

TAKE BACK

THE

ECONOMY

**AN ETHICAL GUIDE FOR
TRANSFORMING OUR COMMUNITIES**



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Take Back the Economy

An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities

**J. K. Gibson-Graham
Jenny Cameron
and Stephen Healy**

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis • London



Illustrations throughout book created by Adam Turnbull.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gibson-Graham, J. K.

Take back the economy : an ethical guide for transforming our communities /
J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8166-7606-4 (hc : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8166-7607-1 (pb : alk. paper)

1. Community development—Australia. 2. Community development—
Moral and ethical aspects. I. Cameron, Jenny. II. Healy, Stephen. III. Title.

HN850.Z9C638 2013

307.1'40994—dc23

2013000919

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Julie and in her memory

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Acknowledgments

Taking back the economy is not a task for a loner. The job calls for concerted action by many. Thankfully we know that there are already many on the job. This book could not have been written without them.

In the late 1990s Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, writing as the authorial voice J. K. Gibson-Graham, suggested, in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, that we didn't need to wait for the revolution; we could smash capitalism by working at home in our spare time. It wasn't till a decade later, with diverse movements across the globe chanting cries of "Other Economies Are Possible!" and "Life after Capitalism," that our cheeky feminist proposition was finally old news.

In *A Postcapitalist Politics*, J.K. laid out a vision of a community economy as a space of ethical negotiation and decision making. Much of the thinking for this book was generated in the context of community-based action research projects conducted with Jenny Cameron in Australia and Stephen Healy in the United States. Over the decades the four of us have been connecting and plotting around kitchen tables, at community meetings, in university lecture halls, and via the Internet to take back the economy any way we could. In 2008, with the encouragement of Jason Weidemann from the University of Minnesota Press, we decided to write a manual that would help connect a broad range of economic experimenters, activists, students, and researchers. Working now as an expanded authorial collective, we launched into what we thought was a project of popularizing these ideas. We had no idea that our journey would take us far away from our familiar starting point, out into uncharted territory.

During the four years it has taken this book to emerge, it has developed a life of its own under the direction of influences and forces we can only just make out. Multiple collectivities have sustained us

with their energy, resources, and creativity. The Community Economies Collective has been a constant source of theoretical nourishment and comradely care. Its web of loving connection surrounded us when Julie Graham died in April 2010, supporting us to proceed with what was at that time a very sketchy manuscript. Julie's presence lives on in our collective's memory in countless ways—in our regular discussions, when we ponder the bizarre differences between English and American punctuation codes, and when we have lost the plot and need to channel her clarifying conceptual capacities. All members of this thirty-some-strong international collective have offered feedback, suggestions, and examples that have enriched this work.

Our ongoing conversation with Julie is not the only one with someone no longer living who has directed our journey. We would like to acknowledge three inspirational thinkers with whom we have continued to converse since their recent deaths. Val Plumwood has pushed us to engage with the ecological world and to extend ethical thinking to include earth others. Jane Jacobs has led us toward a closer engagement with ecological dynamics. And Eve Sedgwick has continued to whisper “reparative, reparative” in our ears as we have contemplated action and possibility. Our debt to these women is heartfelt, not least because they help us accept that death does not sever our interdependence with others.

Some very specific communities and organizations have guided our journey, variously educating us in the work of habit cultivation, popular education, and ethical deliberation. We would like to thank the Cooleyville community; Empower Biodiesel Cooperative Solidarity and Green Economy; Newcastle community gardens; the recovery and twelve-step movements; Latrobe Valley Community Partnering initiatives; the Town Farm Road hummingbirds; Alliance to Develop Power; Nuestras Raíces; Jagna and Linamon Community Partnering initiatives; the Te Maiharoa family, especially Ramonda; Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives; the Association for Economic and Social Analysis; Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement; the Tait crowd; and the Picnic Point cockatoo colony, among many others.

Our institutions have offered us material and collegial support. The University of Western Sydney provided Katherine with generous re-

search support. It funded Julie on an Eminent Research Visitor Fellowship for three months in 2010 and Stephen on a four-month fellowship that took him to Australia for a crucial period. Study leave from the University of Newcastle gave Jenny a concerted block of writing time away from the interruptions of teaching and administration. Worcester State University has supported Stephen's absences.

Above all, we would like to thank a vast array of individuals who in different ways have made this book possible. Thanks first to all who read the manuscript or interacted around it at various stages, made suggestions or corrections, and helped with clarification and examples: our reviewers George Henderson, Roger Lee, Brian Marks, and Sallie Marston and our activist friends, colleagues, and students—Violeta Anahi Castillo Angon, Chris Cavanagh, Janelle Cornwell, Louise Crabtree, Mark Creyton, George De Martino, Esra Erdam, Carly Gardner, Michael Garjian, Ilene Grabel, Caroline Graham, Joseph Haider, Rose Heyer, Ann Hill, Matilda Hunt, Leo Hwang-Carlos, Michael Johnson, Sharon Livesey, Sarah Lutherborrow, Yahya Madra, Julie Matthaei, Ethan Miller, Janet Newbury, Ceren Oszelcuk, Robert Pekin, Jamie Pomfrett, Gerda Roelvink, Annie Rooke-Frizell, Lee Roscoe, Deborah Bird Rose, David Ruccio, Boone Shear, Kevin St. Martin, Lillian Tait, Abby Templer, May-an Villalba, Ted White, and Susan Witt.

Special thanks to Kate Boverman and Ethan Miller, who have pulled out all the stops to help bring this book to life, offering detailed research and editorial assistance and searching theoretical engagement. Our illustrator, Adam Turnbull, has provided wonderfully creative input, and our designer, Daniel Oschner, has transformed our amateurish layout into a masterpiece. Above all, thanks to our editor, Jason Weidemann, for his unstinting encouragement and ability to see what we were aiming for.

Finally, to all those who are taking back any little bit of the economy with an eye to our future on this precious earth, we acknowledge and thank you for your efforts. You are our ultimate inspiration.

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Take Back the Economy

Why Now?

This book rests on the following premise: our economy is the outcome of the decisions we make and the actions we take. We might be told that there's an underlying logic, even a set of natural principles, that direct how economies operate, but most of us can see that the decisions and actions of governments and corporations have a lot to do with how economies shape up. Encouraged by the idea that we can build the economies we live in, individuals and communities across the globe are taking economic matters into their own hands to help create worlds that are socially and environmentally just. *Take Back the Economy* is inspired by these efforts.

