

THE ECONOMY THAT KEEPS BECOMING · CHAPTER THIRTEEN

What Grows by Itself

Chapter Thirteen of The Economy That Keeps Becoming

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THE LICENCE

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

This book has followed one idea from a paper in a drawer at Stanford to a kitchen table. It is worth reading the whole of it once, from above, in the terms of the living-systems lens that Ammanuel Santa Anna's Ecstatic Economics develops, before putting it down. Complexity economics, in Brian Arthur's hands and those of the people who worked beside him, made a scientific case that an economy is not a machine settling into balance but a system that keeps forming itself. Its agents learn and adapt to a world their own choices are creating. Some of their interactions reinforce themselves and grow; others correct themselves and fade. History matters, because early accidents are remembered in the structure of who does what. Arrangements nobody would choose can hold for decades, and arrangements that once seemed fixed can dissolve within a few years when the loops beneath them change.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The whole, read once

This book has followed one idea from a paper in a drawer at Stanford to a kitchen table. It is worth reading the whole of it once, from above, in the terms of the living-systems lens that Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* develops, before putting it down.

Complexity economics, in Brian Arthur's hands and those of the people who worked beside him, made a scientific case that an economy is not a machine settling into balance but a system that keeps forming itself. Its agents learn and adapt to a world their own choices are creating. Some of their interactions reinforce themselves and grow; others correct themselves and fade. History matters, because early accidents are remembered in the structure of who does what. Arrangements nobody would choose can hold for decades, and arrangements that once seemed fixed can dissolve within a few years when the loops beneath them change.

The critics, fairly read, narrowed the claim. Inefficient lock-in is possible and probably less common than the stories suggest. Models of adaptive agents are promising and hard to validate. The theory predicts shapes rather than points. None of this weakens what remains; it makes it usable.

The living-systems reading added a question that the science, by its nature, leaves open: what each loop carries. A loop can circulate value, information and trust back to the people who act, or it can be severed, so that the people who act never feel what they cause. Santa Anna's book places its diagnosis there. An extractive economy, in its account, is not one designed by villains. It is one in which the loops have been lengthened, obscured or cut, so that the system keeps producing outcomes nobody would choose, because nothing in the loop tells it to stop. And it reads the alternative not as a plan to be imposed but as a set of practices that, once adopted by enough people in enough places, begin to reinforce themselves.

The two cases showed what this looks like at scale. In the Santa Clara Valley, loops that ran between firms rather than inside them carried information to the engineers who could use it, and a region reorganised itself after a shock that left its neighbour struggling. In the Toyota group, decades of ordinary practice in solving problems together became, in the week after a fire, the capacity to rebuild a production line without a central plan.

And the practice, from the field manual to the kitchen table, came down to a small number of habits. Map the loops before pulling the levers. Price every suspected lock-in before calling it one. Put the consequence in front of the person who acts. Probe small, with a prediction written first. Read the results honestly, the second reader first. Change two loops together when one is held by the other. Look for what is already growing, and feed it.

The house's reading

Santa Anna's book states its central principle near the start of its account of the economic traditions that preceded the market, and it is the right sentence to read the whole of this book against:

> *An economy that serves life must be grounded in the qualities of life itself — in flow rather than accumulation, in relationship rather than isolation, in sufficiency rather than craving, in reciprocity rather than extraction*[70]

Read with complexity economics, each pair in that sentence names a kind of loop. Flow rather than accumulation: value that circulates through a network rather than pooling in one node, as the Valley's knowledge circulated where Route 128's was held. Relationship rather than isolation: interaction among agents, which the representative-agent models of chapter 4 could not represent and which produces everything interesting an economy does. Sufficiency rather than craving: a balancing loop, which tells a system when enough is enough, and which an economy built only of reinforcing loops lacks. Reciprocity rather than extraction: a loop that returns something to the people who produced it, as the Toyota suppliers' help to one another returned in kind, and as arrangements that share gains with those who create them close a loop that most firms leave open.

The sentence is not a scientific finding, and this book has not treated it as one. It is a statement of what to look for. Complexity economics supplies the method of looking.



What remains uncertain

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What remains uncertain

A book that ends with certainty would contradict everything in it. Three things remain open, and a reader should carry them.

Whether the practices this book recommends will produce good outcomes in any particular organisation or household is not known in advance, and cannot be. The tools are reasoned from models, cases and the experience of practitioners, not tested in controlled trials of whole organisations. They are offered as ways of seeing more clearly and learning faster.

How far restored feedback improves the decisions of the people who receive it depends on whether those people can bear it, interpret it and act on it. Santa Anna's book is explicit that this capacity is developed over time, and the practice of chapter 8 builds it slowly.

And which patterns an economy should grow toward is a question complexity economics, on its own, does not answer. For that, the reader needs the company described in chapter 12: Elinor Ostrom's work on governing what is held in common, the ecological limits of the doughnut, the evidence on gainsharing and ownership (gainsharing, employee ownership), Karl Polanyi's account of markets embedded in society, the economics of gift and reciprocity, the case for patient capital, regenerative and circular economics, and the argument that scarcity is often a design choice. The parent book of all of them is *Ecstatic Economics*. Together they make a series, and the series is a network: each book is stronger for the others, and the loops between them are where the most interesting questions live. The house's pages at hautelumiere.life hold them together.



For a leader who would like company

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For a leader who would like company

The practice of this book can be run alone, and every tool in it is written out in full so that it can be. Some leaders prefer to run it with someone outside the organisation beside them: a second reader who has no stake in the map coming out one way or another, and who has seen the same loops in other firms. That is the work of the house's coaching and consulting practice, and for organisations where the map shows that the people who create a gain never see any of it, the conversation can extend to how that loop might be closed. The first conversation begins at hautelumiere.life.

One image

Go back, one last time, to the lawn.

It is early in the morning, before anyone has crossed it. The paved walks run round the edges at right angles, exactly where the planners put them. Across the middle runs the thin line of worn earth, from the library door to the corner of the street. Nobody laid it. Nobody voted for it. It was made by the first walker who cut across because it was shorter, and by everyone after who found the faint trace easier to follow than the open grass.

Now picture the person responsible for the lawn, standing at its edge with a coffee, looking at the line. She could fence it. She could let it widen until the grass is gone. Or she could do what this book has asked of every reader: see that the line is information, read what it tells her about where people actually go, ask what the path carries and whom it serves, and then, with care, and only where the grass has already been worn, lay the stone.

In every organisation and every household there are lines like this one. Most are invisible to the people who make them. They are the loops that grow by themselves. The work is to see them, to ask what they carry, and to tend the ones worth tending until they become the way everyone goes.

The Tool: The Desire-Line Walk

A single habit to carry when the other tools have been put away. Once a month, thirty minutes, alone.

1 · Walk the system Spend twenty minutes watching where people in your organisation or household actually go, rather than where the official path says they should: which conversations happen outside meetings, which workarounds everyone uses, which shortcuts have worn smooth.

2 · Write down three lines

A desire line (a path people take that nobody designed):

What it tells me about where the official path is wrong:

Whom it serves, and whom it leaves out:

3 · Choose one

Pave it (make the informal path official):

Leave it (watch another month):

Fence it (the line carries harm, and must be redirected, with a better path offered):

4 · The question to end on

What is growing by itself here that is worth tending?

A note on method

The desire-line image is used throughout this book as an illustration of path dependence; no particular campus is cited.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *Ecstatic Economics*. Luminous Prosperity, 2026. Chapter 2, "The Common Thread: Vitality as the Foundation of Genuine Prosperity". The bold is the author's.

What Grows by Itself

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