words of Sylvia Wynter, help us “to think *outside* the terms in which we *are*? Think *about* the processes by which we institute ourselves as what we are, make these processes transparent to ourselves?”<sup>33</sup>

### **Making, Receiving, Providing: Three Dimensions of Livelihood**

Livelihood can be understood or “mapped” in terms of three dimensions: *making* a living, *receiving* a living made for us by others (human and nonhuman), and *providing* livings for others. ‘I’ am, ‘we’ are, continually emergent at the convergence of these three dimensions (Figure 2). *Making* a living is the dimension of livelihoods most often and overtly acknowledged. We weave together multiple life-making activities, including paid work as well as unpaid laboring in home, community, gardens or ‘country’; buying, giving, sharing and swapping goods and services; working for others in private enterprises, or for ourselves in a small business, or with others in a cooperatively owned and run enterprise, not for profit or social enterprise. In all these activities, humans or others exercise particular forms of perception, skill, knowledge, and power. They engage in some degree and form of self-making or, to extend a term developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, ‘autopoiesis.’<sup>34</sup>

This active work of doing, producing, procuring the means of subsistence is the classic site often associated with ‘agency,’ and serves as a key form of social validation for many

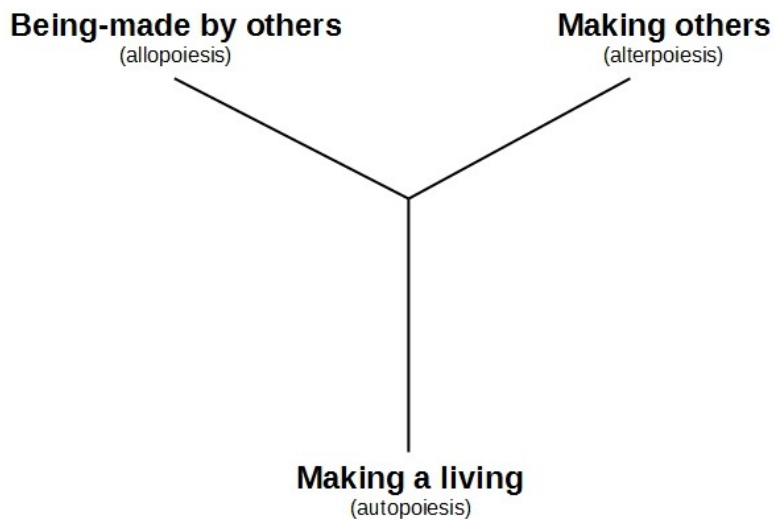


Figure 2: Three dimensions of livelihood

people raised in cultures that emphasize the virtues of individual effort (think, for example, of the status of the 'self-made Man'). Indeed, in so many Western cultural articulations of the human, autopoiesis is seen as the very definition of the species—*Homo faber*, *Homo economicus*—and it should be no surprise that myriad crises of identity and self-worth emerge in post-industrial communities that are no longer able to access traditional forms of wage work. Autopoiesis is, in this sense, both how we are made and how some of us are *unmade*, and it can become a site of disastrous failure and shame. How difficult it is for so many to see that making a living is not, in fact, ultimately the work of individuals: it is, rather, the key site where a particular agency condenses, congeals, or is momentarily *realized*, while its actual sources are 'distributed' throughout the whole triple assemblage of livelihood relations.<sup>35</sup> This is precisely why it is not enough to reduce livelihood to the work of *making*.

Prior to any making of a living we *receive* livings made by others. This is the livelihood dimension that we can also call 'allopoiesis' (*allo*, from the outside). The over-emphasis on agency always risks re-inscribing an impossible normative demand toward a notion of autonomy that we need to confront and transform.<sup>36</sup> Our culture is ripe with praise for those who are represented as pulling ones-self 'up by the bootstraps'. In a world where public policy makers classify citizens as lifters or leaners, it is not surprising to hear those who have the least proudly claiming 'I don't need a handout from anyone'.<sup>37</sup> Yet we are all *utterly dependent* on beings and forces that exceed us. Consider, for example, those at a