When we explore the ways that people are taking back the economy to make it work for societies and environments, we find they are thinking deeply about shared concerns and experimenting with ways of responding. These concerns are as follows:

- What do we really need to live healthy lives both materially and psychically? How do we take other people and the planet into account when determining what's necessary for a healthy life?
How do we survive well?
- What do we do with what is left over after we've met our survival needs? How do we make decisions about this excess?
How do we distribute surplus?
- What types of relationships do we have with the people and environments that enable us to survive well? How much do we know about those who live in distant places and provide the inputs that we use to meet our needs? *How do we encounter others as we seek to survive well?*

- What materials and energy do we use up in the process of surviving well? *What do we consume?*
- How do we maintain, restore, and replenish the gifts of nature and intellect that all humans rely on? *How do we care for our commons?*
- How do we store and use our surplus and savings so that people and the planet are supported and sustained? *How do we invest for the future?*

The message we are getting loud and clear right now is that we've not paid sufficient attention to these concerns. In fact, we've downright ignored them. Even though we live on a finite planet, we have plundered the earth's nonrenewable energy resources and overused and destroyed renewable ones. Even though we live in a society with others, we've focused on individual desires and preferences, and a few have grown massively rich at the expense of many others.

When we think about the scale of the problems facing our planet home, it is daunting. It seems as if the damage we've wrought and the ways of thinking that underpin our profligate economies are insurmountable. We can find evidence for this all around us. But everywhere we turn, we can also find individuals and communities innovating with ways of thinking and acting to address the challenges of our times. If we are to take back the economy for people and the environment, each of us can join in this effort to help address concerns about survival, surplus, encounter, consumption, commons, and futures.

Take Back the Economy is for individuals and communities who want their decisions and their commitments to each other and the earth to shape the economies we live in.

The book is not a pie-in-the-sky program for revolution, nor is it a step-by-step guide to reforming what we have. It is a simple but radical set of thinking tools for people who want to start where they are to take back their economies—in countries rich or poor, in neighborhoods or in nations, as groups or as individuals.



Consciously and realistically build for oneself, and one's community and nation, sources of hope.

Thomas Princen,
Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order

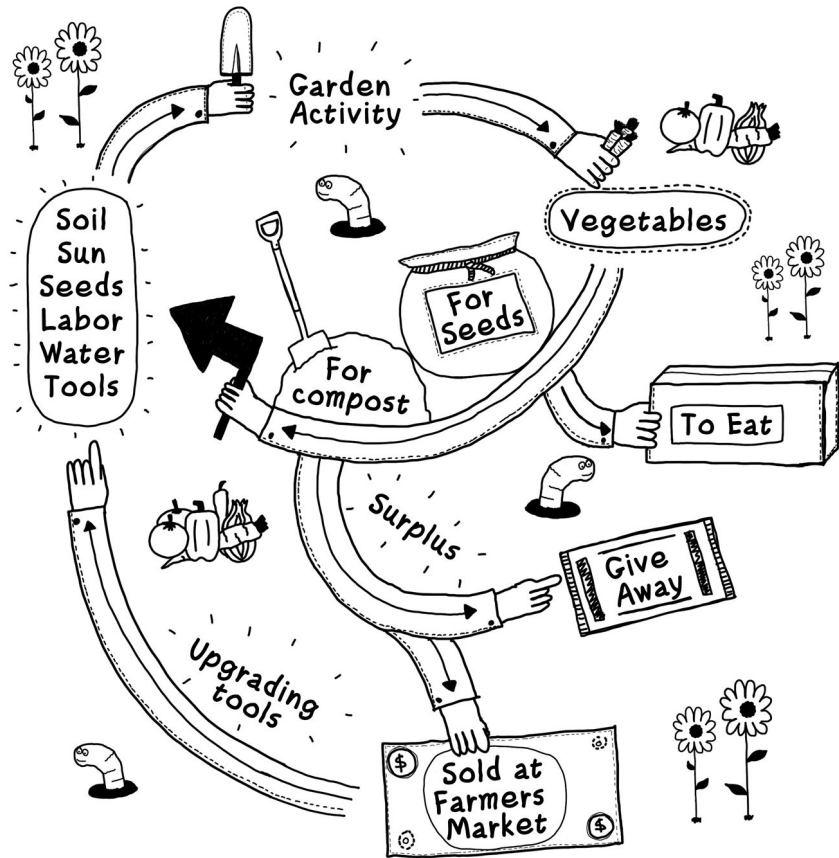
THINKING BIG

Imagine planet Earth as the astronauts see it—a wonderful blue-and-white sphere floating in the firmament—and, on closer inspection, an oasis of green-and-brown land masses and blue water bodies. This is our life-support system, fed by unlimited solar power, in which inputs and outputs circulate and change form and energy is expended and conserved, all without the totality changing its mass. It is one big garden, if you like, where we toil—farming the soil, producing food and shelter and all manner of goods and services that we need to live on. It is our commons—what we and all other living species share (and should maintain and safeguard).

Let's zoom down from our vantage point in space and focus a bit more closely on the earth below. Now we see cities and rural settlements housing people organized in smaller, more differentiated, human-made support systems we call societies and economies. For a moment let's think of these as gardens again, in which nature provides resources and energy, people labor to survive, inputs and outputs circulate, and wealth is produced and distributed.

These human support systems are like the community gardens we find in so many parts of the world. If we look at one community garden, we find gifts of nature (sunlight, rain, land, and soil); the application of seeds, tools, and fertilizer; and the volunteer efforts of community gardeners. All these inputs interact in the productive activity of gardening. As vegetables grow, some are eaten by the gardeners so they can sustain themselves and continue to work in the garden. Seeds are dried and kept for the next year's crop. Stems and leaves are composted and used to replenish nature's soil. The products of the garden flow back to the producers and the environment to ensure the ongoing survival of the gardeners and the garden.

When nature is kind and gardeners work hard, they are rewarded with a plentiful harvest. There is a surplus, even after vegetables are eaten by the gardeners and their families, seeds saved, and compost tended. The gardeners decide to give some of the vegetables away. They give to their extended families and to neighbors who live near the garden, and they fill bags and boxes to donate to the local food bank.



