

2016 - Issue Two

# The Revolutionary Role of the Family

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**Joseph Pearce**, *Small is Still Beautiful: Economics as if Families Mattered* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006).

More than thirty years after *Small is Beautiful*, Joseph Pearce's *Small is Still Beautiful* is at once an introduction, a commentary and an update to E. F. Schumacher's work. While much has changed in the decades since Schumacher's classic, Pearce demonstrates that his message remains as relevant as ever. Helpfully, Pearce makes plentiful use of quotations from Schumacher, as well as his influences and those influenced by him. Pearce is noted for his literary biographies, and while this work is clearly not biographical in nature, he brings in key aspects of Schumacher's life: from his studies under John Maynard Keynes, to Gandhi and Buddhism, to the Catholic social doctrine that ultimately led to his conversion to Catholicism.

Pearce's book is divided into five parts. "At What Price Growth" focuses on the basic inconsistencies of contemporary economics and the drive toward continual growth. Then, in "Economics and the Soul" he explores the relationship between conventional economics, free trade, and globalism, through to materialism and consumerism. Next, in "Size Matters", he deals with alternatives to economies of scale. "Grounded in the Land" focuses on the relationship between economics, the environment, agriculture, and technology. Finally, "Living Legacy" looks at the practicalities of a human-scale economy, and what steps need to be taken to get there. A recurring theme in Pearce's book is that, while the contemporary drive toward "giantism" provides a surface appearance of prosperity for those who reap its benefits, it also nicks away at the virtues and cultural dispositions needed to undergird society itself.

Agriculture and the environment take on a special significance for Pearce, as areas where the giantist economy is especially taxing, and this runs throughout the book, not just the chapters specifically dedicated to these topics. Due to the endless drive for more efficient technology that has exploded since Schumacher's time, the environmental effects (and, in turn, the effects on rural parts of poorer countries) have become more pertinent to the economic discussion. This is probably most clear in Pearce's sharp criticism of the failure of the United States to ratify the Kyoto treaty, and the overall stance of the US as the largest consumer and polluter in the world. That Pearce continues Schumacher's criticism of the United States in the first part of his book makes this a tough read, even for a sympathetic American. For the reality of the situation is that we in the US are accustomed to reaping the material benefits of a global economy which favors giantism. But, as Pearce argues, reality is quickly becoming a facade: "Reality is being replaced by virtual reality. The real is being sacrificed to the sub-real. How can humanity address the urgent problems confronting the real world when it is

being simultaneously stimulated and stupefied by electronic fantasies?” (xvii).

When it comes to the environment and usage of land, Pearce echoes Schumacher’s threefold hierarchy, emphasizing health, beauty, and permanence: “[Agriculture] should keep us in touch with living nature, of which we are and remain a highly vulnerable part; it should provide expression for our creativity, enabling us to ennoble our wider habitat; and it should bring forth the foodstuffs and other materials needed for a becoming existence” (166). In Schumacher’s view, the first two goals should naturally lead to the third result. The problem with today’s approach to agriculture and technology is that it places significance only on the productive aspect, which causes both the environment and humanity to suffer. More and more people turn away from the land to move to the cities in order to find employment (while replacing the natural beauty they have lost with artificial leisure activities). Meanwhile the rich flee to the suburbs, or even further out into the country, leaving greater poverty behind them. Of course, compounding this human problem are the greater effects that this emphasis has on the land itself. Pearce discusses the harmful effects of the overuse of chemicals and antibiotics in farming, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and other technologies that are having significant impacts on both plant and animal life. Pearce uses the effects on farmland bird and butterfly populations as examples: now we might add the mysterious decline of bees as an even more troubling effect.

Pearce also points to some positive signs that have emerged in the decades since the publication of *Small is Beautiful*, particularly in the chapters dedicated to “small beer,” organic farming, and cooperatives. Indeed, the proliferation of micro-breweries—and now nano-breweries, and smaller producers of wine, cider, mead and pretty much any sort of alcohol—has grown at an even faster pace in the ten years since Pearce was writing: these have not only exploded in the Great Britain of Pearce and Schumacher’s focus, but also in the US. The same holds true for the organic farming movement. Pearce notes that, at its then-current pace, 30% of agricultural land in Europe would have been farmed organically by 2010 (205). While that plateau may not have been reached and there remains a long way to go where both business and government are concerned (issues such as labeling and regulation of GMOs come to mind), the demand for organic goods has also grown in the United States, with most major supermarkets now stocking organic lines.

One of the most curious things about *Small is Still Beautiful* is that Pearce’s subtitle is “Economics as if Families Mattered,” in homage to Schumacher’s “Economics as if People Mattered.” This is an interesting change because, apart from a brief discussion in the introduction, Pearce rarely mentions the family, and on a cursory reading there is no discernible reason why his emphases would amount to a more familial focus than Schumacher’s original work. I believe that the concluding chapters may shed some light on this. Pearce considers a key element to recovery from giantism to be an emphasis on philosophy. He writes that Schumacher criticized the modern study of science as “know-how” without the benefit of wisdom, leading us into the errors of economic Darwinism (enshrined in different ways in both Marxism and capitalism), relativism, and positivism—all ultimately variations on the sort of self-centeredness that has caused the problems discussed. Pearce’s concluding chapter is a discussion of the virtues needed to combat this selfish materialism.

The surest antidote to this selfishness and the best source for the needed wisdom to grow in these virtues surely lies with the family. If we assume that Pearce’s audience is of a more religious and traditional bent, which has nonetheless, for a variety of reasons, been duped into the mentality of

giantism, then the family may be precisely the avenue which will give us the courage to fight for these issues. There is a long list of issues for which traditional Christians are on the front lines in the name of human dignity and the family. As Pearce puts it, “Families teach us to be selfless and to sacrifice ourselves for others. It is these very virtues that are necessary for the practice of the economic and political virtues advocated in [Schumacher’s] work” (xvi). The centrality of the family thus seems crucial to the renewal of the movement in favor of the small and beautiful.

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