distance whose labor makes our lives possible, or the web of plants, animals, microbes and geological formations that feeds, clothes, warms and heals us. The hard working American citizen who decries the 'theft' of jobs by 'illegal aliens' is eating an apple picked by immigrant hands as they call out their condemnations. The stockholders who gain from fossil fuel investments find, at the very same time, their habitats fundamentally transformed in terrifying and uncertain ways by atmospheric carbon accumulations. We all rely, fundamentally, on the labors of human and nonhuman others. We are all on the dole. Some of our constitutive others we know; most of them we will never know, and a whole host of ethical questions are opened up here, since *we do not even know with whom we are connected*.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, we *provide* livings for others. We might call this 'alterpoiesis' (*alter* as in other). Despite all the emphasis on 'self-making' in the hegemonic articulation, so much of what we do is about making livings *for* others—those we know, and those we will never know. In some cases, this takes the form of involuntary relations such as exploitation in capitalist firms that provides surplus for owners at our expense, playing host to (other kinds of) parasites, or becoming compost when we die. In other cases, providing for and making-others forms a core part of our intention: birthing the next generation, supporting our families, contributing to our communities, caring for our places, or enacting solidarity with those who live beyond the immediate bounds of our daily connections. Does alterpoiesis become a site of resentment as we support those who we feel to be 'undeserving'? Does it become a site of hospitality and generosity? It is with us, and *from* us, regardless.

Let us bring this triad of relations together: 'we' emerge as a site of continually-enacted agential articulation between the *habitats that we make for ourselves*, the *habitats that we receive* and the *habitats we participate in making for others*. 'I' and 'we' become relays in a complex ecological meshwork, and a politics of the negotiation of ecological livelihoods unfolds here. *Life is the negotiation of multiple, overlapping, co-constitutive habitats*.<sup>39</sup> In such a context, to 'make an honest living' would not entail severing or even reducing one's dependencies on others as is often suggested. Rather, it would entail taking active responsibility for interdependence, for one's constitutive reliance on both human and non-human others and the ethical questions this reliance entails, for the dynamics of self-making, and for the many ways in which one participates (or not) in making others.

The framing of ecological livelihoods sketched out here seeks to open an explicit space to acknowledge the myriad interdependencies in which our sustenance is implicated, thus

challenging the conventional frame in which each of these three dimensions is partially *obscured* by the enclosures and exclusions of the Economy and the Environment. So, for example, what is called “economic development” can be seen here, in its hegemonic form at least, as one particular way of articulating an alienated, restricted, and deeply conflictual mode of livelihood at the intersection of making, receiving and providing. At the same time what is called “the environment” can be seen as constituting an alienated, restricted, and conflictual framing of habitat at the same triple intersection. In this articulation making a living involves securing one of the ‘jobs’ generated by economic ‘growth’. But for the past two hundred years growth has been fueled by and synonymous with the plundering of fossil fuels and habitat degradation. It has taken quite some time for us to see that the living we receive is being severely compromised by our actions to make a living. It seems even harder for us to recognise that our ability to provide safe livings for others, particularly future generations, is diminished in drastic ways. Today the life expectancy of Beijing citizens is declining by more than five years because of toxic air pollution—the result of coal fueled industrial growth, itself fueled by the need for jobs growth and for cheap “goods” around the world.<sup>40</sup> In China to make a living (by having a job) is to be denied a living (in terms of air quality and longevity). In Australia the immediacy of this feedback loop is attenuated: to make a living is to deny a living to our children. We might wonder, which is more stupid?

To challenge these categories and ask, instead, about *the relations themselves* is to radically foreground collective mutual dependence. It is to ask dangerous questions about who we are truly dependent upon, how we actually make our livings, and to whom we might be obligated (Figure 3). And it is to crystallize more precisely the various sites of struggle that emerge around each of these questions when the grip of the Economy and the Environment are loosened—thus opening the question of what possibilities for new modes of collective life might emerge when livelihood and its negotiations are articulated in a more ecological and ethically-oriented frame. The concepts of commoning and uncommoning, to which we now turn, can help to make the ethico-political stakes and dynamics of this reframing even clearer.

