

# Meta-economics, scale and contemporary social theory: Re-reading E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*

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## Abstract

In this article, we argue that E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* offers important insights for contemporary social theory. In particular, we focus on the merits of his use of 'meta-economics' and of 'scale' as a means for advancing ecological social critique. While we are sympathetic to Schumacher's approach, we are mindful of the limitations to his theoretical imagination and commence our article acknowledging his partisan metaphysics and his insensitivity to global political dynamics. To resolve this, we demonstrate that the central critical insights Schumacher provides can be substantially extricated from these problems. Our task here, therefore, is a critical reconstruction of Schumacher's approach to social-ecological critique, which we claim offers the potential to shape contemporary social theory, both within and beyond critical political ecology.

## Keywords

Degrowth, ecological social theory, E. F. Schumacher, Meta-economics, metaphysics, scale

Reflecting on *Small is Beautiful*, on this, its 50th anniversary, it is clearly a book of an earlier era. As is often the case when returning to classic texts, the passing of time has a

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disclosing function; today we can identify clear limitations, which would have been less evident to the world in which it was published. For example, obvious to today's readers will be a blindness to feminist and decolonial insights. That said, we contend that a return to *Small is Beautiful* does not merely present us with a dusty-relic, of pure antiquarian interest. Rather, we argue that *Small is Beautiful* discloses limitations within today's social theory and, thus, has important insights to offer. This is not to suggest that Schumacher is some long-lost social theorist or that *Small is Beautiful* is a misunderstood social-theoretical treatise. It is immediately evident that the book is a collection of mismatched essays, neither social-theoretical in tone nor substance. Yet, the central concepts which inform ecological social thought are discussed impactfully in Schumacher's text; be it: 'the environment', 'the economy', 'nature' or 'technology'. As importantly, the means through which he conducts social critique, through 'meta-economic' analysis, and attention to 'scale', recalibrates how these terms of deployed. Schumacher's work has thus long informed how we understand these concepts, and we contend that *Small is Beautiful* continues to offers insights which can challenge the direction of contemporary social theory more broadly and ecological social thought in particular. As such, the challenge we turn to in this article is to extricate and sympathetically reconstruct Schumacher's social theoretical insights, primarily his meta-economic critique, while mindful of the limitations that the passing of time brings into sharper relief. Our central argument is that ecological social theory, and social theory more broadly, has much to learn from a return to *Small is Beautiful*; however, for Schumacher's primary insights to be of use, they require a balanced sympathetic-critical reconstruction. As such, our article is structured around a critical re-reading of *Small is Beautiful* followed by our reworking of its central interventions, which we bring into dialogue with contemporary social theory.

In the first section of the article, we turn to the principal limitations of Schumacher's work. We start by criticising the metaphysical anthropocentrism in *Small is Beautiful*, which we track to his explicitly Christian commitments. We contend this is ironic for a book that is famous for its 'Buddhist Economics'. We show that this partisan metaphysics is highly problematic and sits entirely at odds with recent insights within ecological thought. By turning to Bruno Latour (2004, 2018) and Jason Moore (2015, 2016, 2017), we explain how and why Schumacher's metaphysical anthropocentrism is pernicious and opposed to the fundamental aims of the left-ecological movement. We then turn to the methodological individualism present in *Small is Beautiful*, which reveals an absence of an analysis and explanation of global power structures. Notwithstanding the date of publication and the evident groundbreaking thought he presents in this text, we show that Schumacher remains an economist with an eye on the national level, and his commitment to 'small' is neither global nor emanating foremost from an ecological position but rather arises out of the practical limitations of the dominant development paradigm of the time.

Having outlined some important limitations to Schumacher's ecological commitments, in the second section of our article, we comment on the substantial merits of his work, most notably Schumacher's framing of meta-economics, which we identify as possessing substantial critical-explanatory potential. We additionally comment on the importance of his analysis of questions of appropriate scale of both technology and

public administration. Our engagement with both Schumacher's deployment of meta-economics and 'scale' serves to underscore the significance and contemporary relevance of Schumacher's approach to social critique.

In the final part of the article, we explicitly utilise *Small is Beautiful* to inform contemporary social theory by drawing on our foregoing critical re-reading of the text. Our argument is that a reworked understanding of meta-economics, shorn of its metaphysical anthropocentrism, can offer critical-explanatory purchase for today's social theory. We argue that meta-economics, when done well, can offer a vehicle for social critique which incorporates a metaphysical consideration of the natural world. We suggest that such a form of social criticism can attend to many of the questions of scale which Schumacher poses. We conclude arguing that a revitalised meta-economics, produced through a critical re-reading of *Small is Beautiful*, has much to offer contemporary ecological social theory and social thought more broadly. Before concluding, we demonstrate this claim by bringing a reworked meta-economics into dialogue with the literature on degrowth, showing how Schumacher's approach can foster dialogue across ecological theory.

## **Primary limitations: Partisan metaphysics and a limited global politics**

It is perhaps surprising that a primary limitation we identify with Schumacher's work stems not from innovations in feminist or decolonial theory, but from his philosophy, and in particular, from his metaphysics. Today, political ecologists are increasingly careful not to position themselves with any partisan metaphysical claims (see Latour, 2004, 2018). Therefore, it is noteworthy that Schumacher, famous for his 'Buddhist economics' and for advancing environmentalism, has not merely partisan, but proudly anthropocentric metaphysical commitments present throughout his social critique (Schumacher, 1974, pp. 76, 78–79, 96). We contend these values are rooted in his explicit investment in 'Christian social science' (see Duhs & Alvey, 1989, p. 67), which can, and must be, displaced by more coherent contemporary approaches.

