



Reflections on ecological social theory marking 50 years of E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Lucy Ford** *Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK***Neal Harris***Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK*

Abstract

While not primarily a social theorist in the classical sense, E. F. Schumacher's interdisciplinary thought helped galvanise ecological social theory and the ecological movement more broadly. In this article, we introduce a special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* dedicated to engaging with E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* on its 50th anniversary. We provide both an overview of his life and work before locating *Small is Beautiful* within both its contemporary context and within today's social theoretical literature. As we show, Schumacher was a fierce critic of capitalist modernity and its 'gigantist' tendencies. As we discuss below, he advocated a metaphysical turn in economics, the implementation of intermediate technology and a reorientation of social practices in line with a more ecologically attuned political economy.

Keywords

Ecological social theory, E. F. Schumacher, gigantism, growth, meta-economics, political ecology, scarcity, *Small is Beautiful*

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Small is Beautiful is an odd book; juxtaposing philosophical treatise, development studies, religious mysticism, science and technology studies and economic theory. In its paradoxes and syncretism, it is reflective of its author (see Wood, 1984). E. F. Schumacher was a National Coal Board (NCB) officer who became a ‘pioneer of the green movement’;¹ a statistician who demanded a return to ontology, a ‘Christian social scientist’ enamoured with Buddhism;² an honoured guest speaker on Gandhi who accepted a Commander of the British Empire (CBE). Perhaps most curiously today, he was an environmentalist who preached a metaphysical anthropocentrism (contrast with Latour, 2004; Moore, 2015; Næss, 1973). As such, it is little wonder that, as we mark 50 years of this ‘remarkable little book’ (Cattermole, 2003, p. 73), ecological theorists continue to find it both an enigmatic resource, and an important foil, from which to theorise society. This special issue of *European Journal of Social Theory* is inspired by the 50th anniversary of this classic of ecological thought, which catalysed the contributors to reflect on both Schumacher’s intervention and on the state of contemporary social theory more broadly.

The issues Schumacher raises have only intensified with the passage of time. There can be no greater issue today than global heating; it poses an existential risk, the likes of which humanity has never encountered (Klein, 2014, 2019; Malm, 2017 *inter alia*). The dynamics driving climate change connect capitalism, neo-colonialism, scientific utopianism and modernity itself (see Beck, 1995; Bookchin, 1986; Chakrabarty, 2021; Latour 2004; Malm, 2016). Latest studies overwhelmingly agree that time is running out to implement substantial economic changes, before disastrous environmental consequences become inevitable (see IPCC 2021; also Harvey, 2021). We have already experienced ‘water wars’ because of global warming (Ahmed, 2015), as well as unprecedented fires (see van Oldenborgh et al., 2021) and hurricanes (Bhatia et al, 2022). While global heating is, and likely will, disproportionately harm the world’s poorest, those who are least to blame for its occurrence (see Chakrabarty, 2012, 2014), the impact of climatic change is already felt across the globe (IPCC, 2021). Increasingly, theorists and activist groups discuss the necessity for more extreme acts of civil disobedience, commensurate with the urgency for social change (Malm, 2020).

As such, it is remarkable that environmental issues remained peripheral to social theory for so long (Newby, 1997), even if they have grown in salience recently (see Malm, 2020; Shove 2010). Paraphrasing Bruno Latour (2004), the age of what passed for ‘political ecology’ must now be over, what must now finally begin, is political ecology. It is worth briefly reflecting on ‘social theory’ in this broader context. Schumacher was not primarily a social theorist, with Duhs and Alvey (1989, p. 74) arguing he occupies a special place as ‘philosopher/economist’. However, this does not mean his work is not rich with resources for social theory, as the contributions gathered in this special issue make clear. Indeed, the entire ecological movement has served to produce a rich array of concepts while challenging disciplinary conventions (see Latour, 2004). Ecological thought is interdisciplinary by necessity, combining scientific insights with political economy, philosophy, sociology, political theory and international relations theory (Hicks et al., 2010). Yet, any meaningful engagement with the social world through the prism of the social sciences necessitates the deployment of concepts, and as such, there is a social–theoretical core to such conversations, which requires continual refining and

critical clarification. Concepts such as ‘capitalism’, ‘technology’, ‘growth’, ‘economics’, ‘ecology’ and even ‘nature’ are never self-defining; as such, social–theoretical engagement retains a central role. This special issue focuses on how ecological thought retains this anchor in social theory, which is a fundamental prerequisite for impactful, critical scholarship. As the articles gathered here demonstrate, Schumacher’s work offers a remarkable springboard from which to commence such investigations.

