

To the Restoration Economy—BOOKS

by Chris Calder

"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the future controls the present."

George Orwell

Imagining the future is at the root of politics, but the visions that actually move people can come in terrible or inspiring forms. Our growing distance from the twentieth century and its bloody utopian ideologies is making possible work like Geoffrey Hodgson's *Economics and Utopia*. With a clarity and scholarly sweep that makes you wonder if maybe the British are smarter, Hodgson analyzes the ways of thinking that were taken for reality during the Cold War and traces their elements back through the minds and conditions of the early 1900s. In so doing, all kinds of dead, deadly and certainly limiting assumptions fall away, leaving a truly clear-eyed view of the path on which we have come.

Moving from Cambridge to Main Street, we find Storm Cunningham's *The Restoration Economy*, directed toward entrepreneurs, boldly pitching the profit possibilities of what he describes as the coming wave of global redevelopment. Projects from prairie restoration in the midwest to ways of reinventing urban water systems are varied and variously convincing. Cunningham is persuasive that a rapidly growing portion of the already existing economy is focused on a deep kind of redevelopment, a reworking of old relationships within human society, and between society and the natural world. His ability to rhetorically connect with a business audience enhances the power of his message, that a genuinely sane future is being born and there's a buck in it.

In *Going Local*, Michael H Shuman sets out to write about "a new economics sensitive to place," the main tool of which is the community corporation, which he defines as "any business anchored in the community through ownership." He goes on to say that, "The only way communities can ensure their economic well-being is to stop chasing multinational firms without community loyalties and to start investing in community corporations. Prosperity follows when ownership, production, and consumption become intimately connected with place."

Shuman supports his argument with examples from a variety of industries and public service realms, looking in detail at issues such as corporate structure and workable local hiring plans. The extensive list of relevant organizations included in the book adds to its value as a resource for anyone thinking or doing something about strengthening a local economy.

One standard among books that reimagine the economic future is Bill McKibben's *Deep Economy*.

McKibben starts with the critique that "economics ... has become abstracted from the actual planet we inhabit," and responds to the problem with the aid of economists like Stanford's Bob Costanza, who apply systems ecology to problems in human society, particularly ones involving the limits to economic growth. McKibben analyzes things in a very big-picture way. He starts with food, which, he points out, accounts for at least 50 percent of the world's assets, consumer expenditure and jobs. Managing limits in relation to food is an ancient human talent, and McKibben musters examples of it still being done skillfully in many places, even within our post-modern food chain. Other very broad aspects of human life—community, wealth, sustainability—he approaches in the same manner, making for a book that is beautifully simple, given its scope, and filled with real optimism about our potential.

That same combination of inspiration and analytical skill characterizes Riane Eisler's *The Real Wealth of Nations*. Eisler breaks through the fences around traditional economics to practice a "caring economics," which includes the essential intangibles not only of human, but of all life. Drawing on varied intellectual fields and sciences in a way that reveals a brilliant mind at work in a global age, Eisler is at heart an analyst of power. She focuses on the dichotomy between partnership and domination, treating economics as manifestations of both those kinds of power, but also as part of a much more inclusive cultural and natural realm. *The Real Wealth of Nations* reaches back before and beyond capitalism and Marxism to describe forms of power with which a healthy humanity can live long term.

Gar Alperovitz has lived American politics for the past 40-plus years as few others have. He worked with Martin Luther King, helped found Earth Day, and organized against the Viet Nam War. Out of all that, Alperovitz derives a vital truth: that real social change is inconceivable right up until it occurs. Based on this outlook, Alperovitz assembles all kinds of ideas that are inconceivable in the United States today—genuinely widespread worker-owned firms; a 25-hour work week, a North America made up of regional commonwealths instead of an imperial superstate—to make a book full of fertile seeds. In fact his passion and sense of the future, make Alperovitz a kind of Johnny Appleseed for progressive American politics, and the ideas contained in *America Beyond Capitalism* are likely to be among those that change the political landscape in decades to come.

Chris Calder is a freelance journalist and former small-town newspaper editor in Northern California.

