

THE SECOND BRIEF · CHAPTER ONE

The Second Brief

Chapter One of The Second Brief

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Chapter One of The Second Brief. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-second-brief (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989141).

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

Somewhere this week, in a meeting room with a whiteboard, a team is writing the word circular at the top of a plan. It may be a packaging change, a take-back scheme, a new supplier, a promise in an annual report. The word will be underlined. Somebody will draw two arrows bending back on themselves. And almost nobody in the room will be able to say, if asked, what condition anything is meant to be in at the end of it. This book is written for the person in that room who would like to be able to say. It is a business book about regenerative and circular economics, and it takes a narrow and practical view of a large subject. The large subject is the claim, now about sixty years old, that an economy can be organised to leave the systems it depends on in better condition than it found them: the soil, the water, the skills of a workforce, the trust of a town. The narrow view is what that claim asks of one organisation or one household, on an ordinary Monday, with the budget it already has.

CHAPTER ONE

The Second Brief

A sentence on a whiteboard

Somewhere this week, in a meeting room with a whiteboard, a team is writing the word *circular* at the top of a plan. It may be a packaging change, a take-back scheme, a new supplier, a promise in an annual report. The word will be underlined. Somebody will draw two arrows bending back on themselves. And almost nobody in the room will be able to say, if asked, what condition anything is meant to be in at the end of it.

This book is written for the person in that room who would like to be able to say.

It is a business book about regenerative and circular economics, and it takes a narrow and practical view of a large subject. The large subject is the claim, now about sixty years old, that an economy can be organised to leave the systems it depends on in better condition than it found them: the soil, the water, the skills of a workforce, the trust of a town. The narrow view is what that claim asks of one organisation or one household, on an ordinary Monday, with the budget it already has.

Ammanuel Santa Anna puts the difference between the two possible briefs in two sentences in *Ecstatic Economics*, the book this one is written beside:

> *Sustainability aims to do less damage. Regeneration aims to increase life.*[1]

Most organisations that have a plan of this kind are working to the first sentence. That is not a criticism. Doing less damage is necessary and difficult, and much of what this book recommends begins there. But the first brief has a ceiling, which is zero, and an organisation that reaches it has done nothing yet for the systems it draws on except stop harming them. The second brief has no ceiling. It asks for a surplus, and it asks the organisation to know, in terms someone outside could check, whether the surplus is real.

Why this, and why now

There are three reasons a leader might want a careful book on this subject now, and none of them depends on a forecast.

The first is that the vocabulary has outrun the practice. In 2017 a team of researchers counted one hundred and fourteen definitions of the circular economy in circulation.[2] *Regenerative* is on course to have more. A

word that loose is easily spent on a slogan, and an organisation that spends it that way pays twice: once in credibility, when someone asks what it meant, and again in attention, because the work the word promised was never scoped. Chapter 2 sets out where the ideas actually came from, and the answer is older and more specific than the vocabulary suggests.

The second is that the evidence has matured. For a long time the case for circular and regenerative practice rested on drawings and celebrated companies. It now also rests on measurement, and some of the measurement is sobering. A global study of material flows found that only about four of the sixty-two gigatonnes of material processed by the world economy in one year came round again.[3] Another line of research showed that closing a loop can, under ordinary market conditions, increase total production rather than reduce it.[4] A leader who knows these findings plans differently from one who does not, and chapter 3 sets them out fairly, each with a route through it.

The third is that the instruments are now simple enough to use. Nothing in this book requires new software, a certification or a consultant. The tools are a ledger with three columns, a map drawn on a large sheet of paper, a six-question test, an inventory of what leaves the building, and a ninety-day plan. Each was designed to be filled in by the people who do the work, in an afternoon or a month, and each produces something a board or a family can read. They are gathered, with a ninety-day sequence, in the workbook at the end of the book.

The question underneath

Behind the vocabulary sits a question simple enough to pin to a wall. Santa Anna puts it in his notes in *The Luminous Sauce*, a volume of the Developmental Canon, as the question regenerative design asks:

> *"How can this system give more than it takes? How can it restore and enhance the health of the whole?"*[6]

Chapter 2 returns to it as a test any project can be put through. The whole of this book can be read as an attempt to make that question answerable in practice: to say what *the whole* is for a given organisation, how its health can be described, and how a leader would know whether the system was giving more than it took.

The question also explains why this is a book about economics and not only about environmental management. A firm that gives more than it takes is not running a charity alongside its business. Santa Anna's book is plain that "you can't regenerate anything if you go bankrupt", and most of the tools in these pages carry a financial line beside their other columns. The claim is narrower and more demanding: that the way a business earns its living can itself be one of the ways the systems around it are kept healthy. Sometimes that is easy to arrange. Often it is not, and the book says so where it is not.

Who this book is for

It is written for four readers, and it tries to keep all four in mind on every page.

The person who runs something. A chief executive, a managing director, an owner of a business with six staff or six thousand. This reader needs to know what to do first, what it will cost, what to say to the board and how to tell, in a year, whether it worked. The field manual in chapter 8 and the chapter on measurement are written chiefly for this reader.

