

Anticipating a transformative future

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Review of *How To Thrive in the Next Economy: Designing Tomorrow's World Today*, by John Thackara. (2015). Published by Thames & Hudson, New York. Available as hardcover and Kindle; 192 pages. Publisher's website: <http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/how-to-thrive-in-the-next-economy-designing-tomorrows-world-today-hardcover>



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The core principle of this inspiring book is to spell out a compelling alternative to our current industrial economy. As is becoming ever more evident, the mainstream industrial economy not only is destroying many of nature's ecosystem services, but also is depleting many of our precious natural resources. Such destructiveness is part and parcel of the “endless growth” belief system that

our industrial culture insists is the only path to progress.

Thackara's global investigation points out that an alternative economy is not only possible but is already emerging throughout the world in the form of “bioregional” economies. These alternative economies rely on the regenerative resources of regional ecologies. The collaborators in such economies are likely to share a common awareness that “our lives are codependent with the plants, animals, air, water, and soils that surround us” (p. 9). Increasingly, participants in these bioregional economies find that they not only can survive but may even thrive. What is perhaps most inspiring is that while such transformations have long seemed

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unthinkable, they are actually happening now.

As people participate in such bioregional economies, they also learn that many of the promises made by the industrial economy are fallacies. The assumptions that endless growth is possible and a “gospel of consumption” improves everyone’s quality of life simply are not true. Alternatively, a bioregional economy—wherein people collaborate for the common good—fosters a flourishing of life and stimulates “the one kind of growth that makes sense—the regeneration of life on earth” (p. 9).

All of this is consistent with Aldo Leopold’s observation that the “land community” is “not a commodity belonging to us,” but rather “a community to which we belong” (Leopold, 1949, p. viii) and that our role, therefore, is not as “conqueror” of that land community but “plain member and citizen” (Leopold, 1949, p. 204). Similarly, Thackara points out that in these emerging bioregional economies people begin to recognize that “production is determined by the health and carrying capacity of the land through time,” and not by the impulse to “drive the land endlessly to yield more food or fiber per acre” (p. 31).

Yet, what is most inspiring about this book is the fact that this new bioregional revolution is already taking place, largely driven by smallholder farmers and regional food citizens in many parts of the world. Furthermore, since “80 per cent of all farms in the world—445 million of them—occupy 2 hectares (5 acres) or less” (p. 59), this bioregional transformation may happen more rapidly than we have imagined. This is the new “commons” that is beginning to transform the lives of an increasing number of people who are increasingly living in such bioregions.


Such bioregionalism is increasingly grounded in a new culture that affirms nature as a living, biotic community of which we are a part. The capacity for renewal of that biotic community can be enhanced in each ecological bioregion. This emerging culture is in sharp contrast to the Enlightenment culture, which operated on the

“notion that the universe is a repository of dead resources for us to exploit, as we choose, for the exclusive benefit of our own species” (p. 151).

Of course it may be hard to imagine such a cultural shift taking place in our lifetime, especially since—as Thackara points out—such a shift has “a spiritual as well as a practical dimension” (p. 32). He acknowledges that it might seem impossible to get modern people interested in issues such as soil health, which lies at the heart of these ecological transformations, since most people live in cities where there is no connection with the soil. However, he provides at least one example from Sweden where innovative individuals (including artists) engaged the public in creative ways that contributed to their transformation.

The arts can play a significant role in bringing about these needed spiritual transformations. An example relative to soil is Deborah Koons Garcia’s creative documentary, *Symphony of Soil*. This film challenges a public that may still think that soil is just dirt, but after being exposed to this film no one can still have that belief. The arts also can help us to imagine a different future with a more flourishing life than our consumptive lifestyles have provided.

Our current industrial food system is heavily subsidized with public funds. Another strategy not mentioned in Thackara’s book might be to use some of these subsidies to encourage transitions to bioregional economies. This support for beginning farmers, many of whom are already intrigued by bioregional economies and food systems, could be well worth exploring.

The vision outlined in this book has the potential to transform our culture, our food and agriculture future, and the quality of life for future generations. I strongly recommend that it be added to everyone’s reading list. 

Reference

Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.