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## [Money in the Mountains - Issue 2](#)

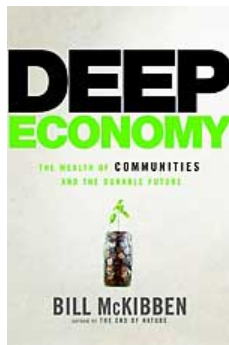
Last month I started a monthly newsletter, Money in the Mountains, focusing on the Vermont homegrown economy. It's off to a fantastic start. Prof. Frank Bryan from the University of Vermont was kind enough to provide this book review for the latest issue.

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Resource of the Month

Deep Economy by **Bill McKibben**

Reviewed by **Frank Bryan**



*Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*

New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007

261 pages, hard cover

\$25

Bill McKibben of Ripton begins his latest book, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* with an analysis of human happiness.

Anyone who knows McKibben's written work (beginning with his landmark, *The End of Nature* and continuing through a shelf of other volumes) or his career walking the walk as he talks the talk against global warming or the material excesses of modern life or the need to control technology or the essential humanity of living close to the land and close to each other - can guess what he thinks about happiness.

But in this book he proves it. His artful, dramatic and often funny trip through the best evidence we have on the relationship between happiness and material progress demonstrates that (after the essentials of life have been met) there is no relationship between the accumulation of more and more stuff and happiness. In fact the relationship is inverse. The more we buy, the more stuff we have, the more miserable we are.

But McKibben is never satisfied with something as simple as taking a sledge hammer to the "more is better" ceramic on which is imprinted the motivational paradigm that has governed economics since Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* well over two centuries ago.

No indeed. McKibben bellies up and provides an alternative.

And where is this alternative most likely to be found?

With us.

Here. In places like Vermont.

For real wealth, and the only wealth that can make us happy, says McKibben, is found on a human scale in communities and not on a system's scale in nations or global conglomerates. The "wealth of nations" is to be replaced by the wealth of neighborhood, town and village. The thin economy of mega markets driven by the lust for material things is to be replaced by the deep economy of local markets driven by the need for human relationships.

I can think of only one recent exception to McKibben's thesis.

I went out and bought something from a box store the other day.

I bought his book.

And it made me very happy.

In fact I knew it would be the moment I opened it. For it is dedicated to Wendell Berry, the poet, farmer and communitarian scholar from Kentucky. Certainly a hero of mine. Those who follow the decentralist movement from both the left and right will understand.

One reason it made me happy is purely selfish. As I read it, I kept exclaiming. "Yes!" "Yes!" as when watching Mike Lowell's line drive sail off into the Colorado night. For reading McKibben's book reinforces much of my own thinking about Vermont since I first made a fool of myself joining with Herb Ogden of Hartland in the 1960's opposing the building of the interstate because of its threat to small towns.

Another reason is because Vermont permeates McKibben's book even as it abounds with examples from around the world. From the Butterworks farm in the Northeast Kingdom to the Full Moon Farm in Chittenden County, from Thunder Road International Speedway to town meeting, from winter wheat in Bridport to locally threshed dried beans in Shoreham, to CSA's (community-supported farms) to VFF's (Vermont Family Forests) all over the state, McKibben places Vermont at the very center of his thesis.

My favorite example is radio station WDEV in Waterbury, which on the "fair and balanced" meter leaves both CNN and FOX in the dust and makes ABC, CBS and NBC seem, well as blah as they truly are. But McKibben also likes WDEV because it is as "public" as a "private" station can be and (more importantly) it is local, truly and forever, local!

A third reason I found happiness in *Deep Economy* was its hopeful message for those of us who, for half a century have patiently endured others (many "from away") who instructed us on why and how we must go about dismantling the core institutions of our state - small family farms, little towns and villages, town meeting, community schools, our citizen legislature in Montpelier - in order to get "up to speed" with the rest of America where bigger and faster, easier and centralized were the euphemistic gods of progress.

Here is a world-class scholar/reporter who came to Vermont not to retire or to preach the values of the places left behind but to work here, with us; to celebrate our institutions, to learn from them and to teach and urge America to catch up with us!

Finally, *Deep Economy* makes me happy because it is written by one who understands that history is not linear and neither is ideology. I first learned of McKibben's book in a very positive review published in *The American Conservative*. Understand. As American conservatism has been constructed and construed over the past three decades, McKibben is no conservative. Not even close.

But there is a kind of American conservatism that resonates from his work. It is the classic, social conservatism best (in my view) expressed in Robert Nisbet's classic *The Quest for Community* or Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*. It came from a time when conservatism meant conserving the values of hard work, self sufficiency, individualism *and* community. (And this latter can be done, as Vermont has demonstrated from its beginning when it paced the seemingly oxymoronic "Freedom and Unity" on its state flag. Again and again in McKibben's book one finds evidence that the enemy is not capitalism and the market place, but giant corporations that usurp the market place and destroy competition. More importantly one senses that McKibben may be willing to concede that huge public bureaucracies are as damaging to the commonwealth of local communities as huge private ones; that (simply put) the Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture threaten community and the deep economy of face-to-face democratic life as much as Wal-Mart and Ford Motor Company. (Well, maybe not Wal-Mart.)

As I read McKibben I see much of the thinking of my friend and Vermont's premier conservative, John McClaughry. On some issues like global warming they disagree profoundly. But this is an empirical disagreement and can therefore (and will someday-hopefully very soon) be resolved. On issues of the heart (which are more difficult to resolve - issues like community, the value of the individual, the redemptive qualities of discipline and hard work and the need for a renewed civic humanism in America these men (heroes both) may be remarkably similar. McClaughry's work-especially on agriculture and local economy in *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale* would (I believe) find favor with McKibben.

And no matter what else is not these days, this would surely be progress.

And make us all happier.

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