

**EDITED BY  
JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH  
AND KATHLEEN COURRIER**

# **THE NEW SYSTEMS READER**

Alternatives to a Failed Economy

“The pandemic of 2020 has made the question of economic and social transformation ever more urgent. As the failures of neoliberalism multiply, what should take its place? The Next System Project has been one of the most fruitful efforts to articulate possible paths forward. This collection—a veritable who’s who of visionaries—is a must-read for anyone interested in creating an egalitarian, sustainable, and humane successor to capitalism.”

—Juliet Schor, author, *After The Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back*

“Aged to perfection, Gus Speth is a global treasure. He and Kathleen Courrier have assembled 38 of the top systems thinkers to offer a multitude of provocative paths toward a radically better future for people and the planet.”

—John Cavanagh, Director, Institute for Policy Studies and co-editor of *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World is Possible*

“This impressive collection of essays was completed a little before the Coronavirus pandemic shook up all our ways of living in the present and viewing the future. The book offers numerous suggestions on how to build truly new and resilient systemic changes in the economic, social and environmental spheres. Each of the 28 essays addresses issues that are urgently needed to reach the sustainable future we have been dreaming about for the past decades. It is now crystal clear that small adjustments to the existing system will no longer suffice. The systemic transformation needed must be global, courageous, inclusive and provide for previously disconnected issues to be considered together. *The New Systems Reader* is well positioned to play an important role in helping us move rapidly to create a new way forward for our planet and all of its inhabitants.”

—Julia Marton-Lefèvre, Former Director General, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

“*The New Systems Reader* puts to rest, once and for all and not a moment too soon, the most nefarious of lies: There is no alternative. Its pages present compelling alternatives that promise a more fair, more healthy, more thriving economy, along with road maps to get there. The only thing missing is a people-powered movement strong enough to bring these visions to fruition. That’s up to us, so read this book and let’s go!”

—Annie Leonard, Executive Director, Greenpeace US

“This book could not be emerging at a better moment: many more of us now realize that we need new models for our collective life, and it will come as a relief to many readers to know those models are out there, with people hard at work figuring out how we can build them to scale in time. A landmark book!”

—Bill McKibben, author of *Deep Economy*



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# The New Systems Reader

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The recognition is growing: truly addressing the problems of the 21st century requires going beyond small tweaks and modest reforms to business as usual—it requires “changing the system.” But what does this mean? And what would it entail? *The New Systems Reader* highlights some of the most thoughtful, substantive, and promising answers to these questions, drawing on the work and ideas of some of the world’s key thinkers and activists on systemic change. Amid the failure of traditional politics and policies to address our fundamental challenges, an increasing number of thoughtful proposals and real-world models suggest new possibilities, this book convenes an essential conversation about the future we want.

**James Gustave Speth** is senior fellow and co-chair of The Next System Project at The Democracy Collaborative. Formerly dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, and chair of the UN Development Group, he served as a senior adviser on environmental issues to Presidents Carter and Clinton. He is the author, co-author, or editor of seven books including *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* (2012); and most recently, the 2014 memoir *Angels by the River*, which traces his path from mainstream environmental insider to a champion of fundamental systemic change in our political and economic institutions.

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James Gustave Speth  
and Kathleen Courrier

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# Preface

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Systems have a way of making us forget they exist.

I grew up in a pleasant town in the American South in the 1940s and 1950s—pleasant enough if you happened to be white. It took me until my undergraduate years to appreciate fully the depths of injustice inherent in the system of life there and to understand that, as a system, it was rotten and untenable.

The moment when the scaffolding of your cultural life and your upbringing collapse around you is certainly disorienting—what you were brought up to believe in and take as natural and inevitable disappears. But it is also a liberating experience.

To understand that a system exists is to imagine the possibility of it being otherwise. To further understand that the system is fundamentally flawed is to imagine the possibility of something much better—a next system.

My subsequent trajectory through and beyond the mainstream environmental movement led me, later in life, to a similar moment. As the founder of the World Resources Institute, as a co-founder of Natural Resources Defense Council, as a presidential advisor, environmental school dean, and United Nations administrator, I proceeded for decades under the assumption that we could correct dangerous disregard for the environmental health of our planet by working for reforms within the system. It was an unexamined presupposition that our political economy was mostly a given, and that the task before the environmental movement was to press hard on the levers of policy and politics to impede unsustainable practices within that system while promoting more sustainable ones.

Thank goodness we have won significant battles, but we are steadily losing the war. Decades of this work—all good, all worthwhile, but all ultimately unsuccessful in moving us away from a path toward climate and ecological catastrophe—led to another, slower epiphany, a realization that the outcomes we as an environmental movement were powerless to hold back were due not only to bad actors or bad policies but to deeper flaws

in our economic and political system itself. These flaws are baked into the very fabric of our political economy, so that fighting for a bright future for people and planet within that system will be a losing proposition in the end. This, like my earlier moment coming to terms with the horrors of systemic racism, was not an easy lesson to take. But it was a necessary and ultimately liberating one.