This is not the only limitation we find when reading *Small is Beautiful* today. The text lacks a systematic critical appreciation of global power structures, which is essential to contemporary ecological scholarship (see Malm, 2016, 2017). While Schumacher acknowledges capitalist and colonial legacies, his political economy fails to overcome the 'North-South' divide, and despite his overtures to holism, he fails to erect an analysis that pays attention to the global dimensions of socio, political and economic analyses (Moore, 2016; Saurin, 1993; Siebert, 2021). While his insights are clearly prophetic on questions of sustainability (see Schumacher, 1974, p. 16), his economics remains national and does not build on the more holistic and global insights from the budding discipline of ecological economics (see Boulding, 1966; Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). While ecological economics does not necessarily pay attention to radical social change (Kovel, 2007, p. 174), Schumacher's Buddhist economics is in the end more focused on the social, but without attention to the global or the political. The 'small' in *Small is Beautiful*, then, remains community oriented, despite containing a kernel of a more radical vision, one that we will seek to reconstruct in the final section of this article.

### *A pernicious, unsubstantiated metaphysics*

Our concern here is not whether we should prioritise the needs of humanity over non-human nature, which represents an extensive and nuanced concern within contemporary social thought (see Malm, 2017, 2019). Rather, our discussion of Schumacher's metaphysics concerns the explicit *ontological* elevation of humanity. This is an argument which is explicitly presented by Schumacher throughout *Small is Beautiful* and reflects his deep commitment to a Christian metaphysics. Our critique here is not of some subtle remnant of a Christian tradition that can be located in the dark crevices of his argumentation. Rather, Schumacher is explicitly demanding a return to a 'hierarchical order' (1974, p. 79) where 'man' is acknowledged as 'the highest of... creatures' who was 'given dominion' over all else (Schumacher, 1974, pp. 78–79). The word 'man' appears 138 times in the short book, and 'human' 135 times, many of these are within exhortations to return to a metaphysical human exceptionalism (see Brindley, 1976, p. 773).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is Schumacher himself who is critical of the 'absence of metaphysical awareness' (1974, p. 76) of his age, which he connects to the domination of market imperatives over fundamental human needs and desires (see 1974, p. 74). As we discuss below, the equivalence-oriented reductive metaphysics of the market does require excoriating critique, and Schumacher's work can most definitely aid in this endeavour (see Schumacher, 1974, pp. 74, 83). However, this insight does not need to be accompanied by a return to a metaphysical anthropocentrism. There is, therefore, a necessity to carefully circumscribe Schumacher's argument. For example, in one famous passage, he argues that what is required is to 'regain the dignity of man', which can be a crucial foundation for a radical humanist critique of capitalism. Unfortunately, Schumacher continues that statement, '... to regain the dignity of man, who knows himself as higher than the animal' (1974, p. 96). This loss of knowledge of man's elevated status, for Schumacher, is intrinsically connected to the elevation of market logics over earlier Christian notions of stewardship. The problem, for Schumacher, is that 'we have recklessly and wilfully abandoned our great classical-Christian heritage' (1974, p. 82) which has induced a metaphysical amnesia.

Schumacher clearly adopts what Francis Fukuyama terms a 'bright red line' metaphysics (2002, p. 150), where there are humans on one side and the rest of the natural world on the other. This is clearly at odds with the 'progressive composition' of the collective advanced by contemporary ecological social theory, most notably by Bruno Latour (2004, p. 53).<sup>2</sup> Yet, Schumacher's metaphysical exceptionalism is not some aberration, it is indeed highly typical of much of the theology of the Judeo-Christian world (see Bauman, 2018). The problem with Schumacher's position, when viewed through the lens of contemporary ecological theory, is not a metaphysical blindness, but rather a partisanship which is both unjustifiable philosophically and pernicious sociopolitically. Schumacher's desired 'hierarchical order' with 'levels of being' (1974, p. 79) clearly requires interrogating and displacing.

It is worth briefly justifying why Schumacher's partisan metaphysics is so problematic. To do so, we consider the implications of his metaphysical anthropocentrism, of putting humanity above all else at some fundamental 'level of being' (1974, p. 79). We contend it is highly damaging for three reasons. First, such a foundation is simply

unstable: Why would anyone accept these metaphysical claims? Schumacher simply asserts them; these are statements made entirely on the basis of faith. No evidence is provided for his position. There is also a clear irony here: such claims to the metaphysical superiority of man sit entirely at odds with the heterogeneous Buddhist and Hindu metaphysical traditions (see Coward, 2003; Siderits, 2021) which he draws on extensively and with which he is principally associated. Second, and problematic for attempts to produce a collective investment for his critical social theory, his partisan claim is simply asserted as universally and self-evidently true, and no space is given for diverse voices or for alternative foundations. This is a problem for collective organising: having a Christian belief is one thing, and expecting this to be the obvious foundation from which others to base their beliefs is another issue entirely. For Latour (2004, p. 163), such approaches risk lowering theoretical conversation into battles about ‘ancient prejudices’.

But beyond these organisational and logical limits to Schumacher’s position, there is a third, deeper challenge to Schumacher’s position. Schumacher’s fundamental claim is that the rise of capitalism has led to a metaphysical blindness, which has led man to forget his special place in the world – as steward. An alternate possibility exists, which Schumacher does not consider which entirely challenges his desire to revert to a Christian metaphysics. The nineteenth-century (read: capitalist) metaphysics, which Schumacher beautifully describes as a view of the ‘world as a wasteland in which there is no meaning or purpose’, an ‘abyss of nothingness’ (1974, p. 74), developed out of the pre-existing Christian theology.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is possible that this was not merely a contingent and aberrant growth out of Judeo-Christian theology; rather, it is possible that the development of capitalism was nurtured by features of the Christian metaphysics Schumacher reveres. Capitalism and Christianity may have far more in common than Schumacher acknowledges (see Waters, 2016). Indeed, the classical Weberian approach to the rise of capitalism, which remains dominant in historical sociology today, famously connects the origins of capitalism with the rise of Protestantism (Weber, 2001 [1904]). As such, Schumacher may be nostalgic for a metaphysical horizon, which nurtured the capitalist ontological commitments he rightly finds so problematic.

