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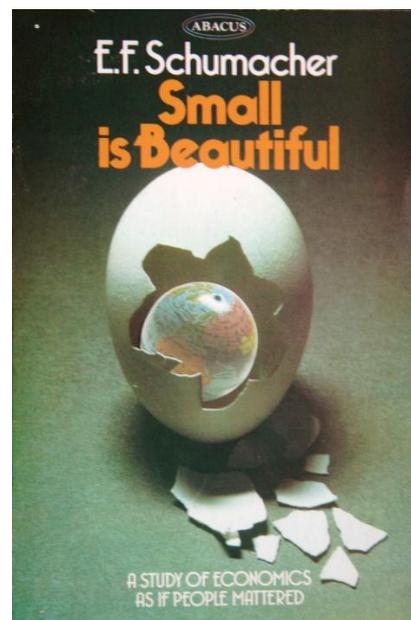
Book Review

Small Is Beautiful. A Study of Economics as if People Mattered

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Schumacher, E. F. *Small Is Beautiful. A Study of Economics as if People Mattered.* London: Blond & Briggs, 1973.

Small Is Beautiful is a collection of essays by British economist E. F. Schumacher. Hailed as an “eco-bible” by *Time* magazine, Schumacher’s well-researched statement on sustainability has become more relevant and popular with each year since its initial publication during the 1973 energy crisis.

A landmark statement against “bigger is better” industrialism, Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* draws attention to the fact that modernization has come at a price. It has depleted our resources and sucked the meaning out of our lives. He says: ‘One of

the most fateful errors of our age is the belief that "the problem of production" has been solved' To him, this belief is erroneous and has its roots in the philosophical, and religious, changes 'during the last three or four centuries in man's attitude to nature.'

To Schumacher, the 'modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it...' Man is under the illusion of having unlimited powers, a belief fostered by large scale scientific and technological achievements, by virtue of which he begins to believe that he has solved the problem of production. The illusion...is mainly due to our inability to recognize that the modern industrial system, with all its intellectual sophistication, consumes the very basis on which it has been erected.' Schumacher goes on to add, 'In the excitement over the unfolding of his scientific and technical powers, modern man has built a system of production that ravishes nature and a type of society that mutilates man.' This system is based on the philosophy of materialism, which has always been challenged by sages and teachers who pleaded for prioritising a different set of values such as justice, harmony, beauty and health. He argues that the western economic system legitimizes greed and values money above all else. He asserts that economists should value life, and not income and profit.

One of the recurring themes running through the book is how modern organizations have stripped work of satisfaction, making the worker no more than an anonymous cog in a huge machine. Craft skill is no longer important, nor is the quality of human relationships: human beings are expected to act as add-ons to the machines of the production line. The economic system is similarly dehumanizing, with decisions being made on the basis of profitability rather than human need. Schumacher advocates a people-centered economics because that would, in his view, enable environmental and human sustainability. Schumacher's book urges us to reflect upon the current unstable situation. *Small Is Beautiful* argues that we need to steer away from the belief that technology can solve all of our problems, and questions the dominance of profit-based economics.

To Schumacher, '*the civilised man has marched across the face of the earth and left a desert in his footprints*'. Civilised man was nearly always able to become master of his environment temporarily. His chief troubles came from his delusions that his temporary ownership was permanent. He thought of himself as "master of the world," while failing to understand fully the laws of nature. Man, whether civilised or savage, is a child of nature - he is not the master of nature. He must conform his actions to certain natural laws if he is to maintain his dominance over his environment. When he tries to circumvent the laws of nature, he usually destroys the natural environment that sustains him.

Talking about agriculture, Schumacher says that it is that one common occupation through which man and nature communicate the most. He asserts that the fundamental principle of agriculture is that it deals with life, that is to say, with living substances. Its products are the results of processes of life and its means of production is the living soil. A cubic centimetre of fertile soil contains millions of living organisms, the full exploration of which is far beyond the capacities of man. The fundamental principle of modern industry, on the other hand, is that it deals with man-designed, non-living materials. The idea of industry implies the elimination of living substances.

Man, the highest of his creatures, was given dominion, not the right to exploit, to ruin and exterminate. Talk about the dignity of himself is meaningless without first accepting the "*noblesse oblige*." Schumacher sheds light on the relation of man to mute creatures. There have been no sages or holy men in history who were cruel to animals or who looked upon them as nothing but utilities, and innumerable are the legends and stories which link sanctity as well as happiness with a loving kindness towards these beings.

It is interesting to note that modern man, in the name of science, is defined as nothing but a "naked ape" or even an accidental collocation of atoms; he is six feet of a particular molecular sequence of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and phosphorous atoms. As modern man thinks so 'humbly' of himself, he thinks even more 'humbly' of the animals which serve his needs: and treats them as they were machines.

Schumacher concludes by asserting that the '*reconciliation of man with the natural world is no longer merely desirable, it has become a necessity*'. Agriculture can never be treated as just another industry of production. The global corporatization of agriculture has had disastrous effects on farmers, food security and the environment. The solution to this exploitative industrial agriculture is the sustainable agriculture proposed by Schumacher.

Sustainable agriculture is one which depletes neither the people nor the land. There's no better way than relooking at our perceptions attached to agriculture, given the importance of the issue. 'And what is my case?' Schumacher asks, 'Simply that our most important task is to get off our present collision course. And who is there to tackle such a task? I think every one of us, whether old or young, powerful or powerless, rich or poor, influential or un-influential. Each of us can work to put our own inner house in order. All big things must have had similar small beginnings.' He adds, 'what is most needed today is a revision of the ends which these means are meant to serve. Everywhere people ask: "What can I actually do?" The answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: we can, each of us, work to put our own inner house in order. The guidance we need for this work cannot be found in science or technology, the value of which utterly depends on the ends they serve; but it can still be found in the traditional wisdom of mankind.'

The book is a must read for all as it offers a crucial message for the modern world's quest for economic growth, and technological and scientific development at severe human costs.

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