Who was E. F. Schumacher?

Ernst Friedrich (‘Fritz’) Schumacher (1911–1977) is not a household name, yet his biography is as remarkable as his intellectual contributions.^{3,4} He was born in Bonn in 1911 and studied as a Rhodes scholar at New College, Oxford, where he read economics, taking after his economics professor father.⁵ Throughout his youth, Schumacher was an ardent atheist and read Nietzsche with great enthusiasm. He experienced a ‘short but meteoric academic career’; he was appointed an assistant lecturer at Columbia, NY, by the age of 23 (Schumacher, 2012, p. 9). To avoid living under the Nazis, he moved back to England; however, and as a German national, he was briefly interned. By the end of 1940, he was declaring himself a socialist and was engaging with a diversity of texts (see Leonard, 2019). In the evenings, he would continue his explorations in economic theory with fervour, with a paper of his finding its way into the hands of John Maynard Keynes.⁶

Through Keynes, Schumacher was introduced to the liberal statistician William Beveridge, and his work went on to inform the famous Beveridge Report, which foregrounded the social–democratic reforms of Atlee’s post-war Labour Government. While not officially credited, Schumacher also made significant contributions to the Marshall Plan (see Schumacher, 1997, p. 11). With time, Schumacher’s interests grew ever more eclectic, by 1950 he had written on topics including Egyptian currency, George Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way, and the Organic Food movement (see Leonard, 2019). His profile grew and he was employed by the British Control Commission, who were responsible for overseeing Germany’s reconstruction after the second world war. By 1950, he had taken up a position as chief statistician for the NCB in the United Kingdom, a substantial and demanding post.

His exposure to new ideas increased as his social circles widened; his brother-in-law was the theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg; and he enjoyed travelling across Asia and Africa, where he was at pains to understand and engage with the diverse socio-cultural systems he encountered. The most significant moment of his travels was arguably a three-month assignment as Economic Development Adviser to the government of Burma (now Myanmar), where he came to appreciate that the Western development model would have had catastrophic consequences for the country (see Schumacher, 1997, p. 13). In contrast to the technocratic capitalistic fate which a bureaucrat in Schumacher’s position would typically have viewed as ‘progress’ and ‘the future’, Schumacher took an interest in Buddhism and the local socio-cultural understandings of the good life. This interest in Buddhism, and ‘Buddhist economics’, became a centre-piece of his later writings, especially *Small is Beautiful*.

After his stumble into Buddhism, Schumacher began to reappraise his views on religion; this was in part an extension of his earlier engagement with Fritjof Schuon (see Schumacher, 1992, p. 12). By his middle age, the ardent secularism of his youth had

been replaced by a fascination with a range of theological positions, which inflected his ecological theory. He travelled extensively in India and came to admire the teachings of Gandhi and J. C. Kumarappa. He was particularly inspired by Gandhian theories of local development and the Hindu tradition of *ahimsa* (non-violence). Yet, curiously, Schumacher's travels through 'Eastern religion' ultimately led him to Christianity; he officially entered the Catholic church 6 years before his death. Indeed, *Small is Beautiful* is littered with references to 'our recklessly and wilfully abandoned . . . great Christian heritage' (Schumacher, 1973, p. 82). Yet, for the vast majority of his life, Schumacher enjoyed an eclectic theological inflection. His daughter writes that this 'outsider' status was both his gift and his 'sorrow', and it enabled an originality of thought, but at the cost of a certain rootlessness (Schumacher, 2012, p. 10).