Fortunately, Schumacher’s insightful social-theoretical infrastructure can be extricated from his unsubstantiated Christian metaphysics. In place of Schumacher’s hierarchical ‘order of being’, the more nuanced insights from contemporary critical ecologists can speak to this important area of scholarship. Unlike post-Habermasian critical theorists, who seek to present a metaphysically abstinent approach to understanding society, our concern with Schumacher is not his investment in metaphysics; rather we are keen to overcome the partisan and pernicious form his substantive metaphysics adopts. As contemporary ecological theorists have argued, the challenge is not to remove metaphysics from the equation, far from it. As Bruno Latour contends, what is required is a ‘kind of metaphysical minimum wage’ to enable a ‘progressive’ metaphysics for ‘the modern world’ (Latour, 2004, p. 53). Such an approach is shown to require a new conceptual vocabulary (see Latour, 2004, p. 64), reflecting the reality that over the past decades since Schumacher has been writing that ‘the demography of the [political] collective has exploded’ (Latour, 2004, p. 175). Jason Moore’s work helps us transcend the binary demarcation of human/non-human nature in the first place. If one removes this

fundamental binary, then questions of the relative metaphysical standing are meaningless. For Moore (2015), it makes more sense to think of humanity existing within and simultaneously creating what is understood as the natural world. The problem is the production of a 'cheap nature' by humans; and in particular for Moore, by capitalism (2016, 2017). As such, when we re-read Schumacher today, sensitive to the partisanship of his metaphysics, we need to be alert to the insights of Latour and Moore, warning us against a return to ancient metaphysical prejudices and false human/nature binaries.

We contend that Schumacher is entirely accurate to reflect that we are 'suffering from a metaphysical disease', and the resultant task at hand is partially one of 'metaphysical reconstruction' (1974, p. 83). As he so rightly comments: 'The leading ideas of the nineteenth century, which claimed to do away with metaphysics, are themselves a bad, vicious, life-destroying type of metaphysics' (1974, p. 74). As with many classical authors, when one returns to the minutiae of their texts after the passing of the years, the challenge is to unearth and run with the essential insights of their argumentation, while carefully displacing earlier prejudices with more pluralistic contemporary insights. In this regard, we contend that Schumacher's awareness of the metaphysical diseases of capitalism requires substantial refinement, so as to be rid of his unsubstantiated and pernicious Christian metaphysics.

### *Inattention to the global articulations of social power*

While Schumacher was consistently critical of the implicit assumptions of classical economics, his economics does not build on existing *ecological* economic insights, which were already in their infancy. Schumacher will have been familiar with ecological economists of his time, notably Boulding (1966) and Georgescu-Roegen (1971). Georgescu-Roegen established the link between economic growth and natural limits but receives no mention by Schumacher. Kenneth Boulding's exquisite essay 'The economics of the coming Spaceship Earth' is actually hinted at but without mention of the author or his radical orientation of a global ecological system (1974, p. 11). On the other hand, Schumacher acknowledges the work of Marx, though at a time before the retrospective greening of Marx had occurred (e.g. Benton, 1989; Foster, 1999, 2000; Harvey, 1996; O'Connor 1988). Marx, though, does retain a globalising analysis of power structures, which Schumacher eschews. In the end, despite its innovative and radical vision, Schumacher's Buddhist economics does not quite add up to either an ecological economics or an ecological political economy/political ecology.

Throughout the text, Schumacher hints at the violent, destructive and expansionist nature of the modern, capitalist industrial system. For example, he accuses the United States of extending 'its tentacles right around the global to secure its raw materials' (1974, p. 98). He is aware of the incredible inequality of access to and consumption of resources between the advanced economies and the less developed countries and that dominant liberal economic explanations advocate and demand rapid economic growth to close the gap, which he believes is a physical impossibility, both in terms of the limitations of energy and nature (1974, p. 98ff). Yet he eschews any theoretical explanation for why this might be. Despite his allusions to Marx as well as to dependency theorists (e.g. 1974, p. 162), he does not provide an explanation for how and why the global system came to be as it is. In this sense, he is

perhaps prefiguring a more post-modern position – eschewing any grand narrative that might explain the global system. His sympathy lies with the ‘poor man’ (sic) in the developing world, who cannot possibly catch up using the same methods as the rich man before him. ‘For the poverty of the poor makes it in any case impossible for them to successfully adopt our technology’ (1974, p. 128). He is also clear that catching up is ultimately not desirable, but that a new kind of human level, decentred organisation of production and intermediate technology is required (1974, p. 128ff), an insight which has spurred the ecological movement’s focus on community, localisation and social economy (Barry, 2012; Hines, 2003; Newell, 2012; Paterson, 2001).

For Schumacher, the causes of poverty lie not in materialist explanations, such as those of conventional economists, who stress a lack of economic growth. Instead, he poses that the root causes are immaterial: ‘they lie in certain deficiencies in education, organisation and discipline’ (1974, p. 140). Despite this, the text at times hints at a global structural analysis of power – for example: ‘Poor countries slip – or are pushed – into the adoption of production methods and consumption standards, which destroy the possibilities of self-reliance and self-help. The results are unintentional neo-colonialism and hopelessness for the poor’ (1974, p. 163). However, in the end, Schumacher moves away from a structural analysis of the causes of poverty, as well as avoiding a discussion of the agency of developing countries by advocating that the solution to development and poverty is to provide developing countries not with material aid, but with *intellectual* help – the aim is to ‘make men self-reliant and independent by the generous supply of appropriate intellectual gifts, gifts of relevant knowledge on the methods of self-help’ (1974, p. 165). This of course presumes that the rich North has this knowledge to give. There is a paternalistic tone to his pronouncements – the poor’s own methods are primitive, inefficient and ineffective and their needs simple (1974, p. 167) and the elites in the poor countries ‘need to be given strong guidance and inspiration to deal with the urgent problems of their societies’ (1974, p. 168). His conclusion for development is an enlightened transfer of knowledge organised preferably outside of the state and delivered through third sector actors, perhaps NGOs (1974, p. 169). Ironically, in this, he is already pre-empting the neoliberal turn in delivery of development.

