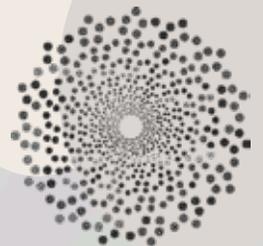


THAD WILLIAMSON

THE NEW SYSTEMS READER GUIDE

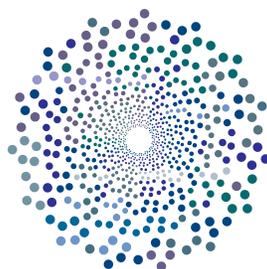
A supplement to
*The New Systems Reader:
Alternatives To a Failed Economy*



DEMOCRACY
COLLABORATIVE

The New Systems Reader Guide

By Thad Williamson
for The Democracy Collaborative



DEMOCRACY
COLLABORATIVE

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Overview

This guide for *The New Systems Reader* is intended to help you think critically, creatively, and synthetically about the diverse, challenging, and wide-ranging ideas within that compendium. It is designed to help readers analyze each proposal on its own terms, see connections (and contrasts) between different proposals and ideas, and develop their own visions of a better future along with concrete action steps in support of those visions.

The guide proceeds in two parts. Part One consists of common questions for *all* “new systems proposals.” Each proposal explicitly or implicitly touches on values, critiques of the existing system (capitalism), proposed new institutions, and theories of change. They also each call for *systemic* rather than piecemeal or isolated change. Part One provides readers with a checklist of questions to be asked of each proposal. The checklist also can be used to compare and contrast different proposals in detail.

Part Two consists of specific discussion questions for each chapter in the book. They are intended both to highlight key theses each author advances, and to raise constructive and critical questions about each author’s arguments.

Suggestions for Using this Guide

Like *The New System Reader* itself, this guide is intended to be flexible and usable for many different purposes.

If the *Reader* is being used in an academic context or in a study group that intends to study the whole book, we highly recommend reading all of Part One of the guide prior to or alongside reading the book itself. In these settings, the specific chapter-by-chapter questions in Part Two can also be used as discussion questions. We also suggest consulting the book’s Appendix, which provides a list of the various analytical questions posed to the authors of each chapter by the book’s editors.

If only parts of the *Reader* are being used (as in an adult learning or informal study guide setting), Part One can be considered optional. It might be more helpful to simply focus on the specific chapter-by-chapter questions noted in Part Two.

If you are organizing a short course or series based on the book, we recommend organizing each session by chapter. We also recommend scheduling one or two sessions at the end to focus specifically on comparing and contrasting different visions described in the book, as well as explicit discussion of social change. Part One of this guide can be useful for both these purposes.

The specific questions posed for each chapter are detailed but hardly exhaustive. We recommend encouraging students or participants to add their own questions as part of any course or study group in which this guide might be used.

Another way to proceed would be to have students or participants “argue the case” for a specific proposal while critiquing other proposals. This guide is not constructed with such a “debate” format in mind, but it could be adopted for that purpose where it would be helpful. The guide can be equally helpful, however, where the goal is simply to convene a serious discussion among friends (old or new) about how we should act to meet the crises of our times.

SECTION ONE

Questions for All New Systems Proposals

A. Values

Each of the proposals in *The New Systems Reader* appeals to our sense of values: that is, considerations of justice and injustice, right and wrong, better and worse. The first set of questions aims to get these values on the table clearly so they can be understood and discussed.

1. What are the explicit or implicit *values* driving the proposal? To what extent are these values *political, personal, or cultural*?
2. To what extent do these values cohere with, build upon, oppose, or replace dominant political, personal, and cultural values in present-day capitalist countries like the United States?
3. How might you engage with a friend, neighbor, colleague, or stranger in a discussion about the desirable values and ideals underlying a good society?

B. Critiques of Capitalism: 21 Questions

The “new system visions” discussed in this book all involve modifying, radically reforming, or replacing capitalism as a political-economic system. They also, therefore, all explicitly or implicitly articulate a critique of capitalism—but with very different emphases. The following questions are intended to help readers see exactly what contributing authors believe is wrong with the status quo and why systemic change is needed.

Capitalism, Inequality, and Exploitation

1. To what extent does the vision emphasize the tendency of capitalist systems to produce greater inequalities of wealth and income over time?
2. Why does capitalism have this effect, according to the analysis?
3. Can this tendency be mitigated, and how?
4. What about the argument that capitalism robustly generates wealth and prosperity—does the proposal address that argument?
5. How does this critique relate to, draw upon, or differ from traditional Marxian critiques of capitalism?

Capitalism, Commodification, and Consumerism

6. To what extent does capitalism lead us to view other human beings, nature, and other goods as commodities for sale rather than valuable in themselves?
7. To what extent does capitalism encourage or require lifestyles oriented around consumerism, social climbing, and acquisitiveness?

8. To what extent does capitalism install ideologies based on hierarchy and competition rather than equality and cooperation?

Capitalism and Racism

9. How does capitalism create, perpetuate, or intensify racism, understood as both the oppression of persons of color and the thought and idea systems that legitimize such oppression?
10. What role did slavery, colonialism, and other forms of racial oppression play in the historic emergence and expansion of capitalism?
11. How do ruling elites within capitalist societies use racial division and inequalities to maintain control of politics?
12. To what extent is meaningful correction of the racial wealth gap possible within the parameters of a capitalist economy?

Capitalism, Gender, and Sexism

13. How and why do patriarchal structures of authority and assumptions about family structure persist under capitalism? How does capitalism strengthen such structures?
14. How does the economic insecurity characteristic of capitalism undermine gender equity?

