What If We Ran The Economy?

How Library Economies Work

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Imagine walking out of your local library with a tent, a telephoto lens for your camera, and the keys to an offroader. Or if camping isn't your style, what if you could check out a breadmaker, a fancy teapot, and a few lawn chairs to host some friends for tea time? Or maybe you're taking an extended trip to visit some family in a colder region and you could just borrow a winter jacket and a set of luggage?

This is the library economy in action. **The library economy** is a collectively organised system of several different commons which catalogues and provides access to a collection of goods and resources to all members of a society. It derives its namesake from the libraries we all know and love; venerable institutions that now act in many places to uphold the principles of inclusivity and accessibility and provide a space for learning and being for all. However, the library economy is not limited to the expectations and restrictions of present-day libraries. It is not simply a library with more than just books. It is not a single building or a straightforward lending system. It is the bridge to an entirely new world of human flourishing that merely begins with the familiar concept of the library. Since I first introduced it on the channel in 2022, I've been meaning to expand on what the library economy is, what may and may not be included, and what it might take to bring it to life.

To do so, we must first understand the basics.

The Library Economy Philosophy

The library economy is guided by three simple concepts that form its underlying philosophy:

1. a freedom, usufruct;

2. a responsibility, the irreducible minimum;

3. and an orientation, complementarity.

Usufruct refers to the freedom of individuals and groups in a society to access and use, but not destroy, common resources to supply their needs. This is tied to the first of the five laws of library science, conceived in 1931 by Indian librarian S. R. Ranganathan—that *books are for use*. In other words, things are meant to be used, not hoarded. So one type of library might be a furniture exchange network for people who love to update their homes with new looks. Furniture is for use. Or maybe a park is used as a modular space for picnics, sports events, music festivals, and art exhibitions; that can also fit into the library economy. Spaces are for use. These sorts of libraries can reduce both demand and waste by creating a sense of abundance without creating excess. And it goes without saying that such libraries would prioritise quality, durability, and ease of maintenance and repair.

The irreducible minimum is the responsibility of a society to guarantee provision of the means necessary to sustain life, the level of living that no one should ever fall below, regardless of the size of their individual contribution to the community. This includes access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare. Our actualisation relies upon this foundation. Everybody has to eat before anybody can get seconds, as the principle goes. We can also tie this to the second and third laws of library science—that *every person has their book* and *every book has its reader*. Applied more broadly, this means that we should strive to develop a broad collection

of stuff to serve the variety of needs and wants, no matter how niche, understanding that those sorts of accommodations are generative of an abundant life.

Complementarity is a way of seeing non-hierarchical differences within a society as something generative, where each person contributes a small part to an outcome greater than the sum of its parts. Complementarity is a recognition that no one person or group has a right to our collective force and each person is free to contribute in their own way to the whole. This social orientation turns our focus away from capital and competition toward humanity and co-operation. Regardless of a person's interests, skills, or abilities, we must all be free to labour and leisure; to find ways to solve our conflicts and meet our shared needs; and to co-create a thriving social ecology.

A World of Commons

The library economy is a network of commons, so we should adapt the key principles for organising successful commons that American economist Elenor Ostrom devised in her book *Governing the Commons* (1990). **The commons**, simply defined, is the land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community. They're based on a **common-pool resource**, or **CPR**, which is a natural or man-made resource system that benefits a group of people, but which provides diminished benefits to everyone if each person pursues their own self-interest.

We're led to believe that nearly every person on Earth is a vicious, selfish competitor out to get one over everyone else, but contrary to the famous *"tragedy of the commons"* thought experiment, millenia of real human existence and more recent studies of ongoing commons can thoroughly dismiss such a cynical fairytale for what it truly is: a bamboozling justification by the rich and powerful for their continuous theft and exploitation of what should be our common wealth. People who share a CPR are **mutually interdependent** and stand to benefit from organising to coordinate their activity, obtain higher shared benefits, and reduce shared harm. Current commons have persevered in spite of the State and the global capitalist status quo because they've figured out how to organise themselves in ways that work for them in the long term. We can do the same.

Across continents where commons have succeeded, Ostrom observed that they shared seven, and in some cases eight, key principles:

1. clear boundaries for both system and users;

2. social-ecological compatibility;

3. collective organisation;

4. a monitoring system;

5. a graduated sanctions system;

6. conflict resolution mechanisms;

7. the freedom to organise;

8. and, where applicable, nested federation across commons in a region or beyond.

In the context of the kind of world I'd like to help build, the organisation of the library economy will probably be undertaken by multiple overlapping freely-organised groups formed of varying interests who will have to come together in spaces of encounter to resolve their conflicts and develop norms surrounding the uses of the CPRs in question.