His subsequent discussion of politics and political administration – Part IV of the book entitled ‘Organisation and Ownership’ is a fascinating proposal for decentralised, hybrid ownership arrangements with a heavy emphasis on common ownership and the radical notion of subsidiarity (we will return to this later on). However, this discussion is solely focused on the global north, that is, already developed countries. No link is made to the earlier discussions about development. The book then retains a split between ‘the third world’ (Part III) and the developed countries (Part IV). Both lack attention to global social power structures and the North South divide reified. The North is invited to reorganise according to scale. The South, because it is desperate and cannot afford new technology, must resort to intermediate solutions. The discussion of intermediate technology is not applied to the global north, and questions of agency and political organisation are not discussed in the context of the global south. This, we argue, stems from his lack of a global framework for analysing social power. In the end, he retains a methodological nationalism, a critique that can admittedly be laid at the feet of much modern social science (Beck, 2007).

There is no doubt that Schumacher was a radical, visionary thinker who proposed a reorganisation of society with a concern for people and planet that was in many ways pathbreaking. He was also an important metaphysical thinker, advocating the beginnings of a more ecologically minded and humane meta-economics. We noted though that this needed to be liberated from an overtly Christian and ultimately anthropocentric underpinning to retain its use for contemporary critical social and political thought. Similarly, we found that Schumacher's analysis lacked a concerted analysis of social power. The structure of his book remains disjointed, and he does not link the sections together as an integrative whole. In some ways, perhaps, Schumacher was a man of his time – much of the 'globalisation' of social and political thought had not yet occurred (e.g. Beck, 2000), and questions of critical global political economy were relatively severed from economics, being overshadowed by the realities of the Cold War and the example of real existing socialism. Disciplines that grapple with a more 'global' analysis – such as IR or development studies – have often neglected social and political thought and vice versa (Saurin, 1993). And yet, as we struggle today to come to terms with the impending global ecological and social crises, critical calls for global economic, political, ecological and social justice will do well to retain insights from *Small is Beautiful*, as we shall see below.

## Meta-economics and appropriateness of scale

While in the foregoing section we critically reappraised *Small is Beautiful* in light of contemporary political ecological thought, our primary concern in this article is to present the text as an important resource to bring into dialogue with contemporary social theory. As such, in this section, we draw out two insights within *Small is Beautiful* which offer valuable and much-needed contributions. These are a considered appreciation of the implicit values hidden within the economic systems of the day, his 'meta-economics', and an acknowledgement of the importance of 'scale' as a conceptual lens to assess social and economic life. Both of these insights invite a reworking of the conceptual arsenal deployed by contemporary social and political theorists to incorporate these concerns. In this third part of the article, we explicitly connect these insights, shorn of the problematic associations we have criticised above, to ongoing debates within contemporary ecological social theory, primarily to the literature surrounding *degrowth*.

### Meta-economics

A crucial intervention by Schumacher throughout *Small is Beautiful* was to advance, and to expand, the field of 'meta-economics'. At one level, this is a largely unfulfilled, speculative area of study, which focuses on 'the basic assumptions about the subject-matter, value orientation and methodology of economics' (Zsolnai, 2007; see also Schumacher, 1974, p. 38). As such, the proposed field invites interdisciplinary, theoretically grounded inquiry into the forces driving how and why resources are produced and distributed. At another reading, meta-economics exists as an abstract concept; a tool through which to critique the foundations of the social-economic horizon. As such, it offers a challenge to social theory to reconnect with key concerns of critical political



economy and to create a theoretical arsenal capable of exploring the imbrications of ingrained social norms and economic dynamics (see Crosser, 1974).

While Schumacher was not the first to advance the term (see Becchio, 2009), his engagement with it is by far the most well-known and most expansive (see Zsolnai, 2007). In Schumacher's introduction to the term he argues:

economics operates legitimately and usefully within a 'given' framework which lies altogether outside the economic calculus. We might say that economics does not stand on its own feet, or that it is a 'derived' body of thought – derived from meta-economics'. (1974, p. 38)

Meta-economics, therefore, invites an investigation of the embedded normative assumptions and ecological conditions upon which the exchange and production of resources is based (see also Polanyi, 1944). For Schumacher, it was to comprise a study of both human behaviour/norms and values, and a study of the environmental conditions/limits in which mankind lives. We contend that the abject failure of mainstream economics, both as subject and societal practice, shows the true importance of, and can be linked to the catastrophic lack of, meta-economic inquiry.

When re-reading *Small is Beautiful* today, it becomes clear that what the ecological movement is calling for is meta-economic revolution. The demand is for a reconsideration of the aims and objectives upon which economic activity is predicated. The questions 'Why do we prioritise growth at all costs? Why is environmental destruction not an economic consideration?' are fundamentally meta-economic in nature. In this regard, economics, if it reflexively acknowledges its foundations in meta-economics, has the potential to become a highly critical subject. The study of economics could entail an injunction to examine how resources can be optimally distributed under a variety of different normative orders, with an awareness to the ecology in which said resources are located.

This clearly has not happened. The failure to develop sustainable economic policy lies in part with the failure of economists to engage with their meta-economic foundations. Indeed, since the publication of *Small is Beautiful*, we have seen a retreat from what little reflexive meta-economic anchor existed within the subject. Over the last half-century, the field has become almost entirely colonised by neoclassical myths, which have produced a myopic and limited field (Harvey, 2010, p. 239). Contemporary economics degrees at most American Universities would be entirely adrift from all meta-economic consideration, with political economy often vastly secondary to quantitative analysis. Tellingly, as William Milberg (2019) notes, a popular US economics textbook, Mankiw's *Economics* (4th edn) [2017], has the word 'capitalism' in it just once in 837 pages. This indicates the dominance of neoclassical and, particularly, uncritical quantitative study, within the field today (see Harvey, 2010, pp. 235–239).