### **The politics of commoning (and uncommoning)**

The language of “ecological livelihoods” is a tool for de-anesthetizing, a strategy for thinking in and with the world that we are continually becoming. It is not a proposal for an alternative system, a vision for how “we all” should or should not live, nor a vehicle for the

### **Figure 3. Key Ethical Questions of Ecological Livelihood**

#### *Making a living:*

- What do we really need to survive well? How do we balance our own survival needs and well-being with the well-being of others and the planet?
- What are the range of ways we secure the things we cannot produce ourselves? How do we conduct ethical encounters with human and non-human others in these transactions?
- What do we really need to consume? How do we consume sustainably and justly?

#### *Having a living made for us*

- What are the gifts we receive from others, from nature and from past generations that enable us to live well?
- How does a community maintain, replenish and grow this natural and cultural commons? What do we make and share with human and non-human others?
- How might we render our interdependencies more visible while also recognising the impossibility of any complete accounting?
- What forms of responsibility can we construct towards the myriad others (beings, places, times) whose bodies and worlds are shaped by the 'makings' that we take and receive from them?
- How do we gain, as the well-known 'serenity prayer' has it, the wisdom to discern the difference between those dependencies that can be transformed and those to which we are truly at the mercy?

#### *Making livings for others*

- To whom are we obliged to offer ourselves, our energies, and our lives?
- What's left after our survival needs have been met? How do we distribute this surplus to enrich social and environmental health?
- How are our makings-of-others connected with our being-made, recirculating energies and matter in ways that maintain our habitats and those of others, and to what extent is this connection severed by various extractive mediations?
- What do we do with stored wealth? How do we invest this wealth so that future generations may live well?
- To what extent are these relations shaped by forms of coercion and violence, and to what extent can we transform such relations?

elevation of a specific set of codified morals. It is about opening new space for emergence and “learning to be affected,” enabling “a process whereby one becomes sensitized to (affected by) a world that in turn becomes more highly differentiated”.<sup>41</sup> But can an effective transformative politics grow from a perspective that appears oriented only toward opening questions and proliferating sites of encounter? We see the practice of commoning as the collective politicization of livelihood.<sup>42</sup> Commoning, or making-common, refers to the myriad ways in which complex relations of livelihood are rendered into *explicit sites of ethical negotiation*. This may unfold as a momentary rupture or revolt against the ossification of hierarchical relations in a community, a nation-state, or a workplace, or it may be enacted (and renewed continuously) in forms of institution that seek to render livelihood relations and their stakes into sites for democratic deliberation. Commoning, in all forms, is the ongoing production of a shared space of mutual exposure to the ethical demands of interdependence.

The practice of commoning involves *identifying and supporting* practices and articulations that render our interdependencies explicit and open to collective negotiation and transformation, and *challenging and dismantling* all that seeks to close these spaces down. Commoning constitutes shared and explicit ‘matters of concern’, where ‘matter’ should be taken in both senses of the word at once.<sup>43</sup> It is not that *all things shared* are commoned (we discuss this below), but that all shared matters are commoned to the extent that they appear as questions, concerns, or sites of struggle and decision. Commoning is at the heart of all labors of thinking in and with the world.

Such labour unfolds, then, as the composition of an innumerable set of variable ‘spheres’ of concern and negotiation that articulate livelihood triads together in explicitly-common habitat assemblages (Figure 4). Particular ecosystems, diseases, experiences of shared oppression, cultural traditions, mutual relations with distant others, the planetary climate system—all may be commoned by their rendering as sites of connection and negotiation. How will we live together? Commonings are the sites where *oikoi* (habitats) overlap, converge, and become sites for asking this crucial and transformative question. When interdependencies between citizens and new immigrants become visible in a public struggle over working conditions and wages, or in a direct encounter at the farmer's market, in school, or at a community meeting: this is where commoning can emerge in the form of new, shared action and commitment. When the climate crisis becomes a site for shared

