

Economy as Ecological Livelihood

J.K. Gibson-Graham and Ethan Miller

Can we overcome our hyper-separation from the more-than-human world and take up membership in a thoroughly ecological community of life? While the demands of “the economy” are set in opposition to the needs of “the environment”; while the economy is seen as a vulnerable system that cannot accommodate allocations of social wealth to earth-repair and species protection without risking collapse; while the economic “we” continues to squander and ignore the gifts of the more-than-human world that gives us life, the answer seems to be a depressing “No.” To answer “Yes” we must begin to rethink and re-enact the relationship between economy and ecology.

We have inherited a vision of “the economy” as a distinct sphere of human activity, marked off from the social, the political, and the ecological as a domain of individualized, monetized, rational-maximizing calculation. This economic sphere rests upon and utilizes an earthly base of (often invisible) ecologies that are swept up into its domain to become “resources,” passive inputs for production and consumption measured primarily by their market value. Economy is “naturalized” in the sense that it is presented as a realm of objective, law-like processes and demands; yet this naturalization is at the same time a process by which the more-than-human world is affirmed as external to our economic lives, and the complexities of our interdependencies are rendered invisible and unaccountable. The economy thus assumes a presence and dynamism—manifest, for example, in the demand for endless growth—that appears to be independent from the living world upon which it depends.

This powerful and abstracted construction of the economy emerged from and enabled agricultural and industrial revolutions that gave rise to urbanization, increased standards of living for many, and vast and unprecedented mobilizations and transformations of energy and matter on the part of certain humans. But it also produced and legitimated tremendous violence and inequity, and has generated unforeseen impacts that are undermining the long-term viability of earthly survival not just for humans, but for myriad other species and more-than-human communities. Enabling as it has been for some, this view of economy-ecology relations now stands squarely in the way of imagining and enacting an ethics for living in the Anthropocene.

Recognizing “the economy” as a historical, discursive production rather than an objective ontological category (Mitchell 1998, 2008; Callon 2007) can enable us to begin exploring different ways of thinking and experiencing our processes of livelihood-making. What if we were to see economic activities not in terms of a separate sphere of human activity, but instead as thoroughly social and ecological? What if we were to see economic sociality as a necessary condition of life itself? What if we were to see the economy as ecology—as a web of human ecological behaviors no longer bounded but fully integrated into a complex flow of ethical and energetic interdependencies: births, contaminations, self-organizing, mergings, extinctions, and patterns of habitat maintenance and destruction?

Starting from this premise, we might begin to see the history of economic thought as a discursive enclosure of ecological space analogous to—and, in fact, historically parallel to—the material and legal enclosure of commons from the 16th century to the present (Perelman 2000). Just as the discourse of individual private property emerged with its legal rules of ownership, use and transfer, divorcing property (as a thing) from social relations, so the discourse of a separate economy evolved with and through terms, techniques and disciplinary practices that increasingly differentiated and distanced it from other spheres of human and non-human behavior and interaction. Economy, then, was produced when discursive boundaries, at once symbolic and material, were drawn around a particular configuration of ecological relationships—specifically those between certain humans and a world made into resources for their instrumental use. Diverse processes of human livelihood were reduced to narrow logics. Sociality was reserved only for those who count as “human.” And all more-than-human life was relegated to the domain of passive objects.

By making a certain kind of sense of the world, this discourse of “the economy” literally made sense transforming our sensual perceptions and experiences, altering the material and conceptual conditions of possibility for our identifications with others, and changing our abilities to see, think and feel certain inter-relationships and the responsibilities that come with such experiences. Our challenge is to engage in forms of thought and practice that undermine the conditions of possibility for thinking “the economy” as a hyper-separated domain beyond the reach of politics, ethics and the dynamics of social and ecological interdependence. How might we cultivate genuinely ethical ecological-economic sensibilities? How might we reconfigure our notions of economy and ecology in ways that help us take responsibility for being alive together as life? We suggest three strategies that might bear some ethical fruit.

Strategy 1: Rethinking Being

For political theorist Jean Luc Nancy, the individual emerges from an essential sociality, rather than the other way around as is often conceived (2000, 44). He suggests that we replace the singular philosophical conception of “Being” with a “being-in-common” that does not reduce us to a unity or shared essence. For theorist of evolutionary biology Lynn Margulis, the process of symbiogenesis suggests that “individuals are all diversities of co-evolving associates” (quoted in Hird 2009, 65). Life does not exist without community as a process of connection-amidst-difference, without being-in-common. “Life,” write Margulis and Sagan, “is an orgy of attractions” (Margulis and Sagan 1995, 157).