Capitalism and Environmental Destruction

15. How does the growth imperative of capitalist economies collide with or contradict the reality of ecological limits and the urgent need to reduce carbon output?
16. Why does capitalism undervalue ecological goods? Can this be corrected within the parameters of capitalism?
17. Why are traditional regulatory approaches to environmental protection inadequate to deal with long-term trends towards ecological destruction?
18. What social and economic changes must be in place for ecological sustainability to become possible?

Capitalism vs. Democracy

19. How specifically do large-scale patterns of wealth and income inequality undermine democratic processes?
20. How do corporations and representatives of corporate interests influence governance and electoral politics? Can this influence be reduced to an acceptable level by political reform strategies?
21. To what extent are governments under capitalism structurally dependent on the prosperity of corporations and hence limited in their ability to impose regulations and reforms?

C. Institutions

“Institutions” refer to the major building blocks of society: government, law, property, educational systems, economic entities (business firms), nongovernmental organizations, the family, and more. All new systems theories aim at institutional change. Indeed, “systemic” change typically means changes in multiple institutional structures over time.

- Here are some specific issues that new system visions typically focus attention on as they pursue institutional change:
- The organization of business enterprise

- Markets and the rules governing them
- Rules regarding the generation, distribution, and taxation of wealth and income
- Government and governances
- Democratic processes (including elections)
- Families, gender, household division of labor
- Education and child-raising
- Urban planning and the design of cities and metropolitan areas
- Environmental protection and regulation
- Civil liberties, civil rights, racial equity, and social equality

Keep that list in mind in discussing the following questions:

1. How does the new system proposal envision institutional change taking place for each of the institutions above? Does the proposal recommend:
 - better policies within existing structures,
 - gradual institutional improvement or evolution combined with better policies,
 - dramatic reform of existing institutions, or
 - wholesale replacement of existing institutions with new ones?
2. Which institutional changes does the New System vision highlight or prioritize, and why? To what extent do the recommended changes reflect:
 - A return to historical practices;
 - Best practices already present in other nations;
 - Best practices already present in some places in the United States; or
 - Emerging ideas that are currently being tested at the grassroots level?
3. How does each New System vision conceptualize systemic change? What institutional changes must take place? Which institutional changes are the most important? Which must come first (to unlock other possibilities)?
4. How do the new or reformed institutions work to reinforce one another and the stated value goals?
5. What past or present-day precedents does the New System vision draw upon in envisioning a systemic logic?

D. Theories of Change: From Here to There

The contributors to this volume do not consider their visions of systemic change merely academic exercises; they are concerned with seeing systemic change happen, in the real world, and sooner rather than later. Each proposal implicitly or explicitly contains a story about how change can or will take place. This set of questions aims to focus attention on how to move bold ideas into practice.

1. How does each proposal envision systemic change taking place?
 - Through changes in individual behavior?
 - Through community initiatives?
 - Through educational and cultural change initiatives?

- Through local and state policy changes?
 - Through consciousness change?
 - Through social media?
 - Through national politics and policymaking?
 - Through protests and social movement activity?
 - Through constitutional change?
2. Who will be the agents of such change? What constituencies must engage or emerge?
- Youth?
 - Labor?
 - Persons of color?
 - Women?
 - LGBTQIA activists?
 - Professionals?
 - Educators?
 - Politicians?
 - Opinion leaders?
 - Religious communities?
 - Low-income communities?
3. What opposition will proposed systemic changes face? From whom?
- The rich?
 - Corporate interests?
 - Political conservatives?
 - Well-off middle class?
 - Corporate media?
4. How will the agents or movement involved in pushing for social change overcome:
- Cynicism?
 - Ignorance?
 - Deliberate misinformation?
 - Economic pressure (firings, disinvestment)?
 - Coercive state power (police, arrests, surveillance, intimidation)?
5. What lessons or models from past social movements are relevant to generating the change desired?
- What emerging strategies can be employed?
 - Where are altogether new strategies or tactics needed?
 - How can the ideas, principles, and proposals of system change be conveyed to others so understanding and support for them can be built?

SECTION TWO

Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Questions

Part I. Social Democracy and Radical Localism

Chapter 1. Social Democratic Capitalism: The Nordic Experience and Beyond

1. What does “social democratic capitalism,” as described by Kenworthy, entail? What is attractive, and what might be lacking, in Kenworthy’s vision of a market society with an active government and generous public provisions and benefits?
2. Why is the U.S. model of social democracy so much weaker than that found in Europe (especially the Nordic nations)? What strategies does Kenworthy propose to overcome this gap? Are these suggestions persuasive?
3. Kenworthy argues that whereas many conceptions of a planned democratic economy, or socialism, are untested, social democracy is a proven model and hence the logical place to begin a conversation about “good society economics.” What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?
4. Kenworthy is optimistic about the possibility of social democracy in America, but also says major constitutional changes could help (shifting to a parliamentary system and instituting a wealth tax). How could such major changes take place?
5. What are five key facts you learned from this chapter that you did not know before that seem important in either diagnosing our current problems or envisioning a better future?

Chapter 2. The Good Society 2.0

1. Why did the global financial meltdown of 2008–09 fail to produce a robust social democratic response, according to Henning? What broad challenges do social democracies in Europe face?
2. How does Henning contrast “The Good Society” with “The Third Way”? What does it mean to “re-establish the primacy of enlightened politics over economic interests?”
3. What does Henning mean when he speaks of a “mixed economy” involving public and private ownership of the means of production? Why does Henning believe any plausible future economic system will be a mixed economy? Why does Henning think the mixed economy concept is preferable to “democratic socialism”?
4. What possibilities do the digital revolution open for reconfiguring work, leisure, and the economy more generally?
5. Henning says the “Good Society 2.0” is more about a process of pursuing values-based policies than reaching an end goal. Does this way of thinking about social change make sense? What opposition will the Good Society framework face, and how could it be overcome?