Schumacher's interest in Gandhi is a source of contemporary intrigue. Delivering the Gandhi Memorial Lecture in Varanasi he proclaimed Gandhi to be the greatest 'peoples' economist' (see Leonard, 2019). Yet, Schumacher paid no attention to the work of more egalitarian and progressive thinkers, such as B. R. Ambedkar (a staunch rival to Gandhi), who challenged the graded inequality in the caste system upon which Hinduism is predicated (see Butler, 2013). Schumacher also made few references to the more radical traditions of South Asia, such as the Naxalite movement. Neither did he write at length on the statistical phenomena of Kerala and other Indian states which, through communist democracy, achieved remarkable development trajectories (see Alit & Sarma, 2021). Simply at a level of quantitative data, these would surely have been of interest to him as a statistician, yet this never featured in his work. There are thus aspects of a blinkered, orientalist view of the 'East', and of India in particular, in Schumacher's texts. This may have enabled him to overcome the remarkable cognitive dissonance of embracing a CBE and giving guest lectures on Gandhi in India.

While today Schumacher is primarily remembered as an author, he was never content with working solely at a theoretical level, as his daughter wrote: 'he wanted to see these ideals translated into practical actions and right livelihoods' (Schumacher, 1997, p. 9). He founded the Intermediate Technology Development Group in 1966 (now named Practical Action) and became a trustee of the Scott Bader Corporation, where his thoughts on appropriate technologies and economics of scale were converted into policy programmes for actual implementation. In his later life, Schumacher veered more towards Catholic mysticism and became well read in Thomism. He also came to view his ideas as having parallels with the distributism associated with Pope Leo XIII; an approach to economics critical of both free-market capitalism and socialism; instead advocating cooperatives and small enterprises.

This spiritual turn in later life possibly explains his social conservatism and his somewhat romanticised anti-modern approach that eschewed any serious analysis of power relations connected to class, race and gender. This is evident in *Small is Beautiful* (Pupavac 2010; Wood 1983). For example, in the Buddhist economic model Schumacher advocates very traditional gender roles. Clearly Schumacher did not value women pursuing employment outside of the home as a goal in itself (Schumacher 1973, p. 47). Likewise, his anti-materialist stance could be seen to be in tension with both northern (and global) working-class demands for increased living standards, as

well as calls from the global South for a New International Economic Order (Pupavac, 2010, p. 701).

The above discussion has shown the remarkable spread of ideas that fed into Schumacher's work. Both the contradictions and complementarities across this enigmatic cast of thinkers can be seen in *Small is Beautiful*, which remains by far Schumacher's best-known work. He did, however, also publish three further substantial texts, with *A Guide for the Perplexed* [1977] being the next most significant. Indeed, Schumacher viewed this as far superior to *Small is Beautiful*, apparently handing it to his daughter on his deathbed, stating 'this is what my work has been leading to' (Pearce, 2008, p. 25). *A Guide to the Perplexed* presents Schumacher's critique of the 'materialist scientificism', which he saw as the foundation for errors of both socialist and capitalist programmes. In this regard, it can be viewed as equivalent, in part, to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1944/1947]), in that it provides a critique of modernity based on its limited epistemological foundations. Like Horkheimer and Adorno's masterpiece, this text is also full of allusions, unreferenced and often hyperbolic assertions and is non-standard in presentation. Schumacher's other key texts include a selection of disparate essays, *This I Believe* [1977], and *Good Work* [1980], published 2 years after his death, which offered a wide-ranging critique of unsatisfying labour brought about due to adherence to technological mandates.

The context of *Small is Beautiful*

Of course, Schumacher was not the first contrarian to write with passion about the environment, and there are echoes of the many of who preceded him throughout *Small is Beautiful*. Perhaps, the earliest coherent body of work to challenge the emerging relationship between 'man' and 'nature' in modernity was the American tradition of transcendentalism (Bowman, 2018).⁷ Emerson's metaphysical appreciation of the natural world, as containing something beyond mere matter, was shared by Thoreau's transcendental pastoralism, as per his famous *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* [1854] (Meeham, 2013). This anarchist–naturalist–metaphysics filtered through to subsequent American classics, such as Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (2015) [1855]. These themes recurred in twentieth-century American environmental texts,⁸ such as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1966 [1949]), and to a lesser extent, in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Schumacher himself makes repeated allusion to the work of Kenneth Boulding, whose 'The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth' (1966) is repeatedly hinted at, without direct attribution.