These gifts build goodwill and contribute to the community-building goal of the garden. The gardeners also decide to sell some of the surplus at the local farmers' market, and they use the money raised to buy new equipment that will make the next round of production easier and more productive.

The community garden offers a simple vision of interdependence among the gardeners, other people, and the natural world. The gardeners make decisions about the forms this interdependence will take. They decide how they will

- share the commons—drawing from it, maintaining it, and replenishing it;

- produce together what is needed for individual and collective survival;
- consume resources and encounter others in the process of meeting individual and collective needs;
- produce and dispose of the surplus (which is given to friends, neighbors, and the food bank or sold to raise funds to buy more tools); and
- invest in the garden (by taking so-called waste and composting it so it can be returned to the soil as nourishment for future crops).

Economies are basically no different from this garden—each economy reflects decisions around how to care for and share a commons, what to produce for survival, how to encounter others in the process of surviving well together, how much surplus to produce, how to distribute it, and how to invest it for the future. These decisions are made under varying conditions of plenty and scarcity.

When we put simple visions of the economy “garden” next to the image of the planetary “garden,” we see what we are up against. In the economy garden we now live in, we consume more than we can replace, use surplus inequitably and unsustainably, destroy our commons, and threaten species survival. We have become incapable of maintaining our finite life-giving planet garden. And it’s become obvious that our planet home can no longer support economic systems that ignore environmental restoration and societal care.

We have hope, however, that change is possible and that there are steps we can take to turn things around.

THINKING ETHICALLY

When we reflect on the thinking that currently guides our economic actions, we see that a few key beliefs predominate. One is that growth is good. Across the globe, growth at any cost is the mantra. Economic growth, we’re told, is the means to improve the fortunes of all. Another key belief is in the value of private enterprise, which is privileged as the means by which individuals can apply their energy and creativity to

—w—

Hopefulness is risky, since it is after all a sign of trust, trust in the unknown and the possible.

Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*

generate wealth, perhaps even great wealth, for themselves and their families. In turn, private enterprise is underpinned by the value that is given to private ownership, with the private ownership of resources, land, and property of all kinds enshrined in legal systems.

But these beliefs have a cost. And the cost is borne most heavily by people and ecosystems that have little voice. Along with degradation of the planet, social and economic inequalities continue to grow. Current economic approaches aren't working. The beliefs by which we have been living economically are bankrupt. Even people who win at the game are beginning to suspect that there is a price that is not worth paying. We have lost, and maybe never had, a moral compass to guide economic actions so that they reflect care and responsibility for one another, for other living beings, and for our environment.

We face a dilemma—whether to follow our present course to the bitter end, acting as if there is no alternative, or to try something new. The times call for ethical action. This means thinking and acting in the economy with concern for others along with ourselves. It means thinking in terms of “we,” “us,” and “our.” It means not putting an end to personal choice, responsibility, or freedom but rather acknowledging that our individual decisions affect others, just as their decisions and actions affect us. As much as anything else, ethical action is a practice of adopting new habits—habits of reflecting on our interconnections with others, approaching the new with an inquiring mind and an appreciative stance, trusting others as we jointly encounter a future of unknowns and uncertainties, and learning to allay our fears and conjure creativity. There are no easy solutions to the problems that confront us, and there are no guaranteed outcomes, but by thinking ethically we can expand our capacity to act.

For us, taking back the economy through ethical action means

- *surviving* together well and equitably;
- *distributing surplus* to enrich social and environmental health;
- *encountering others* in ways that support their well-being as well as ours;
- *consuming* sustainably;

- *caring for*—maintaining, replenishing, and growing—our natural and cultural *commons*; and
- *investing our wealth in future generations* so that they can live well.

An economy centered on these ethical considerations is what we call a *community economy*—a space of decision making where we recognize and negotiate our interdependence with other humans, other species, and our environment. In the process of recognizing and negotiating, we become a community.

THINKING SMALL

What has stopped us from taking back the economy and building strong community economies before this? Our answer is that most people don't see themselves as significant actors in the economy, let alone shapers of it. In wealthy countries we are told that we're consumers and are asked to increase our consumption to help grow the economy. Certainly our role as shoppers and consumers is uppermost in media representations. And often we relate to people we don't know according to their visible consumption—the cars they drive, their hair and clothing styles, their toys and trophies. People's overall level of prosperity and “worth” is communicated by their consumption.

But consumers have a limited economic role—they can decide to consume more, consume less, or consume differently. Sure, many people are responding, voluntarily or not, to the challenges of the time by reducing their consumption or changing their consumption habits, and this has to be part of our taking back the economy. But we want to introduce many more strategies.

We all do more than consume. Many of us work to earn money to survive and also grow some of our own food or care for one another directly. We participate in organizations and enterprises that cater to our needs or help us live well. Some of us start businesses in which we can be our own bosses. Some employ workers and decide what they should do. We work for money, for nonmonetary satisfaction, and out of obligation. We save money and invest in houses, our children's education, or the

stock market. We join unions or political campaigns and try to influence the way economic laws are enacted and enforced. The economy is a diverse social space in which we have multiple roles.

It is also a space in which we are integrated with others in many different ways. In household economies we connect with our nearest and dearest to negotiate who does what for household survival and well-being. In neighborhoods and villages we connect with friends, acquaintances, and strangers through buying and selling, working and employing. In national and global economies we connect with distant others through trade and investment. At all these scales we interact with our environments in complex relations of use and care.

When we see ourselves as economic actors with multiple roles, we can start to envision an exciting array of economic actions. When we take responsibility for our economic lives and for interconnected others, we can begin to shape the economies in which we live. *Take Back the Economy* introduces the ethical thinking that can help us frame the ways we might want to shape our economies and start to take them back, bit by bit.

This book is for students, community members, interest groups, nongovernmental organizations, unions, governments, and businesses that want to create community economies. Each chapter starts by discussing the dominant understanding of a different part of the economy—the typical way that we think about work, business, markets, property, and finance. This mainstream conceptualization is followed by a story that shows how real people are taking back the economy as a space of ethical decision making. We then reframe the dominant understanding in light of the community economy concerns we have identified in this introduction—surviving well, distributing surplus, encountering others, caring for commons, and investing for the future. In each chapter the discussion also touches on the community economy concern with consuming sustainably.