The myopia of the current carbon-capitalist economic paradigm would not have surprised Schumacher, who quotes Edward Coplestone's warning that the field would grow to usurp all other disciplines and reinforce a self-referential set of ideas (see Schumacher, 1974, p. 38). Meta-economics thus serves as a disruptive force in this territory, which, as Bridley (1976) argues, can challenge 'the basic presuppositions of present-day economic quantitative analysis'. While economics courses, and economic policies, are today based around identifying the most efficient means to achieve economic growth and expand private wealth,

Schumacher reminds us that such claims are built on limited, contingent meta-economic foundations. As such, Schumacher argues powerfully for economists to begin to demonstrate some humility and to denaturalise the foundations upon which the field is built (1974, p. 40). Economics is not the science many quantitative economists consider it to be; neoclassical axioms are not algebraic proofs of the human soul. Rather, there are qualitative and normative considerations permeating the discipline to its core; yet 'the great majority of economists are still pursuing the absurd ideal of making their "science" as scientific and precise as physics, as if there was no qualitative difference between mindless atoms and men' (1974, p. 40).

Yet, as Schumacher details, economics is anchored in meta-economics. Whether this is acknowledged, or studied, does not challenge economics' derivative status; the foundational assumptions upon which economics is built do not disappear. Today's neoliberal economic paradigm is predicated on a very clear set of normative assumptions, a particular, contingent form of rationality, and an explicitly extractive relationship to the environment, even if these are all structurally ignored by the subject's principal exponents. As such, a challenge of meta-economic study is first to abstract and articulate the meta-economics of the given social conjuncture. In this regard, it is self-evident that today's neoliberal economists consider the normative order of capitalism, as it is today, to be inviolable, natural and universal. The laws of the market are held as eternal truths. In this regard, Schumacher argues, we have 'become beclouded by an extraordinary, blind and unreasonable faith in a set of fantastic and life-destroying ideas inherited from the nineteenth century' (1974, p. 76). There is a particular view of human nature, which is inherent within capitalism which 'underlies present-day economic theory' (1974, p. 77). Schumacher argues that 'many economists are themselves unaware of the fact that such a view is implicit in their teaching and that nearly all their theories would have to change if that view changed' (1974, p. 77). Similarly, the environmental backdrop of the market is largely viewed by free-marketeers as an irrelevant 'externality'. For Schumacher, it is an inherent feature of modern economics to 'ignore man's dependence on the natural world' (1974, p. 39).

From this position, it is abundantly obvious that capitalism is predicated on poor meta-economic foundations. This stems in part from the arrogance of economists who are blind to their meta-economic choices. The failure to acknowledge their meta-economic foundations is most certainly part of the problem. As such, Schumacher argues, there is thus a duty upon economists to 'clarify' the fields' limitations' (1974, p. 38) and realise the foundations upon which it is based, which require critical scrutiny and constant reappraisal. In short, the demand is for economists to 'understand meta-economics' (1974, p. 38).

Crucially, the critical meta-economic study envisaged by Schumacher is not merely immanent. Rather, having abstracted the meta-economic order of the capitalist present, he invites a comparative study with alternative meta-economic foundations. It is here, within Chapter Four, that Schumacher's famous 'Buddhist economics' enters the discussion. 'Buddhist economics' serve to demonstrate the existence of societies where alternative socio-economic foundations are in place; where society is organised around different choices and around a different relationship between humanity and the environment. This exercise serves to both underscore the contingent and limited nature of the capitalist meta-economic foundation but also to demonstrate the existence of alternative, more sustainable models.

The Buddhist meta-economic foundations which Schumacher discusses contrast favourably on all counts compared to the meta-economics of carbon capitalism. Where the reductive equivalence-orientation of market logics reduces metaphysics to mythology, a Buddhist economics holds that there are ‘essential differences’ between things which ‘cannot be overlooked’ (1974, p. 34). As such, the market’s tendency to reduce all labour, all commodities, all resources to a comparative price, based on the belief that everything is at core ‘equivalent units’ (1974, p. 34) is incompatible at core with a Buddhist economics. This is a crucial divergence which underpins much of the further comparison and underscores the Buddhist economics’ valuation on environmental concerns. Schumacher places a real centrality on this point throughout the whole text, and it is here that his metaphysical inflection (circumscribed above) is so apposite. Ultimately, Schumacher’s turn to Buddhist economics helps remind us that ‘there are fundamental and vital differences between various categories of “goods” which cannot be disregarded without losing touch with “reality”’ (1974, p. 34). One simply cannot treat non-renewable goods in the same way as renewable goods or treat human labour time as a commodity of no fundamental base distinction to iron-fillings.

Perhaps, the most important juxtaposition between the divergent meta-economics is on growth. Within the capitalist meta-economic view, growth is always a good thing, and the contrary idea, that there ‘could be pathological growth, unhealthy growth, disruptive or destructive growth’ is considered ‘perverse’ and ‘must not be allowed to surface’ (1974, p. 40). Within capitalism, the objective is thus always ‘maximum consumption’ (1974, p. 40) to enable optimal growth, greater wealth, greater riches. This is highly problematic when these riches are developed out of the despoilation of non-renewable resources. Here, Schumacher turns (without citational acknowledgement) to the work of Boulding (1966) and Buckminster Fuller (1968) to the idea that we live on ‘spaceship earth’; that we are adrift with limited resources which require considered differentiation.<sup>4</sup> In comparison to the difference-blind maximal consumption underpinning capitalist economics, Schumacher advances the metaphysically conscious, ‘optimum consumption’ (1974, p. 42) of the Buddhist economic foundation.

The importance of Schumacher’s intervention is to underscore the contingent normative horizon and historical rationality that undergirds economic study. The limitations of the capitalist meta-economic base are exposed as destructive and unsustainable. In contrast, an extant alternative is presented as superior. From Schumacher’s exposition of meta-economics one is left, today as in 1973, convinced that the failures of mainstream economics stem from an inadequate underlying meta-economics (Zsolnai, 2007). The significance of meta-economic study as a complimentary concern for wider critical ecological thought cannot be understated. As we have discussed in the foregoing, we contend it has significant critical-explanatory purchase, but also, the application of critical comparative models, discloses the real existing alternatives, which are vastly superior.