In particular, it led me to begin the work that resulted in the book you now have before you, which asks the question; What does it really mean to “change the system”?

## **Why Systems Matter**

The starting point for this book is the inability of traditional politics and policies to address fundamental challenges. Our goal is not to offer visions of alternative systems because it is an intellectually interesting thought experiment, but as visions whose urgency is demanded by our historical moment. As Abraham Lincoln put it: “If we could first know where we are... we could better judge what to do and how to do it.”

Truly addressing the economic, ecological, and political problems of the 21st century requires going beyond business as usual. In the United States, where most of our contributors ground their work, stagnating outcomes around individual and community well-being are showing the limits of the current system. A very rich nation by conventional measures, the United States has, measured against the 19 other “advanced democracies” in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the greatest inequality of both incomes and wealth; the highest rates of incarceration, poverty, and infant mortality; and the shortest life expectancies. In the United States and elsewhere around the globe, the inability of the current system to deliver a future worth believing in fuels the resurgence of dangerous authoritarian and nationalist tendencies.

Beyond national borders, we are hitting, with the onrushing disaster of the climate crisis, the first of what systems theorist Donella “Dana” Meadows and her collaborators termed “limits to growth.” (It won’t be the last.)

Recognizing the system is broken, however, is only a first step. If one remains bound by the wrongheaded idea that “there is no alternative,” a broken system is only an occasion for cynicism, despair, and reaction. It is also be the occasion for the cynical “I’m going to get all I can while I can.” Our goal in this reader is to dispel the deadly notion that nothing can be done—that today’s corporate capitalism as we know it is the best and, in any case, the only possible option.

Thankfully, many alternative visions exist, buttressed by the work of individual thinkers and increasingly sophisticated networks of research and reflection. These thoughtful proposals suggesting new political-economic possibilities—sometimes in considerable detail—map out potential futures

for us to consider. We have endeavored here to select and present a representative sample of the most important proposals. We have focused especially on those that stem from a sustained line of inquiry, research, and advocacy—for all of our contributors, the system question in one form or another, is core to their work.

The contours of the different systems also converge around an at least partially shared vision of key outcomes. Here are a few of those outcomes as I see them:

- The lifeblood of the dominant enterprise type is not profit and growth, but public benefit, social purpose, and a decent living for those involved, while the ownership and control of productive enterprise has shifted decisively to workers, the public, and economic democracy generally.
- The imperative to protect the planet and its climate, and the need to restore the environment back to health, governs economic enterprise and government action. An ethos of nature as a commons for the shared benefit of all life replaces the practice of privatized resource extraction, with benefits hoarded by the few and the costs borne by the many, usually the poorest and most marginalized.
- Investments are made in accordance with democratically determined priorities, with shareholders replaced by stakeholders and with social and environmental returns taking priority over financial ones.
- The aim of economic policy is no longer tied to growth of GDP, but to promote national and international well-being and the common good.
- Equal justice truly exists for all people in all spheres of life, and reparative justice to address the historic and continuing damage caused by systemic racism is core to the work of ensuring that the benefits of economic activity are widely and equitably shared.
- Popular sovereignty—democratic government of, by and for the people—is restored, concomitant with the expansion of democracy into the economy, reversing the takeover of government by the corporate sector.

We hope that the convictions and deep engagement of our contributors with the design of “what comes next” can help shake loose any lingering but profoundly unhelpful belief that we have somehow arrived at the end of history. Our current corporate capitalist system can be superseded by a next system that is equitable, green, democratic, and just.

Comparative analysis of the systems presented here can help us on the difficult path to synthesis—and one of our goals in assembling this collection was to ask our contributors to evaluate their own work with respect to a shared set of analytical categories. (We’ve reproduced that schema

as an appendix in this volume.) The prevalence of planning, the role of the state, the scale of relevant geographies, the organization of work, the relation to nature and environment, all of these provide useful handholds to put these systemic visions in relation. We can demand of each of these systems what they can tell us about growth, justice, leisure, gender, race, consumerism, democracy, or any other of a litany of key challenges. Are their answers incidental, or core to the dynamic drivers of the system proposed?

Importantly, these are not visions of systems that promise inevitable, utterly predictable outcomes. Dana Meadows taught us that human systems are inherently unpredictable. She believed that hoping to design a perfect system in which we are omniscient conquerors is a fool's errand. "The future can't be predicted," she wrote in her essay "Dancing with Systems," "but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can't be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. We can't surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can't impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone."<sup>1</sup>

## **Many Alternatives**

The rich diversity of systemic visions we have assembled here presents a new challenge, leading us to our second goal in assembling this volume. All of the thinkers and activists we have enlisted start from a similar recognition of the problems in the current system—but they all end up somewhere different. The paths they identify also vary considerably—from local self-regulation to top-down reconstruction, from the rewiring of values to the rewiring of ownership, and everywhere in between. There are many alternatives—so which one do we want to build toward? And what questions are at stake in this choice?