Chapter 3. The Promise of a Million Utopias

1. What does Shuman mean by the term “subsidiarity”? Does the idea of doing everything that can be feasibly done at the local level make sense to you? What are the limits to this principle? Can you think of possible objections?
2. What is attractive about Shuman’s vision of diverse, local economies populated by small entrepreneurs rooted in their local communities? Is this vision still plausible in an era of large corporations and global markets?

3. Shuman's recommendation of shrinking the federal government stands nearly diametrically opposed to Kenworthy's vision of a more social democratic America, at least at first glance. Is there a way to expand social democracy while simultaneously decentralizing government functions? What would that look like?
4. Shuman recommends policy packages both to limit larger businesses and to provide more capital to local businesses. Which of these ideas seem more plausible or attractive in your state or community?
5. Shuman argues that many policy matters now assumed to be national matters—including anti-poverty programs, environmental protections, and foreign policy—could in fact be devolved in considerable measure to the state or even local level. Do you find his ideas for how this could be done persuasive?
6. What is the benefit from the standpoint of participatory democracy of moving towards decentralization and pushing more decisions to the local and state levels? What about the concern that often state and local politics are dominated or captured by corporate or conservative interests?
7. Shuman takes seriously the fact of left-right political polarization at the national level in the U.S. and suggests one advantage of decentralization is that it allows communities of different ideological persuasions to adopt more robust policies enacting their preferred vision of "the good society." In that way, progressive and conservative ideas about the good society could compete in real time. However, both progressive and conservatives may have to give up on the idea of re-making the nation as a whole according to their preferred views. Does this "grand bargain" make sense to you? What are the advantages and the downsides?

Part 2. New System Values

Chapter 4. The Economy for the Common Good: A Workable, Transformative, Ethics-Based Alternative

1. Why do critics say that businesses under capitalism routinely violate ethical standards?
2. Is it possible through regulation and adoption of strong ethical rules to change the behavior of corporations under capitalism? What evidence do we have that this approach can work? What do Felber and Hagelberg mean when they say their goal is "a free market economy, but not capitalism"?
3. What is the "Common Good Product"? Why do the authors consider adoption of this metric as a replacement for the gross domestic product measurement critically important?
4. How do the authors propose to regulate the way firm profits are used? Does their approach make sense? What opposition would their approach need to overcome?
5. How do the authors propose to rebalance competition and cooperation? What limitations do they propose to income inequality and the distribution of property?
6. How do the authors propose to handle the banking system, as well as rules around trade? How would their proposals depart from current practice?
7. What is the Common Good Balance Sheet, and why do the authors think it is an important tool for promulgating the idea of an "economy for the common good"? Could this tool be adopted by businesses in your local community, and what impact would that have?

Chapter 5. A Civic Economy of Provisions

1. Brown says that the three basic practices of any community are "providing for one another, protecting one another, and creating meaning together," and proposes reorganizing our economy to meet these fundamental needs (rather than other goals such as maximal economic growth or profit). Does this approach make sense? Why, or why not?

2. Brown says that the “civic economy of provision” is nested within ecological systems, social systems, and civic discourse. Why is it important to ground our thinking about the economy within these larger systems?
3. Brown in effect calls for a society and decision-making systems rooted in civic deliberation, not power or profit imperatives. Is this feasible? What are the obstacles to transition to such an economy? Are Brown’s recommended steps sufficient to launch such a transition?

Chapter 6. Whole Systems Change: A Framework and First Steps for Social/Economic Transformation

1. Eisler utilizes a “relational dynamics” approach that draws a basic contrast between the “domination” model and the “partnership” model. What are the key features of the domination model? What are the key features of the partnership model?
2. Eisler observes that both domination and partnership models involve cooperation, hierarchy, and conflict. How do these play out differently between the two models?
3. Eisler calls for “cultural transformation” and cites the historical example of movement from a domination-oriented to a partnership-oriented partnership. However, past movements frequently have not addressed domination in the private sphere, specifically the oppression of women. Why must future transformational change give equal focus to the private and public spheres, according to Eisler?
4. Eisler identifies four “cornerstones” for cultural transformation: childhood, gender, economics, and narrative/ language. What are the components of each of these cornerstones and why are they important?
5. Eisler argues that the struggle between partnership-oriented systems and patterns of domination is more fundamental than familiar conflicts such as the conflicts between “East and West, North and South, religious and secular, rightist and leftist, capitalist or socialist, or more and less technologically developed societies.” Do you agree with this assertion? Why or why not?

Chapter 7. A Living Economy for a Living Earth

1. Korten states that the core goals of a “living economy” are *ecosystem health and balance*, *shared prosperity*, and *living democracy*. What do you think each of these terms mean? How specifically do these goals connect with one another?
2. Korten describes two “system design errors” that are fatal to the present-day “suicide economy”: valuing life only for its market price and prioritizing corporate profit over community well-being. Give specific examples of each of these errors and discuss why they have such far-ranging implications.
3. Korten says the four pillars of a “living Earth” economy are a “life is sacred story,” a “life is sacred economics,” a “life is sacred law,” and a “life is sacred democracy.” What do each of these terms mean, and why are they important? What are some specific examples of the new stories Korten calls for?
4. What are the specific implications for policy and institutions of Korten’s framework? Discuss with reference to Korten’s recommendations on “redistribution and reconnection,” as well as to money and the banking system.