Likewise, there was a significant European engagement with ecological themes, across disciplines. A substantial influence came from the vast romantic movement, linking works such as Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1992 [1782]), William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) and William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (2003 [1890]). Yet, such European interest in ecology was not merely romantically inflected. Karl Marx wrote on the fundamental incompatibility of capitalist logics and environmental sustainability, what he theorised as the 'metabolic rift' (see *Capital Vol. 3*) (Marx, 1992 [1867]). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Ukrainian socialist, Serhiy Podolynsky, sought to unite Marxian insights with the second

law of thermodynamics, in his remarkable, and largely forgotten ‘Socialism and the Unity of Physical Forces’ (2016 [1881]). Closer European contemporaries to Schumacher can be found within the work of the Frankfurt School, in texts such *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1944/1947]), and the deep ecology movement, with Arne Næss’ landmark paper, ‘The shallow and the deep’ (1973), published the same year as *Small is Beautiful*.

Perhaps, the most significant work in the immediate background to *Small is Beautiful* was not metaphysical, or indeed, philosophical, in nature, but rigorously and innovatively quantitative: the Club of Rome’s signal report, *The Limits to Growth (LTG)* (Meadows et al., 1972). The LTG report came out 1 year before *Small is Beautiful* and would undoubtedly have set the scene for the impact of Schumacher’s work. The report was trailblazing in both its methodology and its concerns; drawing on the innovative computer modelling of Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist, Jay Forrester. A simple truth was presented by the co-authors: infinite consumption of limited resources is not sustainable. The stark warning of this report combined with the October 1973 oil crisis to underscore the global North’s dependency on non-renewable fossil fuels.

The book itself

It was in such a context of growing ecological awareness, and a tradition of metaphysically inflected texts on nature, that *Small is Beautiful* was published. The book itself is divided into four parts of roughly equal length. Of these, parts 1 and 2 are by far the most well known. In part 1, ‘The Modern World’, Schumacher outlines the limitations of the current meta-economic foundation and differentiates between capitalist ‘gigantism’ and a ‘Buddhist Economics’. In these chapters, metaphysics plays a central role, with the faulty equivalence-based-order of the market rightly castigated for failing to appreciate the fundamental differences of the natural world. Schumacher reminds us that some things are renewable, others not; yet, the market is blind to this, unerringly crushing the entire world into logics of exchange predicated on false equivalence. Schumacher shows this to be not just in error, but deeply pathological. In contrast to the dominant growth-obsessed system, blind to metaphysical difference, Schumacher seeks to reinject humanity into the conversation. The aim is not simply economic growth; rather it should be human happiness. The ultimate societal and global good is not ‘growth’, but ‘wellbeing’ and sustainability. As such, the good society is one where optimal happiness is attained through minimal consumption. This, in essence, is the basis of Schumacher’s proposed Buddhist economics, which is contrasted favourably to capitalist norms.

Part 2, ‘Resources’, contains essays on the role of technology and includes a discussion of the ‘appropriateness’ of technologies. The section also challenges a fundamental myth of capitalist economics: its purported efficiency. In reality, as Schumacher argues, capitalism is unimaginably inefficient; its suboptimal allocation of resources is at such ‘a degree that . . . [it] surpasses one’s ordinary powers of imagination’ (1973, p. 97). This part of the book includes discussions on the fundamental dangers of nuclear power, the importance of education and the dangers of relying on oil, in light of the probability for cartels to form. While one can sense the prescience of Schumacher’s prose (beyond global heating, think also of Chernobyl, Zaporizhzhia, OPEC, Putin’s

recent gas price increases), there is a clear sense from this section of the book, that it is indeed, as Toye (2012, p. 387) suggests, a hodgepodge of rehashed lecture notes ‘loosely pulled together’. The insights offered are remarkably prescient, yet not always smoothly flowing. Equally, while Schumacher’s core concern at the time of writing *Small is Beautiful* was around resource scarcity, today it is the alarming reserves of fossil fuel that pose the core crux of the problem of sustainability.