Do we need to change everything? Essays by Lane Kenworthy, Henning Meyer, and Michael H. Shuman propose visions grounded in significant reforms that stop short of a truly revolutionary transformation—drawing on the social democratic and liberal traditions, and the promise of markets grounded in local communities. Even here, they present significant choices. Can a country as culturally and ideologically diverse as the United States be led to embrace unity under a European-style "good society," as Kenworthy and Meyer suggest, or do we concede that a system of radical localism will mean that different communities will make different decisions about how they order their lives, as Shuman does, and that's OK? Still, the virtue of these proposals lies in their closeness to reality.



The distance to travel to their new systems is far from trivial, but it doesn't require us to imagine a total rewiring of our political economic system.

Other proposals insist on more fundamental changes, down to the foundational level of the values that drive how and to what end systems work. For instance, Christian Felber and Gus Hagelberg propose a system built around alternative measures of social and economic value based on an assessment of the common good and stewardship of the planet. Marvin T. Brown echoes that perspective, but raises the challenge to think beyond traditional market frameworks driven by individual desires to imagine markets driven by community well-being. Riane Eisler contributes another layer by calling for a break with the dominant value system of patriarchal dominance, replacing it with a system centered on partnership and on properly valuing such social roles as caregiving. The way David C. Korten frames the debate is a choice between a "money is sacred" story and a "life is sacred" story. Paul Raskin offers a glimpse into the future to show how the world might transition from where it is today to one that is more equitable and environmentally sustainable. His cosmopolitan vision differs sharply from Shuman's localism.

As the climate crisis intensifies, a particular dimension of interest is how systemic visions engage with the constraints of ecology—contributions from Tim Jackson and Peter A. Victor, Lorenzo Fioramonti, Hans A. Baer, and Richard Smith all address this environmental dimension head-on, arriving at some starkly different answers. There is little debate about the need for an environmental accounting of our economic activity, and such an accounting in and of itself has implications for how markets and societies will function. But can either capitalist or socialist societies as currently constituted adapt to the structural changes that such an accounting would demand?

Who owns a new system? Answering "we do" is a start, but it begs new questions. David Schweickart, Richard D. Wolff, and Andrew Cumbers interrogate the dynamics of democratizing ownership as a key facet of a systemic transition, focusing on worker and public ownership. Here we are called by Schweickart to imagine a world in which workers control their jobs and workplaces, and investment decisions are made collectively by society. Richard D. Wolff shows how cooperatives can model the way forward. Cumbers looks at how various forms of public ownership can be strategically deployed to support the successful collective management of a new system.

How do the pieces of a new system fit together? Tracing how community-based alternatives can be knitted together into larger scale systemic visions, my own contribution, that of my Next System Project co-chair Gar Alperovitz, as well as Jessica Gordon Nembhard, Emily Kawano, Ed Whitfield, and Michael T. Lewis, explore the architectures of composition and assemblage that can hold a systemic alternative together. What you

will see in these essays is Alperovitz delving into the importance of building community while I explore what it means to have an economy centered on bringing “joy”—not just the superficial pleasure of having things but an inner contentment that comes through mutually beneficial relationships. Nambhard adds the critically important dimension of the need to repair the damage done by centuries of systemic racism and sexism in order to build a truly cooperative solidarity economy. Kawano, Whitfield, and Lewis discuss the existing and emergent models we might use to build a new system with racial and gender justice at its core.

What are the ways in which people connect to and feel a part of a new system? One path would involve rethinking the scope of “the commons”—the domain of resources shared and collectively managed by the people, as David Bollier suggests, rather than privately extracted and traded on the market. John Restakis supplements an expansive definition of the commons with the idea that the deployment of capital is also socially controlled, primarily directed to support cooperatives and collectives. Writings by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel explore how to deepen democratic processes in both the political and economic realms, so that the idea of decision-making by the people closest to and most affected by the decision is not a slogan but is a routine practice.

Finally, we present a set of visions of systemic transformation grounded in concrete organizing. One essay by J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, Kelly Dombroski, Stephen Healy, and Ethan Miller looks at the hidden registers of system change beneath the surface of today’s economy. Then Kali Akuno and Sacajewa Hall, Tanaka-Evans-Cohn, and Zitto Kabwe each offer a perspective grounded in contemporary social movement building, from the Deep South of the United States to Tanzania. These essays show how real people are grappling with the challenges of bringing an audacious vision of systemic change into reality.