Chapter 8. Earthland: Scenes from a Civilized Future

1. Raskin presents a “history of the future” to imagine how humanity might wrestle with the challenges of the 21st century. Crucial to driving needed change is a “global citizens movement” (GCM) said to emerge in the 2020s. What evidence do you see of such a movement emerging, already or in the near future?
2. Raskin argues that we will need to adopt a system of global governance to replace the currently failing system. What are his main points in favor of global government, in some form? Do you find these persuasive?

3. Raskin believes that eventually we will settle upon the principle of “constrained pluralism” (“One World, Many Places”) to govern our societies, in which three versions of democracy will coexist within a global system that sets some common ground rules. Does this principle make sense to you? Does the emphasis on pluralism answer potential concerns about global government?
4. Raskin imagines three versions of future societies—“Agoria,” “Ecodemia,” and “Arcadia,” each with distinctive emphases on commerce, economic democracy, and sustainability. Which of these societies do you personally find most appealing? Would it be beneficial to have each of them in practice at the same time?
5. Raskin envisions the society of the future focused on several core principles: diversity, more free time, lifelong education, spirituality, social justice, protecting the biosphere. At the same time he acknowledges there will be a diversity of religious and cultural views, including religious views opposed to these new values. How would a more robust consideration of world religions, cultural diversity and global geopolitics complicate Raskin’s vision? Could you see a global consensus forming in support of Raskin’s preferred values?
6. Ultimately, what insights do you take away from the various scenarios Raskin offers for our future development?

Part 3. A Planetary Economy

Chapter 9. Towards a New, Green Economy—Sustainable and Just—at Community Scale

1. Jackson and Victor pose this question: “How does an economy work when it isn’t being driven by relentless growth in material consumption?” What are some examples of ways our existing discourse about the economy assumes that “growth is always good”?
2. Jackson and Victor propose three foundations for the green economy: prosperity, respect for biophysical boundaries, and social justice. How are these foundations connected with one another? Why are all three necessary?
3. Consider in particular Jackson and Victor’s concept of “prosperity”. How do they define the term, and how does that contrast with its common usage? To what degree would public understanding of “prosperity” need to change to match Jackson and Victor’s definition?
4. Jackson and Victor also ask us to consider what a green economy looks like at the community scale. They note that these basic questions must be answered: how is enterprise to be organized, how is labor to be employed, what is the structure of the investment, what kinds of financial systems are appropriate, and what sort of governance systems are relevant. How would you answer these questions in practice? Use these questions to sketch out your own model of a green economy community.
5. If we develop a clear model of the green economy at community scale, how does that help us think through how an entire system re-orientation around green economy ideas might look?

Chapter 10. Well-Being Economy: A Scenario for a Post-Growth Horizontal Governance System

1. What are the characteristics of a “vertical” economy, according to Fioramonti?
2. Why is the gross domestic product (GDP) measure central to the operation and governance structure of the vertical economy? What problems with the GDP measure does Fioramonti identify? In what ways is the measure actually perverse?
3. In contrast, what does a “horizontal” economy based on well-being look like? How would a horizontal economy promote resilience and cooperation, according to Fioramonti?
4. How is “well-being” to be measured, if not through conventional GDP measures, in a well-being economy?

5. Why does Fioramonti believe a change from using the GDP metric to indicators that actually measure well-being in a nuanced way could lead to large changes in governance systems? Is this argument persuasive?
6. How does Fioramonti envision changes in the economic governance system in turn impacting political systems?

Chapter 11. Towards Democratic Eco-socialism as the Next World System: A Vision for the Future

1. Baer argues that the existence of capitalism makes ecological sustainability impossible. Why would this be the case? How are the growth and profit imperatives, and the inequality that is characteristic of capitalism related to ecological destruction?
2. Baer says that “democratic socialism” today might involve a “predominantly and varied public sector,” “a sizable cooperative sector,” and a “sizeable private sector consisting primarily of small and medium companies providing goods, services, and amenities,” and that it also would include political competition, civil liberties, and other rights. How are these aspects of democratic socialism different from historical examples of communism in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere?
3. Baer says the key basis for democratic eco-socialism is “that we live on a planet with limited resources that must be equitably distributed to provide everyone now and in the future with enough, but not too much.” This means building a society with an economy “oriented to meeting basic needs,” “a high degree of social equality,” “public ownership of the means of production,” “representative and participatory democracy,” and “environmental sustainability.” Why are each of these component parts necessary, and how might they reinforce one another in practice?
4. What is the potential environmental advantage of public ownership of production, compared to private ownership? Is there a potential disadvantage from an environmental point of view?
5. What is the distinction between “reformist reforms” and “non-reformist reforms” (Andre Gorz), and why is it important? Of the list of specific actions Baer called for, which seem most promising in leading to lasting structural change in the direction of democratic socialism? (These steps include building anti-capitalist political parties, implementing greenhouse gas taxes, expanding public ownership, narrowing inequality, building workplace democracy, shortening the work week, achieving a net-zero-growth economy, and more.)
6. Why does Baer believe socialism will be needed to transition to a fully sustainable economy? Is “central planning” necessary to achieve ecological protection? Why does Baer believe “socialist technology” might be more effective than capitalist technology in finding solutions to environmental problems?
7. Do you agree that part of achieving ecological sustainability involves limitations on consumption among affluent residents of rich countries? If so, how could this be achieved? How could popular support for reduced consumption be developed?
8. Baer suggests that the current world system is unsustainable and that systemic change in this century is inevitable, with an uncertain outcome. If this is the case, how can actions taken today best influence the possibility of a future transition to a more just and sustainable system?