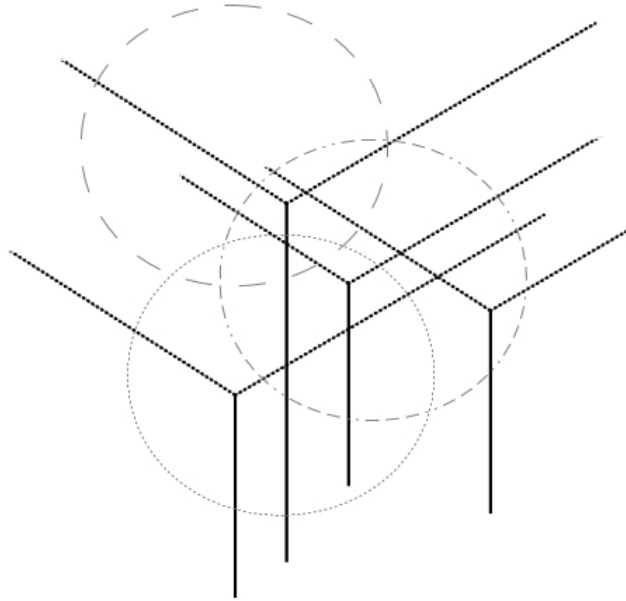


Figure 4: Overlapping commonings of livelihood.

concern and a movement begins to emerge that renders this concern into a new convergence of energy and collective labor: this, too, is commoning.

As sites of connection and community, commonings are also often *boundary-drawing* sites, since they entail explicit relations between particular participants and not others, particular negotiated settlements and stalemates that must often be bounded in order to remain stable. Thus commoning cannot always be contrasted—as it often is—with enclosure.<sup>44</sup> While some enclosures disrupt and destroy commons (the privatization of water, for example), others actually *constitute* them. A community says: “the water is ours, we share it. It cannot be privatized!” This is a boundary-drawing. The ethico-political question must, then, shift from its commonly-articulated form as ‘commons vs. enclosure’ to: *what enclosure, for whom, for what purpose, and to what effect?* It matters a great deal which *side* of a given enclosure one ends up standing on.

For clarity's sake, then, we oppose processes of commoning with those of *uncommoning*. If commoning is a making-explicit of the negotiations of the common, then uncommoning is an anesthetization of the common, an ethical closure, or a rendering-non-negotiable of habitat relations.<sup>45</sup> The commodity form, for example, as Marx showed us, renders our interdependence with the apple pickers into a site of uncommoning to the extent that the social relations of production—and thus our potentials for transformative connection—are obscured. Uncommoning in its various forms is not a *non-common*, since being-in-



common itself cannot be undone as a shared condition of existence (Nancy 1991; 2000), and nor does it always entail the destruction of commons. Uncommoning is, in a strange way, still an articulation of the common and even a production of commons (that is, of shared matters of concern), but this production is *alienated* or estranged: dispossessed, in varying degrees, of the means of encounter, negotiation, and response-ability. The conventional capitalist factory is a space of the common, of a shared existence for those who work there, but until workers organize to challenge or rupture capitalist discipline, it remains an *uncommoned common*, or a *common site of uncommoning*. Such dynamics can also be seen in the domains of climate and migration.

The earth's climate system has constituted a dynamic, shared field of experience for humans and other organisms since their evolutionary emergence. Over the 'long summer' the earth's climate regime has provided a relative stability that supported the human species to make livings from agriculture and industry.<sup>46</sup> Yet the climate only became a site of commoning when certain humans became aware of their active role in undermining the livelihoods we receive from our climate system and began to experience climate as a site of ethical and political engagement.<sup>47</sup> When the global community of nations negotiated the Montreal Protocol and agreed to ban the production and continued use of CFCs they made a stand for livelihoods—agreeing to change how livings were made, to provide improved livelihoods for future generations and to receive the livelihood protection that a repaired earth's ozone layer can give. As a result, this dangerous rupture in the chemical structure of our open access stratospheric commons has started to heal.<sup>48</sup> Substantive, large-scale action to halt global warming has not yet followed suit and the commoning of the climate at a planetary scale remains only an urgent but unfulfilled possibility. Might attempts toward climate stabilization unfold as regimes of capital accumulation and national division are challenged by new modes of collective ecological action? Or might they take the form of large-scale privatizations that serve to reinforce relations of exploitation and inequality in the name of "necessity"?<sup>49</sup> These are questions of commoning and uncommoning, and the stakes could not be higher.