## **Choices on the Road to Synthesis**

“There is no alternative” threatens us with expulsion to a barren desert if we dare to demand some set of arrangements that transcend the possibilities of our current capitalist configuration. But as the plenitude of alternative, visions we have collected in the pages that follow show, far from a desert, what we have is a thriving, diverse ecosystem, an intellectual ecology of mutual relation and overlapping concern. Indeed, this forest of ideas is so thick that the problem is trying to forge a meaningful path through it, to see the trees in their particularity and relation, to understand what is shared—common emergent themes that can unify our work—and what remains irreconcilable, difficult choices to be faced with intellectual honesty and in good faith.

We know a lot—too much!—about how the gross-domestic-product-maximizing, corporate-profit/shareholder-value-focused economic system courts disaster for people and planet. We know—again, too well!—all that is externalized and made invisible by this system, from the rights of nature to the value of the caring labor that reproduces our social life. And we know quite a bit about how the major 20th-century attempt to find a different path resulted in the historical tragedy of statist socialism. So, we know what to ask of a systemic design, the criteria it must fulfill, the traps it must avoid.

But what are we to make of this volume’s diversity in tactics and strategy? Karl Marx famously once wrote that he shouldn’t, as a critic of the existing economic order, be responsible for writing “recipes for the cookshops of the future.” It’s *possible* to agree with this judgment and view the diversity of systemic visions presented here as a kind of fascinating kaleidoscope of possibility—each turn offering a new aspect in which design principles of one reflect upon, resonate with, or contradict another—without continuing with the intellectual and empirical work necessary to understand which synthesis presents a truly operative way forward. The ideas here *could* remain utopias, fantastic visions of possibility that help us think through the limits of the present without asking us to take them seriously.

Ultimately, though, we believe that such a sanguine dismissal of the design criteria of a new system is not appropriate. First, historical experience—especially the long and painful collapse of the Soviet experiment—has shown just how deadly it can be to embark on a revolutionary journey without a solid understanding of your destination. Second, the enemies of freedom and equity have never hesitated to create their own recipes for futures we don’t want. Corporate neoliberalism’s coordinated advance was made possible, in no small part, because it knew where it was going and how it might get there. Finally, we don’t have the luxury of time; an accelerating climate and other crises documented here are demanding, *now*, that we begin to shift the underlying dynamics of our economic system in fundamental ways. With the human suffering of the COVID-19 pandemic mounting as I write, the manifold failings of our current system cry even louder for fundamental change. Indeed, the many movements for a new, democratic economy directly inspiring the authors contributing here are already beginning to work toward making such shifts in practice.

Our hope is that this volume provides a set of places to begin this important and urgent conversation about what comes next.

James Gustave Speth

## Note

- 1 Donella Meadows, “Dancing with Systems,” *Academy for Systems Change*, <http://donellameadows.org/archives/dancing-with-systems/>.

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# Acknowledgments

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It is common to refer to team efforts, but producing this book required an unusually big one.

Shortly after The Next System Project (NSP) was launched as a project of The Democracy Collaborative in early 2015, its executive director, Joe Guinan, and I saw that we had an opportunity to pull together a group of the best thinkers to address an essential question: if today's system of political economy is failing across a broad front, what next systems are possible that would truly serve people, place, and planet?

Joe and I had creative inputs and strong encouragement from my NSP co-chair and co-founder of The Democracy Collaborative, Gar Alperovitz, and from Ted Howard, The Democracy Collaborative's president. NSP's research director, Thomas Hanna, was also quite helpful in this regard. Dana Brown, who directs the Next System Project and the many, many strands of incredibly important work happening there, was indispensable at keeping all the balls in the air as we juggled this book and many other projects.

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James Gustave Speth  
Co-chair, The Next System Project

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# About The Democracy Collaborative and The Next System Project

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The Democracy Collaborative ([democracycollaborative.org](http://democracycollaborative.org)) is a research and development lab for the democratic economy, a national and international hub for the conception and implementation of transformative economic solutions. Launched in 2000, it now has a global network of staff and fellows developing the theory, policy, and practice for economies centered on community wealth building. The Democracy Collaborative's approach to local economic development, using such strategies as worker cooperatives, community land trusts, and other forms of democratic and community ownership and harnessing the economic power of anchor institutions such as hospitals and universities, is increasingly being incorporated into the toolbox of municipal governments and community advocates.

The Next System Project ([thenextsystem.org](http://thenextsystem.org)) was launched by The Democracy Collaborative with the support of more than 300 leading scholars and activists to promote systemic solutions for an age of systemic crisis. Working with a broad group of researchers, theorists, and activists, the Next System Project combines the best research, understanding and strategic thinking with on-the-ground organizing and development experience to promote visions, models, and pathways for a "next system" capable of delivering social, economic, and ecological outcomes superior to those of the failed systems of the past and present.