

HUMAN SCALE ECONOMICS

A Review by

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Since its inception, the pages of this magazine have been filled with thoughtful messages about such things as rediscovering self-reliance and old skills, revitalization of communities, co-operative enterprises, the reintegration of art and craft into our daily life. One is occasionally moved to ask *Why must all this basic, life-sustaining knowledge – 'conventional wisdom' in all traditional cultures – now suddenly be relearned? How did we lose it in the first place?*

One possible answer is the development over the past two hundred years in the West of something called *economics*.

Born as an effort by moral philosophers such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill to integrate fast-changing facts of the material world at the dawn of the Industrial Age into larger schemes of human meaning, something happened on the way to our present reality that profoundly changed the idea of *economics*. A once-promising discipline of inquiry which might have helped all of us improve the quality of our lives evolved into a tool kit of abstractions to be wielded by those who live by manipulation of others, people whose religion is material aggrandizement and the centralization of power. Followers of the ideas of Karl Marx have suggested that control of these concentrations of manipulative power should be shifted to different groups of people. Something very important has gotten lost in all this. More than one thing.

Lost in the frantic scrambling for short-term advantage is the sensibility that seeks to assure the well-being of future generations. Lost in the quest for ever-increasing personal wealth (whether by businessmen, clever doctors, lawyers and other *professionals*, or privileged members of labor unions), is the possibility of a balanced life. Lost in the meanness of all-pervasive competition is the special joy of tasks co-operatively addressed with results enjoyed by the community of creators. Lost in the rush to capitalize on fleeting public fancy is the kind of creativity that once built cathedrals, life-enhancing villages and towns, great religious traditions, interesting and noble occupations. And we didn't even know that we once possessed something called *mental health* until we were deprived of it and filled with countless stresses and *floating anxieties* by the economic structures we have allowed to evolve. In our adherence to the new religion of the *bottom line*, we have lost track of even the possibility of spiritual enrichment and deeply shared meaning, the primal foundation stones of any viable culture.



Most of us by now have read Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*. The phrase has caught on -- even become fashionable enough for the advertising agencies to find it useful in selling products. It is interesting that Schumacher's subtitle 'Economics as if People Mattered' has not shared this public popularity. Interesting also that his much more encompassing book, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, remains almost unknown.

The untimely death of Fritz Schumacher was one of the genuine tragedies of our day. But there are other equally eloquent voices being heard these days, telling us about a new kind of economics which underlies all our contemporary concerns: appropriate technology, co-operative self-reliance, conservation of all valued and needed things, work that enriches rather than diminishes us. Herman E. Daly has written brilliantly about the possibilities inherent in a 'steady-state economy,' Scott Burns has shown us the extraordinary value of the 'household economy,' Joan Gussow has illuminated for us 'the feeding web,' Warren Johnson instructs us in the process of 'muddling towards frugality,' and Tibor Scitovsky has explained exactly why ours is a 'joyless economy.' All of these highly clarifying maps of reality are worthy of our attention if we would seek a fuller understanding of the changes we are now creating.

Just as the glorious sun of massive corporate industrialism is fading slowly in the West, a new moon, a fresh, clear new vision, appears on the horizon. We call it 'human economy.'

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Suggested further reading: James Robertson, *The Sane Alternative*; Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*; Scott Burns, *The Household Economy*; Herman E. Daly, *Toward a Steady State Economy*, and *Steady State Economics*; Warren Johnson *Muddling Toward Frugality*; Joan Dye Gussow, *The Feeding Web*, Hazel Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures*; Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (spring 1980).