The earth's land surface and the geographical distribution of its population is another shared field of experience. As our ultimate commons, the planet is a shared home—its land masses the ground upon which terrestrial livelihoods are built, and its oceans the watery abode of marine life. It is also the stage upon which the most violent acts of habitat destruction have played out as colonial conquest, war, resource extraction, labor exploitation,

and capital accumulation. At the very same time, these and other processes have woven together a vast integrated network of production, trade, and consumption upon which many humans now depend. We are co-implicated, in profoundly unequal ways, in a historically-unprecedented web of planetary livelihood. At various historical junctures the situation of 'displaced people' has become a shared matter of concern that has led to the commoning of habitats and the welcoming of strangers across the boundaries of nation state enclosures. Not so today. We are anesthetized to what we have received from so many 'strangers'—the livelihoods provided for us by those who care for our elderly, our sick, our children, or who work in the more unpleasant and low-paid industry sectors. We wallow in the resentments and victimizations of uncommoning. The goods and services that sustain us appear as anonymous commodities rather than manifestations of transformable social relations. Not only are we disconnected from populations of people seeking peace and secure livelihood in the face of violence and habitat destruction, so many of us see them as 'parasites' or 'dangerous others'.

In each of the three livelihood dimensions of receiving, making, and providing, the complexities of the world call us to open spaces for commoning, even while the hegemonic assemblages within which we exist continue to close down or deny such spaces. Let us re-imagine more-than-human planetary ecologies not as the Environment (itself a form of uncommoning in its hegemonic form), but as myriad sites of explicit ethical engagement around our responsibilities to those who make us and to those to whom we, in turn, provide. The climate is not an externality to be variously ignored, preserved, or 'internalized' into the Economy via marketization; it is a crucial dimension of livelihood itself, always already internal to the direct life sustenance of every organism on the planet. Can we attend to and cultivate our memberships in communities that actively make and share (and thus common) the conditions of life? Yes: we *already are!* What are movements for climate justice if not modes of commoning the collective means of life in ways that refuse exploitation and inequality? What is the work of building ethical food systems and 'sustainable agriculture' if not the commoning of our relations with plants, soil, bacteria, bees, and human food-eaters? A collective refusal is emerging in the face of a capitalist economy posing 'trade-offs' between ecological toxification and the feeding the world, or between climate stability and 'necessary' economic growth. Instead, the work of commoning seeks to continually render the distinction between an 'Economy' and an 'Environment' *impossible*. There is only the complex negotiation of livelihood.

Let us challenge, too, the image of the autonomous, self-made Man who 'works for a living, goddammit.' This creature, beholden to the Economy and its Jobs, desperate to deny its existential debt to the labour of others (human and nonhuman), and bound up with an impossible demand to singularly provide for 'the family', thrives on resentment. The Economy, combined with toxic masculinity, racism, nationalism, and ever-increasing financial instability, enables a collective turning-away from interdependence and its demands (and possibilities): We end up with a tragically ironic situation of *resenting* those who are 'dependent,' pretending that we (alone) work for what we have (no: it is given to us all), and all the while enabling the accumulators to steal the very means of life and livelihood from us—at local and planetary scales—on a daily basis!

To challenge such uncommoning we must honestly trace the complexities of our livelihood relations and cultivate practices of taking collective responsibility for them. How have past generations of immigrants and refugees worked hard to make the felicitous conditions under which we now live? What forms of responsibility do we have towards the myriad others (beings, places, times) whose bodies and worlds are shaped by the 'makings' that we take and receive from them? How might our way of making a living change if we took greater responsibility for supporting these livelihoods? Commoning our interdependence means generating new relations of connection, hospitality, and solidarity with immigrants and refugees, with devastated environments and broken infrastructure. It means struggling against forces that displace human and nonhuman communities against their wills, challenging stories and concepts that render our own forms of exploitation invisible or 'necessary,' transforming resentments into desires for transformation and practices of hope.