Throughout each chapter we use visual tools to prompt our ethical thinking. The tools help us to see our lives and our worlds from a different angle and through a new frame.

Each chapter (except chapter 1) concludes with examples from

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Whether you're working alone, you're an activist and community organizer, or you're a member of a group, here are some pointers to help you use this book.

Work in Groups

We have written this book with groups of people in mind—students and teachers, communities and congregations, unions and associations—reading, thinking, and acting together. We believe that when people work in groups, their different ways of thinking and seeing are fertile ground for the imaginative and creative work of taking back the economy. Therefore, if you are reading this book by yourself, you might want to create opportunities to talk to your friends, family, work colleagues, and neighbors about the ideas the book provokes. If you are already part of a group, we encourage you to think about the ways that your group could read and use the book together. You might be able to form a study group or a reading circle. You might be able to use the material in a teaching situation. Or the visual tools included could be the basis of workshops and discussion groups.

Start Anywhere

Each chapter stands on its own. If you or your group has a particular focus or initiative, start with the chapter closest to your interest.

Make a Record

As anyone who has done activist work or started a community group or enterprise knows, the outcomes are far from certain: success isn't guaranteed, and unexpected swerves and surprises are inevitable.

We like to think of taking back the economy as one big uncontrolled and multipronged experiment. If it is an experiment, perhaps we should take a page out of the book of our friends who work in fields like biology or chemistry. They understand that knowledge advances through keeping a record of the steps and missteps that occur in the course of their experiments. As we experiment with taking back the economy, we should make an effort to record our journey. Therefore, we encourage you to

- take notes to document your discussions and your actions;
- modify and augment the tools that are presented in this book;
- make sketches, take photos, devise diagrams, and make audio or video recordings of events or particular developments; and
- take time to reflect on what is and isn't working.

Share Your Results

All knowledge advances through sharing results. The experimenters want their experiments repeated. When an experiment is successfully repeated elsewhere, its validity increases. Therefore, we encourage you to share your experiences with others. For example, you might

- produce a newsletter, zine, or blog;
- make an online video or audio recording; or
- write to us so we can learn about and share what you are doing with others.

across the globe of the ways that people are working collectively to take back the economy and build community economies that support and nourish life.

THE GROUNDS FOR HOPE

One thing that gives us hope that we can change ourselves and the economy is that people *do* change. Look at the major transformations that have taken place in our lifetimes—the widespread adoption of recycling and the new ways we now feel and act around trash, as well as the changes in the status of women and what can no longer be said about or expected of them.

Perhaps most profoundly, the human species can change. Many people see world population growth as an insurmountable barrier to environmental health. But look at the way that rates of reproduction have varied at societal levels according to the microdecisions of households confronted with survival challenges and possibilities and in response to states' investment in health and education. People have changed themselves as new framings have become the norm. They have even welcomed legal recognition of new norms and behaviors, such as laws against domestic violence and the lowering of acceptable blood alcohol levels for drivers who drink.

Something else that gives us hope is the extraordinary proliferation of economic experiments that are being conducted all around us. From local community gardens all over the world to Argentina's factory takeovers, to the vibrant social economy in Europe, to African indigenous medicine markets, and to community currencies in Asia, economic experimentation abounds. There is no shortage of examples of alternative economic organizations and practices that are creating socially and environmentally sustainable community economies. In this book we are able to showcase only a few, but once we become attuned to the possibilities, we can find examples at every turn.

Nature also gives us hope. As we understand more about our role in changing the world's natural systems, we are also gaining greater knowledge about the reparative dynamics of ecosystems. Nature teaches us that

- diversity produces resilience,
- maintaining habitats sustains life, and
- changing one thing creates changes in others.

We can learn from these life-giving and life-shaping ecological dynamics. Perhaps we can mimic them in our economies. We can certainly choose to activate dynamics that support diversity, maintain survival systems that are working, repair ones that are not, and be aware that every change we make will have effects that need to be identified and assessed.

Most important, what gives us hope is that different economic dynamics can be activated by ethical choices. And small actions can have big effects, as the trim tab does on an ocean liner. A trim tab is a tiny flap that controls the rudder, creating a low-pressure area on one side that enables the rudder to turn. It takes only a movement of the tiny trim tab to steer a large and complex ship toward a very different destination than it was previously headed for. In society, too, small actions can initiate major changes. An idea can spread rapidly, reframing our sense of possibility and unleashing new capacities. A local project can be replicated on a global scale. As we have seen in the cases of the World Wide Web and YouTube, we are living in an age when self-organized movements can spread their knowledge and effects across the globe at lightning speed. Starting where we are, we are in a good position to begin taking back the economy. Are you ready?



Long ago, small and seemingly inconsequential actions took place that eventually changed the world.

Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History Is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*

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I.

Reframing the Economy, Reframing Ourselves

WHAT IS THE ECONOMY?

If we are to believe the evening TV news, our lives are dictated by the state of the economy. Our fortunes rest with how well governments manage the economy and how much scope businesses are given to grow the economy. Economists have become the soothsayers of the modern world, predicting what will happen as interest rates rise and fall, currencies are valued and devalued, and export and domestic markets expand and contract. The economy, it seems, is an ordered machine that governs our lives.

It's even a machine whose interactions have been captured in working models. At the end of the nineteenth century, Irving Fisher designed and constructed a mechanical model of the economy using a system of water tanks, levers, valves, and pipes. By adjusting the spigots and water levels he could model the impact of economic changes, including falling or rising consumer demand and increased or decreased money flow.