### *Scale within global political ecology*

Notwithstanding the lack of a more globally oriented level of analysis outlined above, we maintain that Schumacher made an important contribution to thinking about questions of scale, notably discussions around appropriate scale of both technology and public

administration couched within his meta-economic frame and in some sense an immanent systems thinking (Parker, 2022). *Small is Beautiful*, as the title suggests, is concerned with the question of size, but more importantly scale. Schumacher is critical of the liberal economic assumptions of growth, bigger is better and economies of scale (1974, p. 53). Yet, he is not advocating the opposite – a reduction or shrinking of the economy, as some strands of ecological thought have subsequently done, for example, contraction and convergence (Meyer 2004). He is sensitive to difference and the need for ‘appropriate scale’ (1974, p. 54). These questions of size are discussed in the context of technology, arguing for a new direction in technological development ‘that leads it back to the real needs of man, and that also means: to the actual size of man. Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful. To go for giantism is to go for self-destruction’ (1974, p. 133). Inspired by Herber [Bookchin],<sup>5</sup> he extended these discussions about appropriate and thus ‘intermediate’ technology (1974, p. 128) with calls for decentralisation towards the human scale (see 1974, pp. 94–95), though he also acknowledges that large organisation is here to stay and so the task becomes ‘achieve smallness within large institutions’ (1974, p. 202).

Schumacher also introduces the principle of subsidiarity<sup>6</sup> to his questions of appropriate scale (1974, p. 203), not just in the context of a need for rethinking human scale and social organisation but also in the context of the wider ecology. The principle of subsidiarity is now well enshrined in the global green movement, helping us to think through the complex questions of scale and the relationship between the local and global. Last, but not least, Schumacher also addresses the question of ownership in this regard. He implores socialism’s emphasis on public ownership to not simply ‘out-capitalise the capitalists . . . but to evolve a more democratic and dignified system of industrial administration, a more humane employment of machinery, and a more intelligent utilisation of the fruits of human ingenuity and effort’ (1974, p. 218). He argues that private ownership of large-scale organisations is absurd and citing Tawney calls for a ‘decentralised ownership of public property’ (1974, p. 222).

While the polemical nature of *Small is Beautiful* does not do justice to all the debates and discourses he touches on, its interdisciplinarity was impressive. Schumacher was writing before the advent of neoliberalism, which now dominates most institutions, including at a global level. However, within ecological social and political thought, concepts such as localisation (see Hines, 2003) have grown up out of Schumacher’s early musings, and green movements globally have grappled with the question of scale, as we find, for example, in the famous green slogan ‘think globally, act locally’. Others have warned that the movement of localisation has accompanied the rise of neoliberalism and thus does not provide a radical alternative to capitalist organisation nor a road map out of actually existing capitalism (Albo, 2006).

Critical geographers and IR scholars of the past 30 years have developed what we might call a ‘global political ecology’ that pays attention to the global power structures while also sensitive to the diversity and difference of social and ecological justice claims and the importance of the specificity of place (e.g. Massey, 1991; Newell 2012; Saleh, 2009; Gillard, anonymised for peer review). Despite his at times paternalistic, Eurocentric approach to poverty and development, Schumacher’s sensitivity to local

knowledge and locally appropriate technology can be married to decolonial currents of thought (e.g. Gruffydd Jones, 2006).

While we have highlighted some weaknesses of Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, we have also wanted to retain elements of his timely oeuvre. In a sense, his weaknesses were also his strengths. Schumacher's meta-economics insists on introducing a moral dimension to economic reasoning that must ultimately underpin an ecological society. Likewise, his insistence on the importance of thinking through the complexity of scale was pioneering for his time and influenced a vast literature on ecological thought that has come since. At the same time, he retains a methodological individualism and his analysis could have gone further both politically and ecologically in terms of drawing together the diverse parts of the book into a more holistic analysis of the questions around how to analyse, explain and move beyond the crises he saw.

## **Lessons for social theory and political ecology**

Our critical re-reading of *Small is Beautiful* identified the merits of Schumacher's meta-economics and the importance of a theoretical infrastructure capable of probing 'scale' and 'appropriateness'. We contend these insights can be disaggregated from the more problematic features of his work, identified above, namely, his partisan metaphysics and his methodological-nationalist tendencies. In this final section of our article, we show the merits of returning Schumacher's critically reconstructed concepts to contemporary debates within both social theory and environmental politics.

### *Meta-economics and contemporary social theory*

Schumacher's meta-economics provides a clear counterpoint to recent intersubjective trends within social theory. In particular, we demonstrate that the questions which meta-economics poses require social theorists to return to political-economy, an area increasingly disconnected from social and political theory (Delanty and Harris, 2022). Indeed, recent developments with critical social theory, especially with Critical Theory, have served to naturalise the normative foundations of neoliberal economics (see Thompson, 2016). In contrast, Schumacher's meta-economics seeks to challenge the inevitable, inviolable priorities which are at the core of the capitalist order, demonstrating how they are contingent, historical and variable (Zsolnai, 2007). Furthermore, the invitation to question the meta-economic foundations of the social order can also be read as a challenge to return a metaphysical dimension to social theory. While we have previously criticised the partisan and anthropocentric metaphysics which Schumacher elided with his call for meta-economic investigations, this does not, in itself, invalidate the merits of thinking on an ontological plane. Meta-economics encourages social theorists to consider what values and assumptions are built into a neoliberal society where exchange-value and hyper-reification are so deeply embedded so as to become part of the pathological normalcy of the social (see Thompson, 2022, anonymised for peer review). As such, we argue that Schumacher's meta-economics presents as a timely counterpoint to many recent developments across critical social theory.