Part 3 of the book, ‘The Third World’, is by far the least engaged with and has arguably aged less well. The discussion on the development prospects for India, in particular, may be read with a certain queasiness by critical development scholars today. Indeed, these concerns were registered as problematic by some development scholars at the time (see Pearson, 1975). In part 4 of the book, ‘Organisation and Ownership’, Schumacher emphasises questions of scale and size and in particular further developed notions of subsidiarity, decentralisation and localisation, which have since become hallmarks of green political thought (Newell, 2020).

While *Small is Beautiful* engages with a wide range of topics, typically the key concerns taken from the text are the need for a return to a differentiated metaphysics and a rejection of the implicit and pernicious positivism and false equivalences of the capitalist market order. This is to be achieved through a reappraisal of the meta-economic foundations of capitalism, which are shown to be defective. In place of the metaphysically blind capitalist meta-economics, Schumacher presents a new Buddhist economics. This can enable peaceable and sustainable stewardship of our shared home. From these foundations, one can read Schumacher’s insistence on technological appropriateness and the importance of intermediate technologies and economies of scale.

The next 50 years

The 1970s saw a rapid increase in interest in ecology, with Schumacher’s work being one of several likely catalysts for its subsequent uptake in study. This occurred across the arts and social sciences, with Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island* winning the Pulitzer prize for poetry in 1975 (Snyder 1974). The emerging field of ecological economics, while predating *Small is Beautiful*, certainly blossomed in the aftermath of Schumacher’s text. The critique of the meta-economic foundations of neo-classical economics, and the richer lineaments of an ecological economics, can be traced in the work of Hermann Daly (1992 [1977]), Joan Martinez Allier (1987) and Robert Costanza (1991). The flourishing field of ecological economics continues to engage with provocations placed by Schumacher, although the field’s own protagonists underscore the extent to which its insights are ignored and negated by economic orthodoxy (see Spash, 2012; Wight, 2015; Washington and Mahoney, 2020). Similar reconsiderations of the meta-economic foundations of the economic system can be found in alternative traditions, such as the *Buen Vivir*, degrowth and Ecological *Swaraj* movements (Kothari et al., 2014). However, ultimately, these movements, as much as ecological economics, remain problematically introspective and depressingly impotent in the face of the juggernaut of neoclassical economics.

Within sociology, Fred Hirsch’s *The Social Limits to Growth* (1976) offered an important complementary analysis to Schumacher’s, suggesting that many of the complications of growth-centric societies were social, rather than environmental and/or

economic. The market for 'positional goods' triggered feverish social dynamics, which served little societal good. The work of André Gorz (1980) also developed the conversation of political ecology throughout the 1980s, with *Ecology as Politics* reframing the merits of work and challenging the dogmas of neoclassical economics in a manner similar to Schumacher. Likewise, the American sociologist, William Catton, especially in *Overshoot* (1980), offered a reformulation of sociology, with ecological considerations taking a new centrality. Yet, Schumacher's legacy upon contemporary ecological social theory is ambiguous. His text remains undeniably a classic of the ecological movement and is known beyond the confines of ecology: it was placed in the *Times Literary Supplement's* 100 most influential books published since World War II. However, many of its central themes have been displaced and overtaken by more recent conversations within ecological social and political theory.

Ecological social theory today deploys a radically new conceptual arsenal to that of the 1970s. This is both deliberate strategy on the part of some social theorists to purge problematically partisan terminology (Latour, 2004) and part contingent upon the new debates and insights that have emerged. These debates have been furthered by increasing awareness of the social construction of nature as a category (Eder, 1996; Latour, 2004, 2018; Moore, 2015). One theoretically rich debate, which has emerged post-1973, surrounds how best to conceptualise the impact humanity has had on the environment; an impact which is now recorded in the geological and ocean-systems data (see Moore, 2017). While it is increasingly agreed amongst ecological theorists that the 'Holocene' epoch has come to end with humanity leaving an indelible footprint on the planet, the optimal conceptualisation for the new era is a source of much debate (see Delanty & Mota, 2017; Moore, 2016). The term 'Anthropocene' re-entered popular discourse through the work of Eugene Stoermer; and there are many who prefer this term to describe the impact humanity has had on the planet (see Moore, 2016). Yet, for others, such as Jason Moore (2017), this term fails to capture the true culprit: capitalism. Climate change is not a result of all people, across time and space, equally. Rather, it is disproportionately a result of the industrial development of modern capitalism and is predominantly caused by the richest people in the richest capitalist countries. It is the pathological logics of capitalism, a contingent and liminal social formation, which has impacted the environment. As such, an alternate term, 'capitalocene', is preferred by many ecological theorists. Others, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021), problematise conflating geological and human time scales. The earth long predates humanity. The plants and trees will grow back, even if humanity goes extinct. To think within planetary scales therefore may require an entirely different conceptual lexicon; perhaps one which humans are incapable of, at least at the present time. In this regard, decolonial approaches to ecological social theory highlight the value of indigenous cosmologies in (re-) thinking the relationship between people and planet in an attempt to find alternative conceptualisations outside of the hegemonic modern lexicon (Jimenez et al., 2022; Todd, 2017).