If we cease to think of ourselves as singular, self-contained beings and begin to think alongside, for example, the multiple communities of bacteria and bacterial symbionts from which we continually take shape and of which we are but fleeting, temporary manifestations (Hird 2009; Hird 2010); or if we place our activities in the context of the billions-of-years-old, emergent, planetary-scale process of biological self-construction known as “Gaia” (Lovelock 2000; Harding 2006; Volk 2003), it is no longer possible to identify a singular “humanity” as a distinctive ontological category set apart from all else.

What difference might it make if we accept that from the scale of Gaia, to the scale of the microscopic bacteria that form the laboring basis for nearly all biological energy production and transformation, there is a “we” bound together in myriad interrelationships that are themselves the very conditions of existence for our sense of a human “we”? Being-in-common—that is, community—can no longer be thought of or felt as a community of humans alone; it must become multi-species community that includes all of those with whom our livelihoods are interdependent and interrelated.

From this standpoint, there is no more ground for the construction of a human “economy” separate from its ecological context than there would be for ecologists to consider the provisioning practices of bees as an independent “system”—with its own internal laws and imperatives—wholly separate from their constitutive interrelationships with flowering plants, other pollinators, soil mycorrhizae, nitrogen fixing bacteria, seed dispersing birds and mammals. Human sociality is simply a particular manifestation of the mutual interrelationships between and among species and between and among communities of living beings that implicate lives ranging from the mitochondria in our cells to pollinators that make agriculture possible. If, to paraphrase Foucault, there is no “outside” to ecology (1980, 141), the big difference between those who have economy and those who don’t is our symbolic capacity to represent ourselves as constituting a distinct sphere of existence in which sociality is reduced

to individual desire. In other words, we are separate only by virtue of our ability to conceive of these separations.

We might say, from a Gaian perspective, that we humans are a manifestation of the self-organizing processes of planetary life experimenting with particular forms of self-consciousness. Certainly this makes members of our species distinctive and allows us to generate previously impossible ecologies. But by thinking and building ourselves into self-conscious separation from ecological interrelationships and the sociality of life, we have made many of our livelihood processes into enemies of ecological resilience. Our acknowledgement of this history, and our commitment to rejoining a community of life through both our concepts and our actions is a crucial step toward a more robust ethical engagement with the world.

Strategy 2: Redefining Economy

Let us try to think “economy” not as a unified system or a domain of being but as diverse processes and interrelations through which we (human and more-than-human) constitute livelihoods. “Economy” (*oikos*-habitat; *nomos*-negotiation of order) might then become a conceptual frame or theoretical entry point through which to explore the diverse specificities of livelihood creation by a population (members of the same species) or a community (multi-species assemblage). Economic analysis might then trace and track practices of community survival/management, including processes of co-existence and interdependence with all other populations or communities. Now, if we imagine the co-existence of diverse human economies, diverse salmon economies, diverse bee economies, diverse bacterial economies, and so on, along with the spatio-temporal community economies that they create together, “ecology” (*oikos*-habitat, *logos*-account of) becomes a conceptual frame from which to view the articulated whole of interacting diverse economies. The ecological entry point forces us to step back from the temporary centering operations of economics and ask how relations of livelihood creation and collective provisioning interact, conflict, co-constitute each other, and generate emergent properties.

Clearly such an approach would challenge us to rethink our places in the world, and to re-imagine the identities and social categories through which we’ve grown accustomed to view our interrelationships. What other differences can this redefinition make? For one, it might enable us to develop stronger conceptualizations of livelihood processes that are shared across species and from which we might have a great deal to learn. Jacobs’ (2000) application of ecological concepts to regional

economies, experimental practices of biomimicry (Benyus 2002), and the application of ecological wisdom through permaculture design (Mollison 1990; Holmgren 2002) are all examples of sites where the livelihood work of bees, grasses and bacteria become spaces of inter-species learning.

This redefinition might also offer pathways for developing more robust understandings of the complex interconnections between specific human livelihood practices and the more-than-human world from which they emerge (and which they transform). It might lead, for example, to a different analysis of the ethical and material implications of interdependence between diverse bee economies and diverse human agricultural economies—from the vast agri-business economy that promotes monoculture and dependence on the industrial reproduction of non-native pollinators (Mathews 2011a) to the integrated community farm that cultivates resilient polycultures of human, plant and bee life. When we begin to recognize that we are not alone in our livelihoods and that our human economies are inextricably linked with the economies of more-than-human others, might our ways of understanding and experiencing economic crisis, development and well-being begin to fundamentally shift?