## Political economy

A fundamental contention of meta-economics is that there are choices and values built in to the economic system, which require denaturalising and critical consideration. Poor meta-economic choices are presented by Schumacher as being the fundamental pathology of the age. As such, the call to examine meta-economics demands that social theorists attend to the value-judgements which emanate from, and which simultaneously undergird, the economy. Such a call to meta-economic inquiry is an important counterweight to more recent trends within contemporary critical social theory which have both decentred political economy (Fraser and Honneth, 2001) and have simultaneously served to naturalise neoliberal norms and values, even within critical theory (see Harris, 2022; Thompson, 2016). In particular, it is the so-called ‘recognition turn’ across the humanities and social sciences which has recentred investigations away from the politico-economics and into the domain of status and intersubjectivity. This move, mirroring a shift from Marxian to Hegelian philosophy, has been impactful across the social sciences and is associated with the work of Charles Taylor (1992) and more recently Axel Honneth (1995).

Honneth’s impactful works such as *Struggle for Recognition* (1995) present a social theory with normative content which is predicated on the possibility of exploring the entirety of the social domain, including the economic realm, through a uniquely ‘recognition’ lens. This approach views all economic activity as epiphenomenal to underlying intersubjective dyadic relationships (Honneth, 1995). As such, in Honneth’s influential social theory, recognition is of primacy to all social action. In contrast, Schumacher’s meta-economics suggests that subjects exist within a meta-economic horizon, which shapes the values of social actors. As such, there are forms of economic-structural power which shape the cognitive and critical capacities of the social actor. Such a position holds that the market order is not merely derivative of intersubjective exchanges, but may possess, and be predicated upon, a distinctive normative order, and may emit constitutive power, shaping the subject. Schumacher leaves room for both the study of economics and the manifest workings of the economy to both be occurring within a power-strewn normative horizon which may reinforce pathological forms of social action. As such, Schumacher’s meta-economics can be held to provide a more sophisticated account of economic-structural power, providing a frame of reference which can help further interdisciplinary political-economic and social-theoretical dialogue.

Furthermore, where Schumacher’s call for meta-economic study is a clear invitation to explicitly question the norms and values undergirding the economic system, Honneth’s more recent work, namely, *Freedom’s Right* (2014) serves to reconstruct the normative order of neoliberal capitalism for the purposes of demonstrating its immanently emancipatory potential. As such, the foundational values enshrined within neoliberal capitalism are held, in Honneth’s social theory, to be conducive to emancipation and connected to teleological progress narratives (McNay, 2015). This serves both to implicitly normalise and naturalise the neoliberal horizon in ways problematic to both decolonial and post-structuralist (Allen, 2016), as well as earlier critical theoretical scholarship (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997 [1944]). In contrast, Schumacher’s meta-economics serves to denaturalise the norms of the neoliberal order, reminding us that meta-economic choices are socialised, contingent and variable. The economic order is

explicitly presented as a ‘derivative’ body of work; we are urged to look at the meta-economic choices upon which it is predicated.

## *Metaphysics*

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing, and increasingly strident, rejection of metaphysics across social theory. Jürgen Habermas’ (1992, 2017) work has been crucial in this regard. For Habermas, the reliance on unfalsifiable claims to a universal essence, or to some order of being, belonged to an earlier era of critical social theory. Habermas also warned of the political risks of investing too heavily in metaphysics, seeing links with Heidegger and German nationalism. In contrast, Habermas sought to produce a social theory with normative content built around the intersubjective interactions between subjects. This was to be developed by bringing together insights from symbolic interactionism, formal pragmatics, linguistics, and analytic and continental philosophy. Habermas’ rejection of metaphysics was explicitly detailed in his *Post-Metaphysical Thinking 1 and 2* (1990, 2017), since which an intersubjective post-metaphysical foundation for social theory has come to dominate.

This rejection of metaphysics, however, has been more recently challenged. For example, the work of Michael J. Thompson (2022) calls for the return of a critical social ontology. While Schumacher’s injunction to perform meta-economic analysis does not speak to such a critical social ontology perspective, it does contribute to this recent countermovement which calls for a return to a metaphysical imagination. For example, Schumacher’s distinction between different goods (renewable and non-renewable) invites us to consider the metaphysics of the capitalist economy. The fundamental equivalence orientation of the market is predicated on a metaphysics, and this is what meta-economics reminds us. The rejection of metaphysics of the past 30 years has not left us in a metaphysically abstinent society; rather, as Schumacher plainly states, we have instead been left with ‘a bad, vicious, life-destroying type of metaphysics’ (1974, p. 74) implicit in the facilitation of equivalence-oriented production and exchange.

One of the responses to meta-economic thought is to challenge the idea that different things can be exchanged. There may be beings which are not suitable for exchange, for profiteering, for mass production. Such claims are predicated upon metaphysical assumptions: what it is to be a human being, or to be a human liver, is something which should not be exchange for sterling or bitcoin. Meta-economics, by inviting questions as to the scope of the capitalist economic domain, invites a return to metaphysical consideration. What kinds of being should be considered suitable for economic transfer and exchange. As such, a meta-economic horizon could potentially be brought into dialogue with insights from critical social ontology to provide the foundations for an alternative approach to conceptualising a social metaphysics (see Tudge, 2021).

## *Schumacher in conversation with degrowth*

Schumacher’s practical and meta-economic considerations for questions of scale can be re-contextualised within a critical global political ecology and married with current important interventions around questions of degrowth. Since Schumacher, ecological

economists have continued to highlight the fundamental incommensurability of the globalising capitalist system with the complex and limited ecosystem (e.g. Martinez-Alier, 2002). Global political ecologists further reflect on the global political economy of ecological degradation (Kovel, 2007; Malm, 2017; Moore, 2015; Newell, 2012; anonymised for peer review). At the heart of these debates is the concept of unquestioned and unbridled growth and its physical impossibility on a finite planet. Interventions in these debates are heterogeneous and varied – ranging anything from green growth, green economy, Green New Deal and post-growth to degrowth. In all these debates, there is an appreciation that such transformation requires not just an economic tweak but that socio-political transformation is also required. However, the various interventions differ as to their positioning regarding capitalism with arguably only the latter explicitly taking an anti-capitalist stance (e.g. Hickel, 2020).