Since then, economists have continued to tinker with machines and models to demonstrate the mechanics of economic interaction. One of the most famous machines was built by New Zealand economist Bill Phillips (of Phillips curve fame) in 1949.¹ The Monetary National Income Analogue Computer, or MONIAC, made its debut at the London School of Economics. Long before computer simulations could do it mathematically, the machine used water to mimic how money flowed through the British economy. By closing valves and pulling levers, the

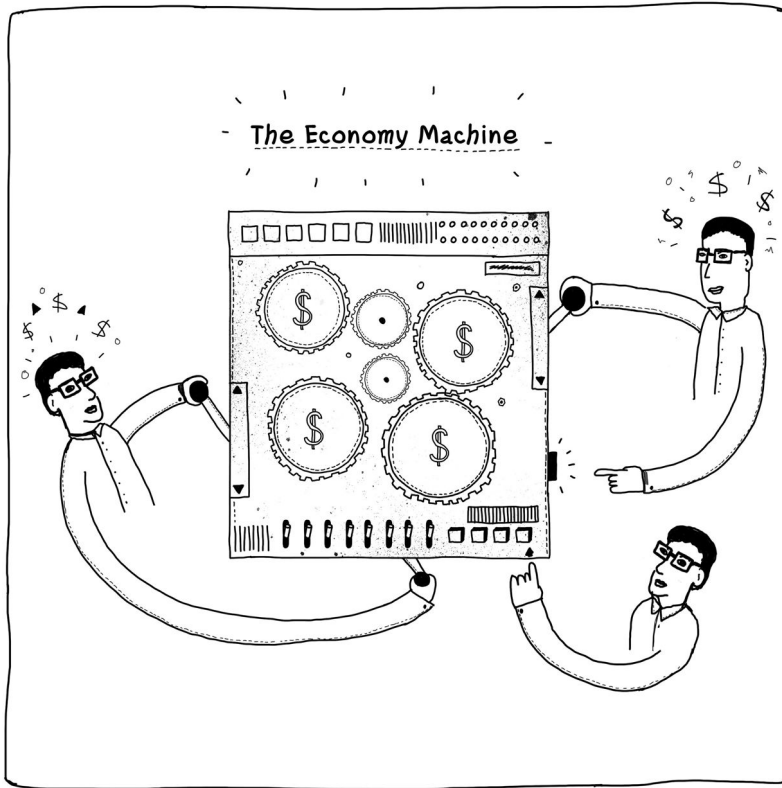
god-economist-operator could see the impact of interventions such as raising or lowering interest rates. Around fourteen copies of the machine were built and sold to institutions that included Harvard, Cambridge, and Oxford Universities; Ford Motor Company; and the Central Bank of Guatemala.

This image of the economy as a machine has prevailed throughout the twentieth century. The major actors are business entrepreneurs and investors who make products, profits, and wealth; the banks that adjust interest rates; and governments that slow down or hasten growth by exacting and spending tax revenues. Everyday people are included as income earners and consumers—generators of demand with appetites that need to be satisfied.

The machine is seen to operate best if it is largely left to its own devices. Interventions by concerned citizens, unions, environmentalists, and even governments pose a threat to its smooth and well-oiled operations. Importantly, these types of interferences are thought to jeopardize the growth mantra that drives this machine to greater and greater outputs.

The image of the economy as a machine has been so robust that even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, economists such as Jeffrey Sachs merrily declare, “The wonderful thing about markets is they self-organise. You don’t really have to do very much. You turn a couple of dials and the whole national economy changes. . . . You can sit in a finance ministry or a central bank and make tremendous progress for a whole economy.”²

Notice Sachs’s confidence that progress automatically flows if the machine is minimally guided by an economist-operator. But is this confidence well founded? Increasing numbers of people have grave concerns about how this machine economy operates. It has a voracious and unsatisfiable appetite for natural resources. It is largely oblivious to the consequences of industrial production as it pumps out greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental pollutants that destroy the health of our ecological commons. It pays no regard to the widening gap between those with excessive material wealth and those with so little that bare survival is difficult. And it appears to have no way of regulating the destructive greed and gambler habits of its financiers—those tasked



with oiling and priming its key valves and spigots. For all the ease with which Fisher, Phillips, and Sachs might claim to be able to manipulate and adjust their levers and dials for the greater good, these intractable problems remain.

The more we go along with the idea that the economy is an engine that must be fueled by growth, the more we are locked into imagining ourselves as individual cogs—economic actors *only* if we work to consume. But there are many other ways that we contribute economically.

Clearly we do not live in a machine that is controlled by turning dials and adjusting valves. But there is work to do to fully reject the idea that the economy is a machine and recognize that it has no existence apart from us and the wider world we inhabit. This work is what we call reframing.

Reframing involves imagining the economy differently. It means

taking notice of *all* the things we do to ensure the material functioning and well-being of our households, communities, and nations. It means finding ways of framing the economy that can reflect this wider reality. In such a reframed economy we might imagine ourselves as economic actors on many different stages—and as actors who can reshape our economies so that environmental and social well-being, not just material output, are addressed.

Across the globe, people are reframing the economy and their role in it in all sorts of ways. They are reframing growth by divorcing it from increased spending (or Gross Domestic Product) and linking it more directly to social and environmental well-being, using tools such as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), the survey of Gross National Happiness, and the Happy Planet Index.³ They are reframing the boundaries of the economy, showing that the value of products and services produced in homes and communities is comparable to what is produced in paid workplaces.⁴

This book gives examples of only some of these reframing actions. Our intention is to highlight the difference that reframing makes and what emerges when people take economic matters into their own hands. In this chapter we start with just two examples—the first involving one individual in the United States, the second involving thousands of women in India.

FASHIONING DIFFERENT FUTURES

In 2009, after ten years in the advertising industry in New York City, Sheena Matheiken decided to “reboot” her life and give something back to India, where she had been brought up.⁵ She decided to do this in a way that was creative and engaging and that was based on transforming a simple daily routine. She pledged to wear one dress (actually seven copies of the same dress) every day of the year. A friend designed a reversible black cotton tunic modeled on one of her favorite dresses. And Sheena jazzed up this one black dress each day without buying anything new. Her challenge was to use only handmade or secondhand accessories gathered from thrift stores or donated as gifts. The Uniform Project™ was born.

For each of 365 days Sheena posted a photo of her “new outfit” on

the Internet and donated US\$1 to the Akanksha Foundation, a non-profit organization providing educational opportunities for children from poor households (in a country where thirteen million children don't have access to an education). Soon she gathered a legion of supporters and had attracted the attention of a somewhat alarmed fashion industry. By the end of the year she had raised over US\$100,000 for Akanksha, helped over three hundred children gain access to education, received donations of a bizarre range of accessories, and been named one of *Elle* magazine's Women of the Year for 2009.

The Uniform Project™ recognizes that what we wear is an important aspect of our identity. Our clothes shape how we feel about ourselves and how we are treated by others. But the very human desire to look good, to feel both different and “in,” feeds an environmentally voracious form of economic growth.⁶ As we raise and lower our hems and switch high-waisted pants for low riders, double-breasted for single-button business suits, or platform shoes for Cinderella pumps, it's hard not to feel like pawns in a huge conspiracy to get us to consume, discard, consume, discard. The volume of unworn clothes in our wardrobes speaks heaps about our fickleness and disregard for the environmental impact of our actions.