## Conclusion

To think with, as, against, and for the world is our task: *with* the world because the world is the condition of possibility for thought; *as* the world because we are this world in-the-making; *against* the world as it has been articulated in uncommoned forms; and *for* the world as it is already emerging in-common, differently. In this essay, we have foregrounded the role of organizing concepts and their material institutions—articulations—in shaping the possibilities and trajectories of active thought. The Economy and the Environment are potent tools for organizing a particular configuration of planetary power that tend to obscure many

ethical dimensions of our constitutive relations and reproduce a sense of inevitability—stupidity—in the face of ongoing ecological destruction, growing inequality, and entrenched injustice.

To counteract these categories and their associated practices, we seek to think with all of those relations that are already exceeding them, rupturing their coherence 'from within,' opening toward new forms of collective life and solidarity. We propose to think and act in terms of 'ecological livelihoods' and the three dimensions of receiving, making, and providing as an experimental engagement with 'tipping the assemblage'. It is our hope that such a language might help us (and others) to develop new sensitivities to the demands of the world, to the ethical calls that confront us, and to the possibilities that are already emerging in our midst. This is not a call for pure invention of a new mode of life, for creation *ex nihilo*; it is, rather, about building on and from the 'other' modes of life that are already present in the cracks—and perhaps even at the heart—of hegemony. How are we sustained by others? How do we sustain ourselves? (Who is 'ourselves'?) How do we participate in sustaining others? And where are the moments, practices, and institutions of commoning in our midst that are rendering these questions into sites of collective struggle and deliberation? We have given some examples; it is our collective task to identify, amplify, and cultivate a thousand more.

One might accuse us of a certain conservatism here, or of seeking to overly-domesticate the wild potentiality of transformation with our insistence on the here-and-now. We plead guilty to the extent that we are already in love with aspects of this present world, bound to them, obligated to conserve. And we, too, are domestic. We are creatures of homes, and in many ways it is home—the *oikos*—that we seek to passionately defend. But some concepts domesticate by alienating, closing, stopping thought—answering questions too quickly, before they are even really asked. Our aspiration is to domesticate *just enough* to hold onto our commitments to an *oikos*, or to *oikoi*, while also keeping open the movement toward radically-transformative possibility. The 'sweet spot' that we seek is somewhere between the sublime, ethereal terror of 'the ecological thought' that everything is connected, and the messy every-day comfort of washing dishes, cooking for the family, and going to the neighborhood association meeting.<sup>50</sup> We want to help find, acknowledge, and strengthen the places where thought is engaged in the radical challenges that our interdependencies call forth, where beings are collectively exposed to each other, becoming-in-common in ways that are bound to transform all those involved.

We do not propose here a coherent 'theory of change.' We are not suggesting that capitalism can be overthrown in a particular way via a particular strategy (though we are sure that capitalism *can* be overthrown!). We do not know if the amplification and connection of multiple, diverse forms of commoning will be 'enough'. But we refuse to be certain that they will *not* be enough. We seek to think, and to be forced to think by new forms of relation that might emerge from our collective experimentation. We seek to find ways to make the interdependencies of our webs of receiving, making, and providing more visible, and thus to open up new spaces for commoning across the boundaries and divisions that have so often been built between us.

How else are we to imagine the overcoming of the separations between those who seek to build walls and those who strive to tear them down? Perhaps we can render their construction less viable by relentlessly asking—with our concepts, in our conversations, and in myriad forms of action-research and organizing—how we are already connected across these real and imagined walls. We can refuse to accept that there is something called the Economy and something called the Environment that we must choose between, or that 'our' Economy takes priority over 'theirs', and focus on the transversal relations of ecological livelihood rather than the divided spheres of the hegemonic articulation. We might then more effectively foster a world in which fewer and fewer are forced to choose between feeding their family and being hospitable to unknown others, or between a steady job and a viable planetary life-support system for future generations. To paraphrase Spinoza, we do not yet know what our commonings of ecological livelihood can do.