The concept of degrowth is now widely debated (e.g. D’Alisa et al, 2015; Kallis, Kerschner & Martinez-Alier, 2012; Latouche, 2009; Hickel, 2020). In essence, it draws on ecological economics in its concern for a reduction of energy use and economic throughput (rather than GDP) to rebalance the economy within the web of life. Crucially, it seeks in the process to reduce inequality and enhance well-being, demanding a transformation of the capitalist mode of production, consumption and reproduction (D’Alisa et al, 2015; Hickel, 2020). As Hickel (2020, p. 1107) states:

Growth is the ideology of capitalism, in the Gramscian sense. It is the core tenet of capitalism’s cultural hegemony. The word degrowth is powerful and effective because it identifies this trick, and rejects it. Degrowth calls for the reversal of the processes that lie behind growth: it calls for disaccumulation, decommodification, and decolonization.

Similarly, Neff (2009, p. 103) has argued that the rational necessity for degrowth should signal ‘a deconstruction of the economy and the transition towards a new rationality that can guide the construction of sustainability’ – in short a deconstruction of the rationality of modernity in thought, science, technology and institutions, a project very much in line with Schumacher’s quest for a new meta-economics.

In terms of size and scale, there is a demand for a scaling down and reduction of production and consumption. This is a global necessity but not a universal one. Sustainable economic expansion to meet human needs and alleviate poverty in the global South is still necessary. It is the bloated economies in the global North that require shrinking, while also paying attention to inequality across the globe – including in the global North – which requires redistribution (anonymised for peer review; Hickel, 2020). Excess consumption in the global North is structurally linked to extractivism and ecological destruction in the global South due to colonial and continued post-colonial power relations (Hickel, 2020). The requirement for global socio-ecological transformation thus needs to pay attention to difference of place and scale. A systems approach for the new economy is helpful for thinking through difference of place and scale (Blewitt, 2022; Parker, 2022). In addition, we can draw on Escobar’s suggestion of a pluriversal approach to overcome the North-South divide, by finding resonance between de-growth and post-development approaches, which both reject the one-world approach of modernity and argue for radical ecological and social justice (2015). There was a kernel of this



impetus in Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* which continues to demand attention and which continue to inspire the necessarily radical conversations we need to have if we are to transform the status quo.

## Conclusion

Our intention throughout this article was to demonstrate the timeliness of a return to *Small is Beautiful* for both social theory and for theoretically informed contributions to ongoing environmental debates. We have argued that Schumacher's work on meta-economics and on the 'appropriateness of scale' provides important insights which need to be centred within critical social theory. Going further, we suggested a receptivity to Schumacher's imagination that can work as a palliative to domesticating trends across critical social theory more broadly. While these social theoretical changes have offered insights, Schumacher's work reminds critical social theorists of the need to unravel the foundational implicit assumptions at the core of capitalist societies. In light of the existential environmental crises, there is an urgent need to interrogate the fundamental norms and values built into capitalist logics of production, distribution and exchange. The unpicking of these taken for granted norms requires a considered social theoretical arsenal, and a reconstructed metaphysically abstinent reworking of Schumacher's meta-economics enables us to commence such an investigation.

Throughout the article, however, we have been conscious to admit to the problems one is faced with when re-reading *Small is Beautiful*, half-century after its initial publication. Writing before the ascent of post-structuralism, third-wave feminism and decolonial theory, Schumacher's prose can seem, in turn, essentialising, developmentalist and unjustifiable, philosophically. We do not deny this. Indeed, we have been conscious to acknowledge the flaws which time has disclosed within *Small is Beautiful*. However, our approach has not been to jettison the text on the basis of its limitations, rather, we have sought to extricate the valuable substantive components of Schumacher's work to enable it to inform future social-theoretical investigations.

While Schumacher's work does not contain a catalogue of unreconstructed answers for us to lift, the concepts he provides enable us to consider some of the questions he first posed 50 years ago, which have only become more pressing with the passage of time. In particular, the meta-economic lexicon of *Small is Beautiful* enables us to ponder with greater specificity: what is the purpose of economic activity? Why is growth considered an unquestionable good? What assumptions are baked into a neoliberal order into which everything is reduced to equivalence-oriented commodity status? It is only by exposing and denaturalising the meta-economic values enshrined in neoliberal economic activity that we have any possibility of avoiding the fate outlined in Wallace-Wells' (2019) *The Uninhabitable Earth*.


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## Notes

1. Compare this to Latour's work on the importance of a non-partisan vocabulary which enables a 'minimal . . . non-polemical definition of an actor' (see Latour, 2004, p. 75).
2. It is worth reflecting that Latour's non-partisan metaphysics is presented by a scholar who is deeply religious; Latour was famously a practising Catholic. This demonstrates that Schumacher's faith does not present an insurmountable obstacle to presenting a more open metaphysics.
3. Schumacher (1974, p. 74) turns to Byron to underscore this point.
4. This harks back to the poems of Walt Whitman, especially 'Old Age Echoes' in *Leaves of Grass*, and Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879).
5. Murray Bookchin wrote *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962) under the pseudonym of Lewis Herber. *Our Synthetic Environment* outlines the danger of chemical and industrial society like Rachel Carson's (1962) groundbreaking *Silent Spring*. However, it predates publication of the latter by 6 months and includes a radical social critique. In that text, Bookchin is already working out his ideas around decentralisation, which Schumacher drew inspiration from (see 1974, p. 94). Bookchin would go on to pioneer a radical social ecology.
6. Here again Schumacher is citing without reference and he again betrays his underlying Catholicism. His definition of subsidiarity is from *Quadragesimo Anno*, para 79, *The Encyclical of Pope Pius VI on Reconstruction of the Social Order* of 1931.

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