Chapter 12. Six Theses on Saving the Planet

1. Smith argues that the facts of rapid environmental destruction are obvious, yet we persist in destructive practices. This apparently irrational behavior is rooted, he says, in capitalism and the practices it generates. Do you agree? If so, why do not more people see this?
2. Thesis One: Smith states “Capitalism is overwhelmingly the main driver of planetary ecological collapse and it can’t be reformed enough to save humans.” What is Smith’s argument and evidence for the proposition that capitalism can’t be “reformed enough”?
3. Thesis Two: “Solutions to our ecological crisis are blindingly obvious and at hand, but as long as we live under

capitalism, we can't prevent ecological collapse tomorrow without precipitating economic collapse today." Why exactly does capitalism prohibit us from rationally transitioning to a steady-state economy without inducing economic collapse?

4. Thesis Three: "If capitalism can't help but destroy the world, then what choice is there but to socialize most of the world's industrial economies and plan them directly for the common good?" What specific arguments does Smith make for the urgency of socializing the world's economies? What specific action steps would this entail? How could such a program generate popular support? How does Smith answer common criticisms of government planning and ownership?
5. Thesis Four: "Rational planning requires democracy." What does democratic planning look like? Why is planning by a public entity superior to planning by a private entity, from an ecological point of view? With public planning processes, how can we assure planning is more, rather than less, inclusive, participatory, and democratic?
6. Thesis Five: "Democracy requires rough socioeconomic equality." Why is democracy incompatible with inequality? If capitalism produces too much inequality for democracy to work, how do we implement democratic planning processes without having them be captured by the wealthiest and best-connected? Do we have to make major movement toward equality to being the urgent work of democratic planning?
7. Thesis Six: "Impossible? Perhaps, but what's the alternative?" Smith acknowledges it may be impossible to effect the transition needed to meet what he calls our "planetary emergency" in real time, but says we are obligated to try anyway while we still have the chance. What strategies and tactics might raise awareness of the scale of our emergency and the need for dramatic action? Could change proceed faster than Smith suggests if awareness were raised to a much higher level?

Part 4. Ownership and Economic Democracy

Chapter 13. Economic Democracy: Ethical, Economically Viable Socialism

1. Schweickart's basic model of economic democracy involves three key components: markets for goods and services, workplace democracy, and democratic control of investment. Why does Schweickart believe we should use markets (rather than central planning) for most goods and services?
2. How are democratic workplaces organized in Schweickart's system of economic democracy, and why is this important? What rights will employees have at their workplaces within this system?
3. Schweickart believes democratic control of investment is critically important. Why is this the case, and how does Schweickart propose to achieve this in economic democracy? How are capital funds for new investments generated in Schweickart's model?
4. Schweickart's "extended model" adds four additional components: government as employer-of-last-resort, socialist savings and loan associations, an entrepreneurial-capitalist sector, and socialist protectionism. Why is it important for government to act as an employer of last resort in this system?
5. How does Schweickart propose to organize *private* savings in a "socialist" manner? How might this system help fund items like housing purchases?
6. Why does Schweickart believe economic democracy could benefit from a capitalist-entrepreneurial sector? How does Schweickart propose keeping these enterprises from coming to dominate the economy?
7. What approach to trade policy does Schweickart believe is appropriate for economic democracy? What is the justification for imposing a "socialist tariff" on goods made in nations with low wages and poor environmental practices? How does Schweickart address the concern such policies might hurt the economic development of poorer nations?

Chapter 14. The Next System: Workers Direct Themselves

1. Wolff argues that the central issue in economic system change is less whether *ownership* of business firms is public or private, but whether firms are organized *democratically* or not. Do you agree with this assessment, and why?
2. Wolff argues that “the employees of capitalism should become their own employers.” What exactly would this entail in terms of ownership structure, management structure, and the organization of work? How could workers’ self-direct enterprises (WSDEs) assure equal voice for all workers, in practice?
3. Wolff argues that the “micro-level” focus of WSDEs is a better way to achieve system change than macro-level debates that have characterized previous capitalism vs. socialism debates. Why does he make this claim, and do you find it persuasive?

Chapter 15. Diversifying Public Ownership: Constructing Institutions for Participation, Social Empowerment, and Democratic Control

1. Cumbers defines public ownership of the means of production in very broad terms, incorporating seven distinct forms of ownership: full state ownership, regional state ownership, partial state ownership, local/municipal state ownership, producer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, and employee ownership. What are the difference between each of these types of public ownership? What do they all have in common that makes them distinct from private ownership, according to Cumbers?
2. Why does Cumbers advocate for a mixed economy in which numerous forms of public ownership coexist, along with a smaller entrepreneurial private sector? What does he mean when he speaks of “de-centering” the economy?
3. Look closely at Table 1 where Cumbers maps the relative advantages of different kinds of public ownership for different important goals. What is the point of this table? Does the mapping make sense to you? How does the table reinforce Cumbers’ argument for diverse forms of public ownership?
4. Now look closely at Table 2, mapping out how different parts of the economy might have different forms of ownership and regulation. Does this map create a coherent vision of a diverse, well-functioning, publicly owned economy?
5. What lessons do you draw from Cumbers’ account of the nationalized oil industry in Norway and the wind power revolution in Denmark for how political support for public ownership can be built and maintained? Do these examples vindicate the notion that public ownership allows for genuine democratic control over economic life, while also meeting standards of economic rationality?

Part 5. Community-Based Pluralist Systems

Chapter 16. A Pluralist Commonwealth and a Community Sustaining System

1. Alperovitz’s concept of the “pluralist commonwealth” prioritizes the idea of “community.” However, he defines community not primarily in terms of social capital or neighborly interactions, but rather by the political and economic institutions that constitute and sustain community and that provide the economic basis for community life. Given this frame, why is democratic ownership (in various forms) critical to community? Why is planning critical to community? And why must theories of community and democratic participation explicitly address the question of scale?
2. Alperovitz says a new system must address four critical challenges at once: the legacy of structural racism and economic inequality; ecological limitations and the reality of climate change; ongoing rapid technological development; and the limitation of our existing constitutional design. How do his four recommended principles

of the pluralist commonwealth—democratization of wealth, community, decentralization (where possible), and democratic planning—speak to these challenges? Why are all important?