A **space of encounter**, by the way, is simply anywhere that respects the principle of free association, so that equal people of diverse interests are able to connect, coordinate, negotiate, and compromise with others of both common and conflicting concern. Community centres, cafes, parks, warehouses, streets, and, yes, even libraries, can all become spaces of encounter under the right conditions.

Not everything falls under the purview of the library economy. Library economies will need some clearly defined boundaries, so that everyone involved knows who and what is part of each specific CPR. This doesn't mean we bring country club Karen energy though. Even if some libraries of things might organise themselves through something akin to "membership" for ease of coordination, the freedom of usufruct must not be constrained. People visiting an area should be able to access their libraries once they're not jeopardising the sustainability of the system as a whole.

Where monitoring the CPR is concerned, I'm not talking about having snitches walking around with a notepad. Instead, this is where I think the concept of **consultative associations** provides benefit, as they are simply groups organised to gather and disseminate information so that interested and affected individuals and groups can easily access everything they need to make informed decisions. So a consultative association might organise around gathering feedback on accessibility or documenting energy use on a particular block or measuring the limits of the ecology or tracking the demand for certain tools compared to others.

And as for sanctions, naturally, I think people who return their books late should be hanged, drawn, and quartered. But seriously, I think we will end up developing a variety of disincentives for harmful behaviour that don't immediately default to punitive measures. Our responses need to be proportional to the level of harm—so there probably wouldn't be any disembowelment—as disproportionate reactions can lead to rather unproductive, needlessly escalating cycles of conflict. Ostrom herself recognised that simply banning people who abused the system didn't work very well. What does work is clear communication of expectations and an understanding of the social and material consequences that will inevitably arise if a person continues to act in a harmful manner.

Some people develop tendencies toward inconsiderate behaviour as children due their environments, so that may take time, or even generations, to work through. Some mental health issues may also contribute to a person's difficulty with putting themselves in another's shoes. Obviously no system or solution will universally and eternally solve every harm, and of course we may fall short of the "conflict resolution ideal," but I think that empathetically addressing the potential motivations behind harmful behaviour on a case-by-case basis can help to resolve a lot of the issues that may arise in the day-to-day organisation of the library economy. Also keep in mind that our current socioeconomic system incentivises the exploitation of others for one's personal gain. The work required to build library economies and undo that kind of conditioning is no less than revolutionary.

Libraries of Things

A few people have asked me for examples of what sorts of things can be included in the library economy. This isn't an exhaustive list of possibilities, but I can imagine raw resources, clothing, jewellery, furniture, decor, electronics, toys, sporting goods, luggage, camera accessories, camping gear, gardening tools, power tools, kitchen appliances, vehicles, venues, houses, and of course, books and other physical media, all being included in libraries of things. I understand that the sheer variety of options can be mind boggling. The library economy is a promising concept that requires a rather robust imagination to develop further. So I get that you might have some questions or concerns, which I'm gonna try to address. But first, we need to understand that there are many, many ways that the things in a library economy may be accessed and used.

When it comes down to **who** is using something, it isn't as simple as a single person borrowing a book. Sometimes use might be exclusive to one person for a period of time, like a bike, or it might be in shared use by a group of people, either simultaneously or on a rotational basis, like a stand mixer being shared amongst housemates. Something might be predominantly used by people of a particular vocation, like lumber, or people from a particular location, like a bakery oven in a particular apartment complex.

How things are being used in the library economy can generally be split into three categories: consumption, possession, and occupancy. A wedding party might possess tables, chairs, and other decorations while they occupy a garden as their venue and consume wildflowers from a nearby meadow for their decor. A person may occupy a home and consume energy and water while possessing a couch, a jacket, and an uncracked copy of Dune that they swear they're still reading.

And as for **when**, things might be used just once, like a tuxedo, or on a daily basis, like a pair of sneakers. Or they might be used weekly (rake), monthly (grill), situationally (sewing kit), or annually (pressure washer). Things might be free to use spontaneously or high demand might require reservation. Depending on how popular tennis is in your area, for example, you might have to book the court in advance or you might be able to just walk in.

Of course, the when of use is connected to the **how long** of use. Things might be borrowed from the library economy on a short-term basis or a long-term basis, like a car taken for a weekend getaway or a studio apartment used for an artist residency. Something might be used until the task it's needed for is completed, however long that takes, like a theatre being used to host an acting troupe. And some things might be technically considered part of the library economy, but are in actuality recognised and respected as being used by one person or group for their lifetime, like a home, a workshop, or a truck.

A Library of Concerns

Last time I spoke at length about the library economy, I was accused of being a proponent of the idea that "you'll own nothing and be happy!"