Sheena's initiative shows another way forward. We don't need to be blind consumers to contribute to the economy. By participating in economic activities such as recycling and reusing, we can reduce our ecological footprint and avoid feeding a fashion industry that exploits workers. And we can improve the educational opportunities of Indian children directly through people-to-people economic connections. Using her flair and creativity, Sheena is refashioning fashion and reframing what it means to be part of an economy.

While Sheena is reducing her involvement with the global fashion industry (and encouraging others to do likewise through the ongoing Uniform Project™), thousands of poor Indian women are increasing their engagement with it via the SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre (STFC).⁷ STFC was launched by SEWA (the Self-Employed Women's



There's a renewed sense of possibility, collectively our individual actions can have macro impact. Everyday people can have real impact in the world.

Sheena Matheiken,
TEDxDubai 2010

Association), an extraordinary union of self-employed informal-sector workers in India. Since 1972 SEWA has been reframing poor women as economic actors who can command respect from their families, peers—and, most importantly, themselves—as well as police, city officials, politicians, and policy makers.

With 93 percent of the Indian labor force working in informal-sector jobs, unprotected by progressive labor laws, there is little opportunity for the vast majority of workers to share in the benefits of national economic growth. SEWA's membership, of over 1.2 million across seven states, has taken their economic destiny into their own hands, organizing hundreds of producer and marketing cooperatives, a cooperative bank, health care and child care services, a housing trust, training centers, and now STFC, a not-for-profit craft business.

STFC is based in rural Northern Gujarat, where conditions are harsh, drought is frequent, and families must regularly migrate from their villages to find food and work. Women wear clothing beautifully embroidered in traditional designs—even their bullocks sport colorfully embroidered covers. Today, thanks to SEWA's reframing and organizing activities, Gujarat women's embroidery adorns fashion garments

worn in London, New York, and Sydney, and fifteen thousand families in northern India are well on the way to accessing a stable income. Gujarat women may think that black is an ugly color to wear, but they now bow to the market advice that New York women won't wear anything else and incorporate this new "color" into their designs.

As they embroider cloth for an international fashion market, the artisans are assured that 65 percent of the proceeds of any sale will return to them via STFC. This not-for-profit company in which they are the suppliers, managers, and shareholders cannot pay individual dividends. Instead, all surplus returns to the company to increase wage payments for the fifteen thousand artisan members and to expand the company's productive capacity.

For Sheena and SEWA, reframing is a prelude



Now I am able to earn a livelihood and support my family not only with the bare necessities of life, like food, clothing, and shelter, but am also able to educate my children, especially my daughter who is today studying in the second year of Primary Teacher Certification course.

Jamuben Khangabhai Ayar,
artisan and craft leader,
Dhokawada, Gujarat

to claiming a space in the economy in a new way. Sheena reframes the faddish fashion industry as a realm in which a commitment to reduced consumption and increased people-to-people connection can be practiced. SEWA reframes poor women artisans as skilled producers and shareholders in a company with a global reach, market savvy, and operational principles of social justice. Each is pursuing a pathway toward building a better world. In so doing, Sheena and SEWA are taking back the economy as a space of ethical decision making.

The stories of Sheena and SEWA are not without their contradictions. One woman is advocating reduced consumption of new clothes while thousands of other women in a very different location are banking on marketing their brand to well-heeled global consumers. Here we see in microcosm one of the biggest challenges of our times—how to take back the economy for people and the planet without resorting to a one-size-fits-all approach.

Clearly, there are no simple answers. We must approach each effort to reclaim the economy with open and curious minds, feeling hearts, and an orientation toward the experimental rather than the programmatic. Let's not rush too quickly toward the big picture and the big judgments.

Is there a way of addressing the challenges without thinking there is one truly best pathway forward? If the economy is not a machine that operates in a predictable way, we can't set a course and expect that things will systematically unfold. And if our earth is not a bottomless resource pit, we can't keep feeding it to a machine to be gobbled up and spewed out. We must find other metaphors, other frames of meaning, that inspire new ways of being and acting.

REFRAMING: A KEY CONCERN OF A COMMUNITY ECONOMY

Reframing starts with seeing something familiar in new terms. Think of the drawing that can look like a duck or a rabbit or the profile that can appear to be two heads or a vase. Reframing can achieve what's called a figure/ground shift and produce very different understandings that can lead to previously unthinkable actions.

Reframing the economy is a critical step in building community economies. By seeing the economy not as a machine but as the day-to-

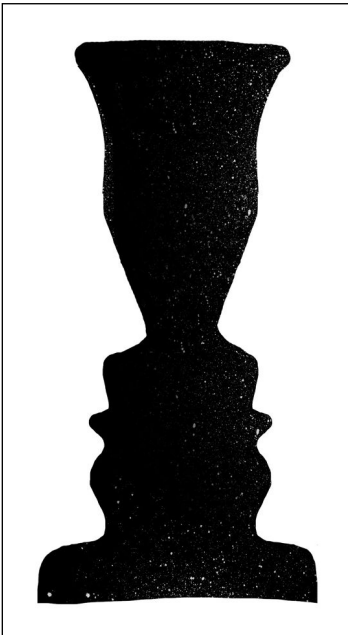
day processes that we all engage in as we go about securing what we need to materially function, it's clear that the economy is created by the actions we take. People are creating community economies based on ethical decisions to live well with other humans and with the world around them. Sheena is creating a community economy by acting on her recognition of the destructive environmental impact of the fashion industry and her desire to advance educational opportunities in a context in which too many miss out. The STFC is creating a community

economy by acting on a commitment to the power of women to collectively act as economic decision makers and by providing opportunities for them to secure material well-being for their desperately poor families.

The practice of reframing is central to social and political transformation. Centuries ago, abolitionists fought to end the slave trade and slavery in general. Key to the campaign was the reframing of slaves as fellow humans who experienced unimaginable physical and psychic suffering as they were ripped from their families and communities, transported in chains across the seas, sold at auction like animals, and literally worked to death on plantations. The rhetorical question "Am I not a man and a brother?" may have ignored the slavery of women, but this reframing of slaves as human became a catchphrase that was taken up on both sides of the North Atlantic and helped to build widespread public support for the abolition movement. The catchphrase and the accompanying image of a kneeling slave even

became a fashion item adorning everything from men's snuffboxes and women's bracelets to domestic crockery.