Strategy 3: Ethical Coordinates for More-Than-Human Community Economies

We have redefined economy as ecology from the standpoint of actors constituting a community and producing livelihoods together, and ecology as the interactions of different diverse community economies. We arrive, then, at the ethical questions that lie at the heart of our economic and ecological relations: “How do we live together with human and non-human others?” Here we might turn to the work of identifying key sites of ethical negotiation—what we have elsewhere called the ethical coordinates of community economies (Gibson-Graham 2006, Ch. 4; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). Building on and adding to these, we suggest that an economic ethics for the Anthropocene calls us to become practiced in negotiating:

- **PARTICIPATION:** Who is the “we” that participates in the constitution of livelihoods and community economies? This involves cultivating forms of knowing and becoming that open us to the complexities of our interdependencies, to their animate interactions with us, and to the forms of responsibility this calls forth.
- **NECESSITY OR SUFFICIENCY:** What do “we” need for survival? What constitutes “enough”? This includes asking about what is necessary for the dignified survival of all living

beings and communities with whom we are interdependent, and about how we might consume in ways such that one species' or community's consumption does not compromise the survival chances of others.

- SURPLUS: How do “we” produce, appropriate, distribute and mobilize surplus? Our new accounting must include surplus that is generated not just by human labor, but by the work of plants, animals, bacteria, fungi and dynamic energetic systems.
- COMMONS: How do “we” make and share a commons, the material commonwealth of our community economies, with this new, more-than-human “we” in mind? Can we, for example, begin to see the chickens, bees and fruit trees of a cooperative farm not as part of that farm's commons (as shared resources), but rather as living beings participating in the co-constitution of the community that, together, makes and shares the farm?

Imagine an economics in which these kinds of questions were placed at the forefront of theory, public debate, and practical action—an economics in which the dynamics of livelihood were understood not in terms of a narrow range of monetized maximizing (human) activity unfolding according to the dictates of market forces, but as dynamics of appreciative inquiry into diverse forms of interdependence, complex relations of community-making, and ethical negotiations of multiple rationalities and ways-of-living. If community is what emerges as living beings make and share worlds together, then community economies are the sites where we imagine and struggle—as increasingly-attentive members of a community of life—to balance our needs with the needs of others, to account for and to offer recompense for the gifts of surplus we receive from the earth and earth others, and to begin to build together an ethical practice of economy for living in—and beyond—the Anthropocene.

References

- Benyus, Janine. 2002. *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired By Nature*. New York: Perennial Publishers.
- Callon, Michel. 2007. “What Does It Mean To Say That Economics Is Performative?” In *Do Economists Make Markets?: On the Performativity of Economics*. Ed., Donald MacKenzie, Fabian

- Muniesa, and Lucia Sui. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Colin Gordon (ed). New York: Pantheon.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. and Gerda Roelvink. 2010. "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene." *Antipode*. 41(1): 320-346.
- Harding, Stephan. 2006. *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*. Foxhole, UK: Green Books Ltd.
- Hird, Myra. 2010. "Coevolution, Symbiosis and Sociology." *Ecological Economics*. 69 (4): 737-742.
- , 2009. *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution After Science Studies*. Houndmills, Basingstroke: Palgrave Press.
- Holmgren, David. 2002. *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*.
- Jacobs, Jane. 2001. *The Nature of Economies*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jax, Kurt. 2006. "Ecological Units: Definitions and Application." *The Quarterly Review of Biology*. 18(3): 237-258.
- Lovelock, James. 2000. *Gaia: The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margulis, Lynn and Dorion Sagan. 1997. *Dazzle Gradually: Reflections on the Nature of Nature*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green.
- , 1995. *What Is Life?* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mathews, Freya. 2010. "Planet Beehive." *Australian Humanities Review*. Issue 50.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1998. "Fixing the Economy." *Cultural Studies*. 2(1): 82-101.
- , 2008. "Rethinking Economy." *Geoforum*. 39(3): 1116-1121.
- Mollison, Bill. 1990. *Permaculture: A Practical Guide for a Sustainable Future*. Washington D.C.: Island Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2000. *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Perelman, Michael. 2000. *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Volk, Tyler. 2003. *Gaia's Body: Toward a Physiology of Earth*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.