The person who carries the plan. A head of operations, a sustainability lead, a procurement manager, the person who will actually draw the map and run the test. This reader needs the finer points: which loop to prefer, where to draw the boundary, how to ask a supplier what the relationship returns to them, how to keep a change alive through a bad quarter. Most of the book's tools are built for this reader's hands.

The person who has to be persuaded. A board member, a union representative, a business partner, a sceptical finance director, a spouse. This reader is not hostile but has heard the word *regenerative* before and seen what it usually meant. Chapter 10 is written for the conversations with this reader, with scripts, and with the honest concessions that make those conversations go well.

The household. One person, or a family, deciding how to spend, mend, keep and pass on. Most of the material flows the researchers measured pass, sooner or later, through a home. Chapter 11 takes the whole book down to the scale of a kitchen table, and most chapters include a few lines on what their idea looks like there.

How the book is built

The first five chapters after this one were developed from a series of essays in *Ecstatic Economics*, the Haute Lumière lineage that reads money and markets as living systems. They have been revised for a book: the repetition removed, the sources re-checked, and each one still ending with a tool written out in full.

Chapter 2, *A Loop Older Than Its Name*, traces the idea from Kenneth Boulding's essay on a closed spaceship in 1966, through the engineers who named industrial ecology in 1989 and Walter Stahel's argument for repair, to John Fullerton's eight principles of regenerative capitalism in 2015. Its tool is the Three-Column Ledger.

Chapter 3, *Where the Loop Leaks*, is the fair critique: what the measurements say about how circular the world really is, why thermodynamics does not negotiate, how a loop can grow the pile, why "copy nature" is three claims dressed as one, and why the word *regenerative* needs an object. Its tool is the Leak and Rebound Test.

Chapter 4, *A Forest in Generative Surplus*, is the living-systems reading: a firm read as a metabolism rather than a conveyor belt, with five design principles drawn from nature turned into five questions a leader can answer. Its tool is the Metabolism Map.

Chapter 5, *The Café and the Compost*, works chapters 2, 3 and 4 through Kalundborg's industrial symbiosis and a composite café, labelled as one, with every figure's provenance stated. Its tool is the Waste-Is-Food Inventory.

Then the chapters written for this book. Chapter 6 is a deep case on Interface, the carpet maker whose founder set out in 1994 to make it restorative, read for its mechanism and with its figures traced to what the company itself reported. Chapter 7 returns to Kalundborg at length and sets beside it Patagonia's 2022 change of ownership: two cases, one about neighbours and one about owners, the two relationships on which a regenerative commitment most often survives or fails. Chapter 8 is the field manual, the whole implementation sequence written week by week, with roles and decisions, for a leader who wants to run it. Chapter 9 is about measurement: what to count, how to read it honestly, and how to tell a stock from a flow. Chapter 10 is about the hard conversations. Chapter 11 is the household. Chapter 12, *Life at the Edges*, joins the regenerative brief to the companion books on the doughnut, the commons, patient capital and gainsharing, and closes on the reading of the whole. Chapter 13 is the workbook.

What the book is not

It is not a manifesto. It does not argue that capitalism should end, and neither does the most careful source it relies on: Fullerton's paper says in plain words that regenerative capitalism "is not about ending capitalism, but evolving it".[5]

It is not a promise. No chapter claims that a regenerative organisation will outperform a conventional one, because the research to show that, with good controls, does not yet exist in a form this book would rely on. Where a case reports striking results, the book says whose account they are and what they cannot show. Where a figure is a teacher's illustration, as in the café, it says so in the same paragraph.

It is not investment advice, and it names no security, fund or return.

And it is not a set of permissions borrowed from nature. Santa Anna's own workbook warns that "the leap from 'nature does X' to 'therefore humans should do X' is not always straightforward",[7] and this book keeps that warning in view. Biology is used here as a source of questions: where does this output go next, how many ways can this fail, what does each party get back. It is never used as proof that a plan is right.

The one change in measure

If the book has a single argument, it is about measurement. An economy, a firm and a household are usually judged by what passes through them: revenue, units, spending, growth. Boulding's capsule was judged

by something else, the condition of the stock the crew kept. Santa Anna's book puts the blindness of the first measure in one sentence about accounting, that a forest has value only when it is cut down, and the chapters that follow keep returning to the same correction. Beside the question *what did we spend, or sell?*, put a second: *what is in better condition than it was, and how do we know?*

That second question is cheap to ask and hard to answer. It needs one stock chosen on purpose, described so that someone outside could check it, and watched over a long enough time to see it move. It needs the honesty to write *not measured* where that is true. And it needs the patience to let a change run for a season before deciding whether it worked. Most of this book is about how to do those three things inside an organisation that is also, every month, trying to pay its way.

How to read it

A leader in a hurry can read this chapter, the field manual in chapter 8 and the workbook, and begin. A person carrying the plan should read chapters 2 to 5 in order, because each tool builds on the one before. A reader who has to persuade a board should read chapters 3, 6, 9 and 10 before the meeting. A household can begin at chapter 11 and come back.

Every chapter ends with something to do. None of it needs capital. All of it needs attention, which is the scarcest resource an organisation has in a bad year, and which is why the tools are written into weeks and forms rather than left as good intentions.

Back in the meeting room, the word *circular* is still underlined at the top of the plan. The work of this book is to write one line beneath it: the name of the stock, and its condition today.

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