3. How do existing examples of “community wealth building” and public enterprise in localities in the US, UK and elsewhere illustrate the possibility of embedding pluralist commonwealth principles in actual local communities, in response to *current* challenges that have not been addressed by other strategies?
4. Alperovitz proposes in effect to replace the private corporation as the dominant economic institution, with a variety of alternatives depending on scale, scope and context. Why is replacing the corporation critical to bringing about systemic change? Why is doing so especially critically important in addressing climate change? How does Alperovitz answer common criticisms of public ownership and planning?
5. How can a community-by-community, bottom-up strategy address the “moral failings” of slavery and genocide (as well as imperialism)? Why does Alperovitz contend that only the transformation of real-world experience within communities can produce radical, systemic change? Why does he contend that such an approach is not “utopian” (in the pejorative sense), but practical and grounded in ample historical precedent?

Chapter 17. The Joyful Economy: A Next System Possibility

1. What does Speth mean when he says we need “a new American dream”? What would that look like? Is the American dream compatible in any form with system change and ecological sustainability?
2. Why does Speth say the environmental movement has largely failed? Why must it explicitly address systemic issues if it wishes to be more effective in his view?
3. Speth believes “joy” could be the framework for a new economic narrative compatible with system change. How is that possible? How does the current model of capitalism tend to undercut actual happiness by prioritizing economic growth? What would it take to persuade people that joy-centered system change represented a better path to happiness?
4. Look at each of the specific questions regarding the economy, education, polity, and society Speth poses. Which of these questions seem most critical or salient in examining systemic reform proposals?
5. Is the future imagined by John Maynard Keynes in 1933 of a world that has largely solved its economic problems still possible? If so, what would this look like?

Chapter 18. Building a Cooperative Solidarity Commonwealth

1. What does Nembhard mean by the term “cooperative solidarity commonwealth”? How is this concept related to but distinct from the basic idea of a cooperative (i.e. a company “owned by the workers or the people who use their services”)?
2. Nembhard envisions an economy in which “everybody is part of several different but connected cooperatives.” Do you believe an entire economy based on cooperation, mutual assistance, and solidarity is possible? What prevents individual cooperatives or sectors from seeking to impose their will on other cooperatives?
3. Nembhard cites Curtis Haynes’s idea of “social energy.” What does this term mean? Have you ever felt “social energy” in your work, political activity, or personal life? What about social energy feels or is different from work in traditional capitalist settings?
4. In support of the broad goals of sustainable economic prosperity, eliminating poverty, and extending democratic control over capital, Nembhard stresses the concept of “wage solidarity” within cooperatives. This means the ratio between highest and least-paid workers would be 6 to 1 or less (a tiny fraction of current gaps between CEOs and front-line workers). Do you think there would be wide support for a wage policy like this?

5. Nembhard stresses the central importance of credit unions in developing and financing larger and larger networks of cooperatives, drawing on the experience of Mondragon and other examples. What would keep existing credit unions from playing this role? What roles would need to be changed to grow the importance of this sector?
6. How does the concept of cooperative solidarity align and overlap with struggles for racial justice in the US, both historically and today? How could cooperatives extend the mission of such groups as the Movement for Black Lives into the economic arena at large scale?

Chapter 19. Solidarity Economy: Building an Economy for People and Planet

1. Kawano writes that the assumptions of *homo economicus*—that people are “calculating, selfish, competitive, and acquisitive”—are at the root of our current, destructive system. She also calls the “solidarity economy” not a blueprint but an “ecosystem of practices.” How quickly do you think people can learn new habits based on cooperation of the kind Kawano calls for?
2. Kawano says explicitly that the solidarity economy is a global movement. To what extent must economic justice movements in affluent nations like the US be linked to movements and actions in the Global South? How can solidarity, ideas, and mutual support be extended across national borders to support global system change?
3. Consider the wide variety of solidarity economy practices in Table 1. Which of these do you have first-hand experience with? Which would have the most potential impact in your community? How can these different practices support one another?
4. What is the role of non-market labor and exchange in the solidarity economy?
5. What overlap do you see between Kawano’s solidarity economy and Nembhard’s cooperative solidarity commonwealth?

Chapter 20. Democratizing Wealth in the U.S. South and Beyond

1. Whitfield writes that democracy requires not just voting, but “SASH”—involving the Spirit, Arts, Sciences and Habits of “standing with the whole and being in the community, for the community.” What are some examples of SASH you have personally experienced? Why does Whitfield foreground this idea?
2. What are the basic principles of the Southern Reparations Loan Fund, and why are each important? Whitfield cites the example of a cooperative grocery store in North Carolina as a success, even though the stores only remained open for three years. Why does he consider the effort to be successful?
3. “We can think our way into new ways of acting, but we can also act our way into new ways of thinking,” Whitfield writes. What does this mean concretely and how does it relate to the process of building new institutions to democratize wealth?
4. Whitfield states that “the owners of economic surplus should be those who produce it and the communities they are a part of;” and the moral justification is that “the production of surplus from human labor requires a nurturing and supportive community.” Do you agree with this moral principle? Why or why not?
5. Why does Whitfield believe that community wealth can often be built better through common or public ownership of land rather than subdividing land into privately owned properties? How does this argument run counter to much conventional economic thinking?
6. Why does Whitfield think that development funds to create and expand enterprises in disadvantaged communities would be the best form of reparations?
7. Whitfield says that social justice movements have three fundamental components: Resistance, Advocacy, and Doing for Ourselves. What are each of these and why are they important? How can these different components reinforce one another in practice?

