

The Human Economy: A Citizen's Guide.* Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville and Antonio David Cattani, eds. London: Polity Press, 2010, 371pp.

Reviewed by Lorenz Khazaleh

Our world is in a condition similar to France before the French Revolution. For how else can one describe a situation where a socially exclusive minority controls an impoverished mass?

Not many months after Keith Hart made this comparison in *The Human Economy*, a wave of revolutions and mass demonstrations has hit the world. From Tunisia and Egypt to Spain and Greece, people take to the streets in order to fight against inequality and lack of democracy.

The timing for the release of *The Human Economy* could not have been better.

In this anthology, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, economists, and activists from 15 countries discuss alternatives to our dominating economic system. Their aim is to “rebuild economic democracy.” They describe their book as “a citizen's guide” for a “human economy.”

Human Economy?

Yes, this is an economy that serves humanity as a whole. An economy that is not guided by what activities return the most profit but by what serves human needs and the common good.

Sounds utopian? Indeed. But, the authors insist that the Human Economy is not a dream. It already exists theoretically and practically, but it has been obscured by the economic models and approaches that dominate the media and universities. “The project of economics,” the editors proclaim (p. 5), “needs to be rescued from the economists.”

Anthropologists have shown, Hart stresses, that the idea of an economy based on narrow self-interest is absent from many societies and “does not even reflect what is best about ourselves.” The capitalist notion of the *homo economicus*, who seeks to maximize individual wealth and pleasure, and to minimize individual effort and pain, might be rather the exception than the norm, and rather a product of capitalism than its starting point.

When you move to a new place, your friends will drop their own plans for the day and help you carrying your belongings without presenting a bill afterwards. On social media websites, people invest much time in building projects together like Wikipedia, the world's largest and maybe also best encyclopedia. When the need arises, people cooperate and help each other, even strangers, and not only after disasters.

David Graeber, in one of the most inspiring contributions in this book, calls these practices for everyday communism. Here, the classic communistic principle of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” is applied. This everyday communism is the

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foundation of all human sociability. There would be no society without it.

The question that then arises is: How compatible is capitalism with this everyday communism? Does it support or undermine it? If we find that the latter is true, shouldn't we replace it with a system that is more in harmony with human sociability? How could this system be designed?

There are already a variety of theories and concepts available that address this question. Some of them are presented in the book, among others feminist economics, ecological economics, gift economy, moral economy, and the notion of "global public goods."

Across the globe, people have already started designing "human economies." Local exchange trading systems (LETS) have gained in popularity as Jérôme Blanc shows. LETS allow even people without a thick wallets to acquire goods and services: You repair my bike, and I will help your with your English homework. Felix Stalder explains how on the internet, new infrastructures and new forms of copyright have been developed to ensure that everybody gains equal access to knowledge and can take part in the production of culture. The numerous fair trade initiatives in Latin America may serve as models for Europe and Northern America, argue Alfonso Cotera Fretel and Humberto Ortiz Roca. In Latin America, the Fair Trade concept has expanded, with the definition being extended to trade within countries, trade between the countries of the south as well as with the north and the east.

The authors are convinced that it is now easier than ever to realize a Human Economy. The internet facilitates the communication of ideas and the formation of alliances on a global level. "Global interconnectedness," states Thomas Hylland Eriksen (p. 31), "can be the servant of human aspirations for liberation."

The Human Economy is partly fascinating reading—especially as an academic book. With its interdisciplinary and cosmopolitan approach, it gives a unique introduction into alternative ways of thinking about our economy that are rarely mentioned in public debates. As a fundamental critique of established theories, this book should be compulsory reading for social scientists, especially economists.

But I am in doubt if the book is as valuable as a citizen's guide. Sure, its starting point is refreshing. The author's suggestion is to build on what is already there instead of calling for a revolution. They aim at transcending the socialist-capitalist divide.

But unfortunately, many authors do not leave the theoretical level and persistently stick to academic prose. Only a few authors include empirical research in their articles as, for example, Chris Hann does.

Arnaud Sales and Leandro Raizer, for example, describe different forms of alternative energy, characterizing their strengths and weaknesses. A case study about a concrete project would have been more useful. Technology is not the problem. It has been developed already, to a large degree. The crucial part is the introduction of new technology. How can we do it? How have others succeeded (or failed), what can we learn from them?

As a global citizen's guide, the perspectives and references are not global enough. Too many authors write from a Western and sometimes even Christian perspective.

Finally, how valuable is a citizen guide published in 2011 that only exists on paper? Put it online! And why not extend the book with online forums and wikis where positive examples from around the world can be shared, discussed and developed?

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