Social and political change might start with a handful of concerned citizens, but, through a process of reframing, familiar understandings are shifted and new norms of thinking and acting emerge (often supported by government legislation). Indeed, it is hard to think of a contemporary social and political transformation that has not used the strategy of reframing. Smoking, for example, has been reframed



against the continued opposition of the powerful tobacco industry. Where once images of healthy outdoor characters, whether rugged North American cowboys or glamorous European skiers, adorned cigarette packs, now there are more likely to be images of diseased lungs or rotting teeth and gums (as increasingly required by government legislation across the globe).⁸

And new reframings are continually emerging. One that we use throughout this book is a recent reframing of the world's nations. We are all familiar with the idea of first and third worlds or of "developed," "underdeveloped," or "less developed" countries (LDCs). The effect of these names is to highlight what most countries of the world apparently lack ("development") and celebrate the sort of progress only a very small number of nations have achieved (with considerable negative consequences for the environment and for people in other parts of the world).

In the early 1990s, Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam proposed a different terminology that has become widely adopted—that of majority (and minority) worlds.⁹ Rather than representing the majority of humankind in terms of what they lack, Alam suggested that we replace the terms "third world" and "LDCs" with the less judgmental, more descriptive term "majority world." In this categorization, "minority world" refers to that fraction of humankind that is relatively well off. This reframing is a ready reminder of the responsibility that comes with being part of the minority world—that one billion of the world's seven billion people who live in countries where per capita income is more than US\$12,195 *per year*.¹⁰

When it comes to "the economy," reframing has been an important strategy used by working people since the Industrial Revolution. Rather than going along with the image of an efficient but soulless machine, many political movements have framed the economy as a vast arena of combat among workers, employers, and the state. In this framing the economy becomes a battleground in which competing forces wrestle



Fashion, which usually confines itself to worthless things, was seen for once in the honorable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom.

Thomas Clarkson, 1808,
*The History of the Rise, Progress,
and Accomplishment of the
Abolition of the African Slave-Trade*

for their piece of the economic pie, making alliances and compromises along the way to achieve their goals or engaging in outright warfare in an effort to command the heights of the economic landscape.

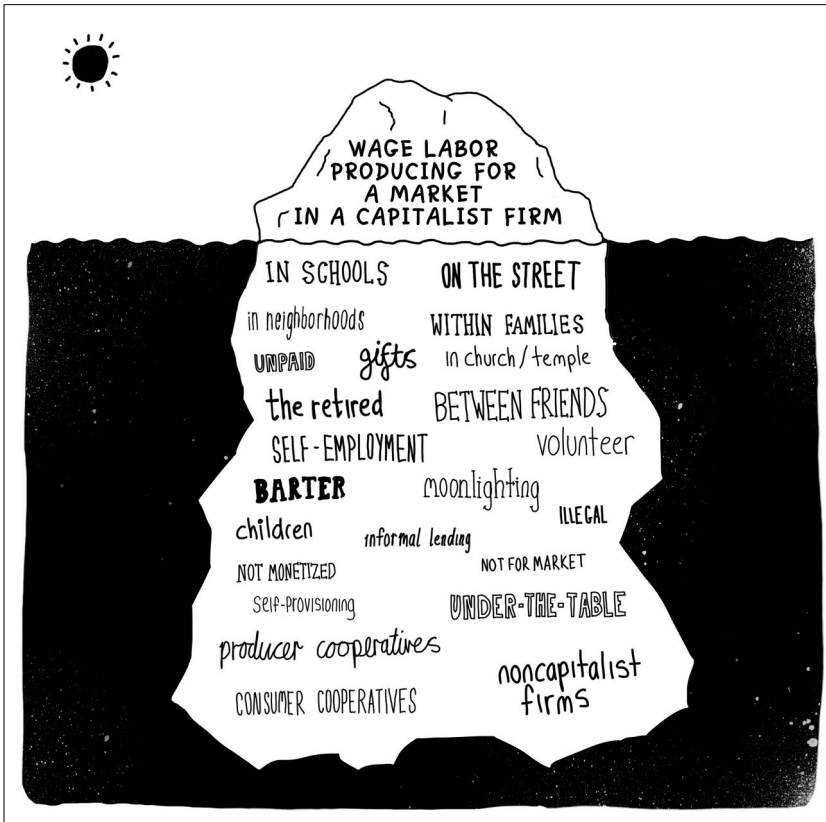
The economic actor in this economy is a member of either the working class or the capitalist class, or some fraction of either, and his or her actions are channeled into class struggle. This framing of the economy, though no longer enjoying the currency it once had, has undoubtedly been influential over the course of the past two hundred years. It has inspired socialist revolutions and union movements (and, more recently, the Occupy Wall Street movement) that have also aimed to take back the economy for people and the planet.

The reframing we offer in this book takes its inspiration from this history of economic reframing but offers a very different picture. Our interest is in creating community economies by opening up the economy to the wide diversity of practices that contribute to social, material, and environmental well-being. If we want to take back the economy as a space of ethical decision making not only at the shop counter or at the barricades, we need to draw on a different framing device.

THE ECONOMY AS AN ICEBERG

Our first step toward reframing represents the economy as an iceberg. Above the waterline are the economic activities that are visible in mainstream economic accounts. These are the sorts of activities that are regularly reported on the evening news and that are seen as making up a “capitalist” economy. Below the waterline is a range of people, places, and activities that contribute to our well-being. If we do hear about them on the evening news or read about them in the newspaper, they’re likely to be portrayed in novelty or human-interest items, not in pieces on core economic activities.

The iceberg can be used to make an inventory of all the economic practices an individual is involved in, or it can be used to record the economic activities taking place in a community, region, or nation. The iceberg presents a different understanding of what constitutes the economy. Some people think of capitalism as interchangeable with the notion of economy. We don’t. We use the idea of an iceberg economy to acknowledge the economic diversity that abounds in this world. The



iceberg also allows us to explore interrelationships that cannot be captured by mechanical market feedback loops or the victories and defeats of class struggle. Once we include what is hidden below the waterline—and possibly keeping us afloat as a society—we expand our prospects for taking back the economy. We potentially multiply the opportunities for ethical actions.

