

MONEY OR LIFE: What makes us really rich

English translation of a book review by Jörg Parsieglä, published in Der Rabe Ralf, 8 August 2010, issue is on-line at: <http://tinyurl.com/28wg7wl> p. 26.

The somewhat sensational title Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen has chosen for her essay is misleading. This is neither a gentle guidebook for the stressed nor a manual for self-fulfilment.

No, the professor at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, Austria and director of the independent Institute for Theory and Practice of Subsistence in Bielefeld, Germany discusses a major issue for the future: What happens if the conversion of money into things we need for living no longer works because money has evaporated into thin air? Admittedly, this scenario seems exaggerated at first glance. On the other hand, considering the current systemic economic crisis - from economic stimulus packages to emergency bailouts - the question is not pulled out of thin air.

But Bennholdt-Thomsen's approach also works without crisis. In eight chapters and just under 100 pages, the author presents the subsistence theory, describing an existence aimed at producing the essentials, without having anything to do with the Stone Age.

Why is it that the subsistence principle is discredited with large sections of modern society and equated with poverty? Bennholdt-Thomsen finds answers in the theory of capitalism and presents five reasons why today's appreciation of subsistence is blocked, including the disregard for nature, colonialist exploitation and fear of scarcity.

She exposes the obsession with economic growth and the dictatorship of money, which allow LIFE only as a byproduct. Instead she presents the decommercialisation of heads and hearts – heavy fare for the reader, as she implies that more or less (almost?) all of us are accomplices, with our own self-interest in mind. At least it is comforting to know that if we are the problem, we can also be the solution: "The call to individuals and civil society to work for an ecological and socially just world, as voiced today by a broad range of movements, has its source in this view from below."

And then the author answers the questions that come automatically while reading this essay: How can we live today without money? Why shouldn't we shop in super markets? Specific answers – bartering, freeshops, regional currencies – may at first glance seem insufficient and utopian when considering global connections. However, Bennholdt-Thomsen believes these to be the first steps towards creating decommercialised zones that introduce new opportunities for participation by the socially disadvantaged, as well as the return of virtues like overcoming greed, appreciating crafts, and strengthening local and regional economic plans. She thus propagates a culture of giving, in which *Homo donans* replaces *Homo oeconomicus*, and subsistence replaces growth.

MONEY OR LIFE is part of oekom verlag's new series "thinking outside the box." In these slim booklets well-known authors offer daring ideas and new approaches to alternative ways of thinking and lifestyles. With this essay, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen offers food for thought, provoking impulses encouraging the first steps towards change. Suggestion for the interested reader: chew your way through, let it settle and start thinking!

Jörg Parsieglä

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen
GELD ODER LEBEN
Was uns wirklich reich macht
Reihe quergedacht
oekom verlag, München 2010
93 pages, 8.95 Euro
ISBN 978-3-86581-200-1

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