Chapter 21. Navigating System Transition in a Volatile Century

1. Lewis identifies four crucial trends that “define our time”: Climate change, depleted ecosystems, “the third industrial revolution,” and “money, debt and finance.” What does Lewis mean by “third industrial revolution”? What threats and opportunities does it present?
2. Given these challenges, what are the key principles of “cooperative economic democracy” as laid out by Lewis? What is the force of principles like “sufficiency over efficiency” and “well-being over the right to possess”?
3. What are the seven principles of resilience laid out by Lewis and how are each of them important?
4. How can cooperative economic democracy be implemented at multiple scales simultaneously? Consider in detail the example of RESO, based in Montreal: what have been the accomplishments of this approach, and the limitations? Likewise, what have been the accomplishments and limitations of the social care cooperative economy in Emilia-Romagna, Italy as described by Lewis?
5. Lewis provides examples from Sweden, Germany, the UK, and Canada illustrating how economic democracy can accelerate a transition to renewable energy use. Why is each example important? How do these examples add up to a broad strategy linking economic democracy and ecological responsibility?
6. Lewis presents the Chantier from Quebec as a framework for developing a politics to bring system change to scale. What are component parts of this approach? Can this approach be widely replicated in other settings?
7. Finally, consider the menu of macro-level interventions, including 10 specific steps, to counter the four major trends noted at the outset. How can these recommended interventions be woven together in a coherent narrative about a transition to a different system?

Part 6. Commoning, Cooperation, and Participatory Planning

Chapter 22. Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm

1. Bollier says the key goal of the commons movement is to reclaim “common wealth” and reverse market enclosures, or privatization of key goods. Why, with this view, has the strategy of privatizing goods while relying on the state to regulate markets largely failed? Why does Bollier recommend that commoners rely on strategies outside of both market and state structures?
2. What is the significance of the contrast between Garrett Hardin and Elinor Ostrom’s view of the commons? Why does Bollier say Hardin misdescribed the commons in his famous essay “The Tragedy of the Commons?” What is the significance of Ostrom’s extensive research on how actual communities have managed communal resources successfully?
3. What is the difference between how commoners view social reality and the traditional image of *homo economicus* invoked by mainstream economics? Why does the language of the commoners matter in bringing about a changed reality?
4. What are examples of “commoning” in practice? How have these led to better, more trustworthy, and more democratic practices compared to traditional markets (or government)?

Chapter 23. Cooperative Commonwealth and the Partner State

1. Restakis says that neoliberalism has not failed, but succeeded in “maximizing wealth to the owners of capital.” He then says this principle is pathological. How does this show the need for a pluralist approach that recognizes the many aims and goals we should want a humanly decent economic system to realize?

2. What does Restakis mean by “civil socialism”? How does his definition of the “cooperative commonwealth” compare to the “pluralist commonwealth” described by Gar Alperovitz? Why does Restakis believe imposing a “purely” cooperative economy would corrupt the model?
3. Restakis lists six specific sovereign powers related to the regulation of the economy that the state must recover, as a precondition for democratizing the state and the economy. What are these powers, and why have they been lost or forfeited?
4. Restakis favors a strong role for non-state, civil control of the commons, similar to the view laid out in Chapter 22. Yet he also believes the state can and should act as a “partner state.” What are the specific things Restakis believes a partner state should be doing, distinct from the traditional concept of the “welfare state”? How do these action steps support the goal of “promoting and enabling the civil production of goods and services as a form of protected commons”?
5. What is a social market? How can social markets be created? What are some examples? How is this concept helpful?
6. How does Restakis propose establishing “social control over capital”? Why is this goal integral to economic democracy?
7. How can the modern corporation be democratized? Consider the twelve specific steps listed by Restakis in support of this aim. Do these steps make sense? How could political support be built for such bold steps?
8. How can new communications technology support the spread of “generative democracy”? What changes would be needed in the way such technology is currently controlled and deployed?
9. How does the Rojava Revolution from Syria exemplify the idea and possibilities of “stateless democracy”?
10. Why does Restakis believe that to promote system change we must simultaneously push for change within existing institutional frameworks, while also directly creating “models of human economy” based on entirely new principles? Does this both-and rather than either-or approach to these modes of social activism make sense to you?

Chapter 24. An Introduction to Participatory Economics

1. How does “Parecon” (participatory economics) as defined by Albert treat the concept of economic equality? Do you agree with the assertion that people who work the same hours, at the same intensity, at equally pleasant or unpleasant tasks, should be paid the same? Why or why not?
2. How does Albert respond to the familiar claim that specialized professionals like doctors need to be paid high salaries in order to provide talented persons an incentive to undertake the extended schooling and training required to enter those fields?
3. Given a baseline of robust economic equality, how does Parecon seek to accommodate the preferences of people who prefer to consume a larger-than-average bundle of goods? The preferences of people who prefer longer-than-average free time?
4. How would jobs be organized under Parecon to assure that all jobs are equally empowering?
5. Albert proposes “participatory planning” as an alternative mechanism for resource allocation to both markets and central planning. How would this work in practice? What makes this proposal attractive or unattractive?
6. What does Albert mean when he writes, “Fairness is not prescribed on a tablet but instead has to emerge from a discussion of what people want as their income, working conditions, and working hours”? Why does he believe deliberation and participation will create more fairness than regulated markets (“social democracy”) ever could?