1 Data on global refugees is from Edwards, A. (2016).

2 Fry, T. (n.d.) <http://www.thestudioattheedgeoftheworld.com/the-sustainment.html> (accessed 14/01/2017).

3 Stengers, I. (2015, 119).

4 Critchley, S. (2007); Derrida, J. (1993).

5 Lyotard, J.F. (1993); Latour, B. (1998).

6 Macnaghten, P. and Urry, J. (1998); Kovel, J. (2007); Smith, M. (2011).

7 Foucault, M. (2007); Polanyi, K. (2001); Mitchell, T. (1998); Luke, T. (1995); Macnaghten, P. and Urry, J. (1998).

8 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987); Latour, B. (2005).

9 This notion of a “form of life” can be traced to Wittgenstein, L. (1958).

10 Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (2001).

11 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987, p.326).

12 Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006a, 2006b, 2008); Roelvink, G., St. Martin, K., and Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2015).

13 The kinds of diverse economic activities represented in his iceberg image have been more systematically identified by members of the Community Economies Collective via two frameworks: a “diverse economies grid,” mapping alternative and non-capitalist forms of enterprise, labor, exchange, property, and finance (see Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013); and a circular “diverse economic moments” schema linking processes of creation, production, transaction, consumption, surplus allocation, and governance (see Miller 2010; 2011).

14 Morton, T. (2010). Plumwood, V. (2007) Rose, D.B. (2004).

15 The phrase “world of becoming” is from William Connolly (2011).

16 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987, p. 161).

17 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987, p. 160-161).

18 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987, p. 160-161).

19 Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006a, 2006b); Cameron, J. and Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2003); Miller, E. (2010; 2013).

20 Roelvink, G. and Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2009); Gibson-Graham, J.K. and Roelvink, G. (2010); Hill, A. (2014); Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2011).

21 See Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006a), and also Miller, E. (2013).

22 See also Gibson-Graham, J.K. and Miller, E. (2015) and Miller (2014).

23 Oxford English Dictionary (2008).

24 We draw this phrase *par le milieu* from Deleuze and Guattari via Stengers, I. (2009).

25 Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987, p. 105).

26 Deleuze, G. (1988, p.19); Bennett, J. (2010).

27 Polanyi, K. (1977); Chambers, R. and Conway, G (1991); Scoones, I. (1998); Scoones, I. (2009).

28 The term “transversal” comes from Guattari, F. (1996) and has been further developed by Yuval-Davis, N. (1999).

29 Szerszynski, B. (2010, p. 14).

30 Morton, T. (2010).

31 Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2008).

32 Latour, B. (2004).

33 Scott, D. (2000, p. 206-207).

34 Maturana, H. and Varela, F. (1980).

35 See Bennett, J. (2010) for a discussion of “distributed agency.”

36 Whatmore, S. (1997).

37 This classification of “lifters” and “leaners,” referring to those who give and those who merely take, comes originally from a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox and has been taken up by numerous people in the world of social ministry, nonprofit organization, and social work.

38 Latour, B. (1998).

39 We draw the term “meshwork” from Morton, T. (2010).

40 Benjamin Haas 9 January 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/09/beijing-creates-anti-smog-police-to-tackle-air-polluters>

41 Roelvink, G. (2015). See also Gibson-Graham, J.K. and Roelvink, G. (2010). Latour B (2004) How to talk about the body? The normative dimension of science studies. *Body and Society* 10:205–229 Page 205

42 This term, drawn initially from the work of Peter Linebaugh (2008) and Massimo de Angelis (2007), has been taken up by members of the Community Economies collective and many others in recent years as a key language for articulating the politics of explicit, collectively-negotiated interdependence.

43 Latour, B. (2005, p. 114).

44 A similar point about avoiding the opposition of commons and enclosure is made by David Harvey (2012, p. 70).

45 We could speak, then, of particular *commoning enclosures* and of *uncommoning enclosures*.

46 Dumanoski, D. (2009)

47 See Dumanoski, D. (2009).

48 Gibson-Graham, J.K., Cameron, J. and Healy, S. (2016). See also Solomon, S. et al (2016).

49 We are thinking here of various market-driven pathways such as carbon credit trading, as well as capital intensive and power-centralizing visions for geoengineering.

50 Morton, T. (2010).

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