That phrase is used to criticise the software as a service model, the subscription model, and other forms of rent seeking behaviour that seem to deprive us of our ability to own the things we use. For those who haven't heard it before, the phrase was popularised by a semi-viral screengrab from a video by the World Economic Forum, which was referencing an essay by Danish politician Ida Auken. The essay is titled "Welcome to 2030. I own nothing, have no privacy, and life has

never been better." I suggest reading the very-short essay for yourself. The world described in it, which I'll call Aukenopia, includes free access to transportation, accommodation, food, and more. Everything is designed for durability, repairability and recyclability. Work is no longer the slog it once was. But there's also a complete lack of privacy or personal space. Everything is recorded and tracked. And much of labour is undertaken by robots and AI. The controllers of this world are conspicuously absent from the scene painted by the essay, but it is clear that the people themselves are not truly free.

Contrary to the now-popular conspiracy theory, "you'll own nothing and be happy" is not a stated goal for the future by either Ida Auken or the World Economic Forum. I know media literacy and reading comprehension went the way of the dinosaurs, but the beginning of the video so used as "evidence" for the conspiracy clearly states that it is making predictions, which were later clarified as being based on our current trajectory. Analysing trends and making predictions does not mean you support those outcomes. Believe it or not, you don't have to spread misinformation about the World Economic Forum to criticise them. There's no need to sleuth for secret conspiracies and underground cabals when they serve systems that openly exploit you, like capitalism and the state.

Anyway, I'm not gonna pretend I can't see any superficial similarities between the library economy as I describe it and Aukenopia's theoretical total service economy. The difference is that Aukenopia is heavily implied to be run by a centralised, totalitarian city state/corporation, which I obviously don't support, while the library economy is based on egalitarian, collectively organised commons. Rather than owning nothing, you could argue that in the library economy, people "own" everything. The Earth and everything on it is treated as the shared inheritance and shared trust that it truly is, created, cared for, and carried on from one generation to the next.

But you can relax, nobody is coming for your toothbrush or your underwear. You won't be "forced" to give everything you create to the library economy and you won't have to pay a monthly subscription to have a mattress, or anything. And **not everything is going to fall under the purview of the commons**. The library economy is just one part of the economy and one way of organising resources. It's focused primarily on the distribution of goods and resources, not their production, and it's modular enough to fit with other systems and arrangements developed according to the needs of people on the ground.

Which leads to another common concern: **how will the library economy relate to production?** For one, in some cases, we already have so much more than we need due to the excess produced by the capitalist economy. The issue is the distribution of the stuff that's already produced, which is where the library economy comes in. Unoccupied houses, for example, can be given to those in immediate need of homes. Of course, we will still need to produce things and the commons would be the source of all the raw resources required for production, so continuous negotiation between individuals and groups will be necessary to find the right equilibrium of usage without compromising the sustainability of each CPR.

Furthermore, how much is produced will depend, at least in part, on the data gathered on the use of goods within the library economy. So if certain goods are in high demand in the library economy, producers will likely try to increase their supply, within reason. Some goods can be produced so that each individual has their own, while others may be limited due to environmental considerations. Consumable goods, like food, drugs, and toiletries, should also have a place in the library economy, as we have a responsibility to meet the irreducible minimum of all. So some portion of the produce of farming collectives would be allocated to the library economy to ensure

folks are meeting their nutrition needs. The rest may be distributed by other means or through other economic arrangements as people see fit.

A fully-realised library economy would be built upon a society that, to borrow the words of John P. Clark, recognises that the goal of labour is the collective creation of a community in which beauty, joy, and freedom would be realised, rather than imposing unbearably long hours of unfulfilling work activity in the name of productivity. The labour necessary to satisfy the needs of society and produce abundance does not require such collective punishment.

What if people break or ruin stuff in the library economy? Either on purpose or by accident? What if they get blood on a dress or spill curry in the backseat of an SUV and leave it parked in the sun? That's another common and reasonable concern, but it goes back to case-by-case conflict resolution. Sometimes an item has reached its natural end and the person was unlucky enough to be the last one to use it. They shouldn't be penalised for that. Sometimes they just need to roll up their sleeves and clean or repair the object themselves. And if for whatever reason they're not able to do so, sometimes they can just make restitution by other means. The commons are a shared responsibility that requires shared effort to care for and maintain.

What if people don't bring stuff back on time, or at all? As we established earlier, there are many, many ways that the things in a library economy may be accessed and used. The who, how, when, and how long vary considerably. There are some items that can be kept for personal use over a very long term. But there are definitely things that need to be returned in a timely manner. So sending reminders can help, as can ensuring that people are able to return their stuff at any time of day. But again, case-by-case conflict resolution is a must if we want to resolve the core of the issue rather than simply the consequence.