Chapter 25. Participatory Economics and the Next System

1. “The question we should ask about any economic system now,” Hahnel writes, “is whether its basic institutions and decision-making procedures afford creative ideas and proposals about how to relate to the natural environment a fair and friendly hearing.” How and why in Hahnel’s view does capitalism fail to do this?
2. Why does Hahnel believe participatory planning would constitute a rational way to make economic decisions informed by ecological limitations, and to balance trade-offs between present and future well-being? What makes such planning superior to both current practice and commonly proposed reforms of capitalism?
3. Hahnel writes, “Only when a majority is sufficiently disgusted by corporate rule, and confident that workers and consumers can manage and coordinate their own economic affairs, will it be possible to leave capitalism in the dustbin of history and launch an economic system supportive of sustainable, equitable cooperation.” What will it take for this to happen? What intermediate steps in the meantime should be taken to support radical change, according to Hahnel? Are the initiatives described by advocates of the “pluralist commonwealth” or “solidarity economy” consistent with this long-term vision?
4. Consider the key institutions Hahnel names as fundamental to participatory economics: workers’ councils, balanced job complexes, and consumer councils. What are each of these and what do they do? How do they relate to and how are they distinct from existing models and experiments in economic democracy?
5. Now consider the iterative participatory process for planning Hahnel envisions. How exactly would this work? Why is such a model feasible, according to Hahnel? Why does Hahnel believe that planning is consistent with respecting individual preferences?
6. How does Hahnel make the case that the iterative participatory planning process protects the natural environment in both the short and long term?

Part 7. The Emerging New Economy

Chapter 26. Cultivating Community Economies: Tools for Building a Livable World

1. Gibson-Graham et al. write that to them “community economy” means “the active, ongoing, and open-ended negotiation of interdependence with all life forms, human and nonhuman. We see community as a never-ending process of being together, struggling over the boundaries and substance of togetherness, and coproducing this togetherness in complex power relations.” How does this understanding of community challenge common usages of the term? Does this understanding of the human situation strike you as more insightful than traditional assumptions about the economy and politics?
2. Consider the categories *survival*, *surplus*, *transactions*, *commons*, *consumption*, and *investment*. How do these categories help us understand communal economic life and the actual choices and ethical dilemmas we face as a community?
3. Consider the examples Gibson-Graham et al. bring forward: Kerala, Hepburn Wind, After Trade Japan, the Chantier, and the Montreal Protocol. How do these different examples illustrate the possibility of communal economic reasoning that is ethically informed and leads to better outcomes?
4. What do Gibson-Graham et al. mean by the term “diverse economy”? How does this framework play out in the terrains of work, property, markets, and finance? How does this comprise their first major strategy for change?
5. What does it mean to “broaden the horizons of economic politics,” according to the authors? Consider this important passage: “When the economy is framed in terms of capitalism, and when capitalism is presented as spreading across the globe, it seems that the only alternative is an equivalent globally organized anti-capitalist struggle. This diminishes the potential of the local in economic politics. Conversely, framing the economy as comprising diverse practices opens up multiple sites as places of economic struggle and makes us see that what

seems global is actually occurring in multiple locales and that what seems local can be globally networked and connected.” Do you find this argument persuasive? How do the various local examples the authors cite demonstrate the plausibility of this way of thinking about system change?

Chapter 27. Building Economic Democracy to Construct Eco-socialism from Below

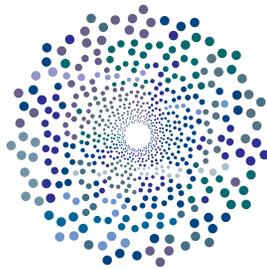
1. What are the component parts of Cooperation Jackson outlined by Akuno and Hall?
2. Could the Jackson program of federating worker cooperatives, incubating cooperatives, providing a school and training center for cooperatives, and developing cooperative financial institutions succeed in building a robust democratic economic sector at the local level in your city?
3. How has Jackson complemented the focus on cooperatives with other innovations such as participatory budgeting and community land trusts? What else would you add to this approach?
4. How can local initiatives like those found in Jackson become sustainable over the longer term?
5. How can initiatives like that found in Jackson form a building block for “eco-socialism?” As a next step, would you recommend federating radical and progressive cities like Jackson, taking the most successful initiatives from Jackson and “scaling them up,” or both?

Chapter 28. How We Build the Movement for Reparative Economic Democracy

1. Why is a reparations framework needed to talk about racial and economic justice, according to Tanaka and Evans?
2. How do the authors distinguish between “reparations in actions” and a “reparations frame”? How can a reparations frame be translated into grassroots action even in the absence of a national reparations effort?
3. How does the Ujima Project’s capital fund work? What elements make it democratic and responsive to community need?
4. Why has the Ujima Project taken on the rewriting of Boston’s City Charter as part of its work? Why must transformative movements engage with local structures of governance?
5. What would an Ujima Project-type effort look like in your community? What would it take to make it happen?

Chapter 29. The Arusha Declaration: The Case for Democratic Socialism 50 Years On

1. How does Zitto Kabwe distinguish the 1967 Arusha Declaration from the 2017 Tabora Declaration? What is similar and what is different on how each declaration defines African socialism?
2. What specific socialist policies did Tanzania enact in the quarter century following the Arusha Declaration? How and why were they undone by neoliberal policies beginning in the 1990s?
3. What role did international institutions and foreign investment play in the neoliberal turn Tanzania took beginning in the 1990s?
4. To what extent are Zitto Kabwe’s reflections on the content of a revived African socialism consistent with the emphasis of other authors in this volume on maintaining a mixed economy? How does he distinguish “public” from “state” ownership, and why does this matter?
5. How have international loans and tax policies favoring multinational companies drained nations like Tanzania financially? How could these financial flows be reversed?
6. What responsibilities do more affluent nations have to support the efforts of nations like Tanzania in developing a democratic economic system?



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