Embroidering in Northern Gujarat was an unpaid activity that women did in their households until SEWA recognized its potential to help secure livelihoods for the embroiderers and their families. SEWA and the embroiderers are now engaged in a whole new array of ethically driven economic decisions. Without forsaking its commitment to maximizing members' participation and benefits, SEWA has established an internationally competitive company (STFC). The artisan

embroiderers assist others in their area to join SEWA and become shareholders in STFC. In so doing, they learn about making commercial decisions in a cooperative context with other shareholders.

Artisan embroidery, once hidden beneath the waterline of the economic iceberg, has become an activity that has introduced new economic arenas and new economic practices into women's daily lives.

Sheena's daily routine, on the other hand, is drawing on economic arenas and practices not usually associated with the world of fashion. She is engaging with activities that largely occur below the waterline, such as reusing, recycling, donating, buying from thrift stores, and making things by hand. Sheena is showing how these activities can help create a fashion world that takes into account environmental and social consequences.

Reframing the economy through the iceberg is a first, somewhat chaotic step toward sorting out in a more systematic way the diverse economic practices we have to work with. If we are going to take back the economy "any time, any place," we need to know what we are starting with. The diverse economy offers a template for a more comprehensive inventory.

Each column in the diverse economy figure represents a different aspect of the economy—labor practices, business enterprises, transactions of goods and services, property ownership, and finance. Each column is divided into cells that relate to the iceberg economy. The top cells refer to those economic activities that are usually above the waterline (and recognized in the mainstream framing of the economy as a machine). The bottom cells refer to those economic activities that are usually under the waterline, hidden and generally unrecognized as making an economic contribution. In the middle cells are activities that are like the mainstream activities but involve an alternative element. For example, alternative paid labor includes arrangements in which workers are paid not in cash but in kind, with goods or services. Alternative capitalist enterprises include businesses driven not by the goal of turning a profit but by a commitment to producing social or environmental well-being.



We had no value for our work and never thought of getting income by selling [our embroidery]. But with the help of SEWA and our company STFC it has now become possible.

Rudiben Jivabhai Rava,
embroidery artisan,
Babra Village, Gujarat

| THE DIVERSE ECONOMY | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| LABOR | ENTERPRISE | TRANSACTIONS | PROPERTY | FINANCE |
| Wage | Capitalist | Market | Private | Mainstream Market |
| Alternative Paid | Alternative Capitalist | Alternative Market | Alternative Private | Alternative Market |
| Unpaid | Noncapitalist | Nonmarket | Open Access | Nonmarket |

Unlike the machine economy, this diverse economy makes no pre-sumptions about predictable relationships between economic activities. Nor does it categorize people into classes according to their economic involvements. It is a reframing that highlights diversity and multiplicity. People participate in many different activities across the diverse economy. They are economic actors on many fronts.

Similarly, sectors of industry are comprised of a range of diverse economic activities. For example, in the diverse economy of fashion shown in the nearby figure, there are a host of economic activities (including Sheena's open-access online blogging about the Uniform Project™) and economic entities (including STFC, an alternative not-for-profit company in which the embroiderers are shareholders).

The diversity that already exists, and that we are all part of, is the basis for building community economies. The diverse economy helps reveal the economic activities that might be strengthened and developed in order to take back the economy for people and the planet.

THE DIFFERENCE REFRAMING MAKES

Each chapter of this book takes one column from the diverse economy figure and explores it from the perspective of *community economies*—economies in which ethical negotiations around our interdependence with each other and the environment are put center stage.

There are no simple answers to the dilemmas that we overviewed in the Introduction—dilemmas as to how to survive well, how to distribute surplus, how to encounter others as we seek to survive well, what and how to consume, how to care for our commons now and into the

ACTORS AND ACTIONS IN A DIVERSE ECONOMY OF FASHION

| LABOR | ENTERPRISE | TRANSACTIONS | PROPERTY | FINANCE |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Wage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-wage workers in a clothing factory in Costa Rica • Salaried sales manager in a clothing retailer in Hong Kong | <p style="text-align: center;">Capitalist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large clothing manufacturer operating across Southeast Asia • Small clothing retailer in London that employs ten staff | <p style="text-align: center;">Market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail outlets in shopping malls, airports, and main streets across the United States • International mail-order and online sales by prêt-à-porter labels based in the United States | <p style="text-align: center;">Private</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trademarked labels and designs of fashion houses in Paris | <p style="text-align: center;">Mainstream Market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bank finance for expansion of Canadian retail chain into the United States |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Alternative Paid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-employed fashion designer in New Zealand • Home-based piece worker in Honduras | <p style="text-align: center;">Alternative Capitalist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organic cotton company that uses no herbicides or pesticides • STFC not-for-profit company in which the embroiderers are shareholders | <p style="text-align: center;">Alternative Market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thrift shops run by charities • Online sales by individuals • Mitumba (second-hand clothing) markets in Tanzania | <p style="text-align: center;">Alternative Private</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clothing shared between siblings in a household | <p style="text-align: center;">Alternative Market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microfinance loan to a woman in Bangladesh to buy a sewing machine |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Unpaid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Householder sewing clothes for self and family members • Friends helping each other sort out their clothing wardrobes | <p style="text-align: center;">Noncapitalist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative of machinists in Argentina | <p style="text-align: center;">Nonmarket</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents giving baby clothes for best friend's new baby • Family donating winter clothes to an international charity working in an earthquake-affected area | <p style="text-align: center;">Open Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sheena's online blog that describes how different fashion looks have been put together | <p style="text-align: center;">Nonmarket</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loan from family members to help start a small fashion business |

future, and how to store and use savings and surplus so that we and all other species continue to have a life on this planet.

In the chapters of this book we foreground people who are negotiating the challenges of living well together. Like Sheena and SEWA, they want to make a difference. The decisions they make and the actions they take may not always be to our liking; we may think the trade-offs involved are insufficient for the task at hand. But these are our fellow travelers. They are also resisting the idea that there is a machine economy that dictates our actions and positions us as self-contained economic units. Instead, they are reaching out and connecting with people from different economic and geographic locations; they are taking seriously the economic work that needs to be done to redress environmental harms. Like hundreds of thousands across the globe, these are the people who can teach us by opening up new worlds of possibility.

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