What about late fees? Some public libraries have recently begun getting rid of late fees to "keep with the mission of libraries as community pillars that champion equitable access." You see, fines often serve as an obstacle to engaging with libraries for folks who may need them most and they're not even proven to incentivise patrons to return books on time. In fact, more books tend to be returned when fines are dropped. So if libraries of books are moving away from the late fee model, then perhaps libraries of things should do the same.

Yet another common concern is that **people will just exploit the system**. That it all sounds good and dandy but human nature will spoil it. In reality, though we've come to accept certain narratives about humanity, history and anthropology illustrate that we have a range of possibilities encoded in our biology. We can be hierarchical and we can be egalitarian. We can be cruel and we can be kind. We can be competitive and we can be cooperative. Our social conditions shape what "human nature" is, how it develops, and what aspects of it are made manifest.

We have the ability to think and learn for ourselves, we are social creatures that are provably capable of organising ourselves without hierarchy, and we can recognise and oppose injustice. Those three traits are all we need to resist hierarchy and create social arrangements that actively reshape our powers, drives, and consciousness toward egalitarian modes of organisation. It may not be easy to overcome hierarchical and oppressive conditioning, but that doesn't mean we have to fall back on the human nature argument, which simply serves as a mythology of social control weaponised to avoid confronting our preconceived notions and limit our recognition of other possibilities.

I think we should expect a degree of conflict as library economies are being established. This system is in some ways an entirely new project for humanity and in other ways a rebirth of more ancient ways of living. In any case, there's only so much that any of us can predict and prepare

for in advance. We'll still have to develop the knowledge of what works and doesn't through experience. We'll learn over time what practices work best, what practices definitely don't, what issues are recurring, and what solutions have been most effective. And if over time we've made enough progress that we've created a viable and independent alternative, then the values baked into that alternative will persist to defend that alternative. That's how egalitarian cultures have historically resisted the establishment of hierarchy within their societies—not through mere ignorance but through conscious, value-based, and ongoing opposition.

How To Start A Library Economy

So how can we get started? What will it take to start a library economy?

Firstly, we have to understand that establishing a library of things is just one component of a much broader social revolution. It is a means of prefiguring a new world in the shell of the old. But it cannot stand alone. It will require acts of confrontation and noncooperation with the world as it is currently. Otherwise, the library economy will simply atrophy into a whimpering charitable cause within the relentless body of the Planetary Work Machine. Libraries of things may begin with community land trusts, squatted housing and storage units, and rental negotiations with the powers that be, but those efforts will need to link up with and mutually reinforce broader social struggles for political and economic change if they want to reach their full potential.

But let's start small. Every situation is different, so I'll speak in broad strokes. Let's say you just wanted to start a tool library in your community, with plans for expansion into other categories of things in the future. If you can find others who share this affinity, you can work together as a group to source the labour, resources, and location you'll need to get started. You might need to pool funds to purchase tools or gather donations of tools, and you'll need to find somewhere accessible and convenient to base the library. That might be a community centre, a public library, a school, an apartment lobby, or a shed in someone's front yard. It's better to have your own dedicated space in the long term, funded by donations if not occupied by other means, but it may be necessary to negotiate the use of another space until then.

Depending on the boundaries of the tool library, it might be easily circulated among a tight-knit circle of neighbours or it might require a greater degree of organisation and inventory management scaled to membership. Ranganathan's fourth law of library science says that *we should try to save the time of the user*. Libraries require a lot of work to maintain, even more so if we intend to apply their concepts to broader society. Thus, it is vital that we develop systems, applications, workflows, guides, and frameworks that work for the people involved and allow us to most effectively coordinate the resources of the libraries and do more with less. None of this can work, however, without community buy-in. If you're looking for ideas on how to connect with your neighbourhood, picnics, block parties, sports days, or other events can serve as a space of encounter and catalyst for dialogue about the commons, cultivate trust within a community, and gather information about people's interests and concerns.

The fifth law of library science reminds us that *a library is a growing organism*. The aim of a library economy should never be to rigidly establish itself and continue as is. A library economy must be dynamic, ever-growing and evolving in both the quality of the collections held and in the quantity of those who are effectively served. I don't personally have experience in expanding tool libraries or networking between commons. This idea is still very fresh and subject to further

evolution. But hopefully, all the information I've shared will encourage further discussion and development. I believe we are capable of cultivating a library economy and I hope that they'll serve broader social struggles for a better world.

All power to all the people.

Peace.

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