A second substantive development in the literature in recent years is a heated discussion on optimal future steps to transition to a more sustainable future. While Schumacher advocated for a peaceful transition to an ecologically aligned, non-capitalistic, meta-economics, neither 'peaceful' nor 'non-capitalist' can today be taken

for granted. In part, the contestation in the literature on how best to theorise and how best to action decarbonising transition stems from the increasing sense of urgency. As Klein (2014, 2019) and Malm (2020) make clear, something must be done, and done yesterday. The horrors of a future where action has failed are bleak, as Wallace-Wells' (2019) *The Uninhabitable Earth* makes clear. In such a crisis, moment praxis is demanded and sacrifices on other principles start to enter the conversation. For Paterson and Newell (2006), capitalism may need to be utilised to enable decarbonisation. This could be through the form of a carbon-credit system. By deploying market imperatives, and the profit motive, a minimal societal transition could be made, to enable the speedy uptake of a greener future. Yet, such 'carbon capitalist' approaches have been roundly rejected by many on the ecological left, with Larry Lohman (2012) rightly challenging the foundational basis on which Newell and Paterson's claims are made: there is no evidence that a carbon credit system would reduce emissions, and it would simply lead to a bureaucratic mountain. A recent, and possibly even more controversial, change in the wider literature since Schumacher sits in terms of the merits of continuing to adopt a non-violent form of protest. For Malm (2021), the fetishisation of Gandhian non-violence has failed to achieve results; what is required now is a form of targeted sabotage, a more Fanonian approach, which may be capable of actually achieving change.

Contributions to this special issue

Small is Beautiful captures many of the challenges that were alive in the 1970s, a period which has many commonalities with the present. The decade saw oil crises (1973/1979), humanitarian catastrophes, demands for a new international order, fears of nuclear annihilation, unsettling digital innovations and a rapid growth in awareness of ecological destruction. The 1970s also marked a turning point in environmental consciousness, with some crucial first steps taken. In 1972, the Stockholm conference on the environment took place. This was the first major UN conference addressing ecological concerns. This revealed the deep-seated tensions between environment and development, and between global North and South, tensions that eventually gave rise to the concept of 'sustainable development'.

Many of these themes remain alive today, and we have the added certain knowledge that the combustion of fossil fuels has resulted in climate change. Unlike the fears of scarcity of the 1970s, we now know there is an abundance of fossil fuels that might cause significant irreversible harm. The challenge of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene era is not so much whether we will run out of scarce resources, but whether we can will ourselves to keep them in the ground: to keep 'the oil in the soil' and 'the coal in the hole'. As the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, despite such shifting inflections in ecological consciousness, Schumacher's desire to interrogate the underpinnings of the modern capitalist project remains the vital task today for critical social theory. With its breadth, idiosyncratic style and uncompromising critique, the contributors demonstrate how *Small is Beautiful* retains value for contemporary social theory.

In this special issue commemorating the 50th anniversary of Schumacher's *magnum opus*, the contributing authors have been invited to reflect on this text in the context of contemporary social theory, relating it to concepts, perspectives and theories from across

ecological political economy and environmental philosophy, as well as to move beyond Schumacher himself, to reflect on the relationship between ecological scholarship and social theory more broadly.

Chris Hesketh's contribution 'Indigenous environmentalism: For a political economy where people (and planet) matter', shows that there are significant overlaps between the environmental critique outlined by Schumacher and the everyday environmentalism enacted by indigenous communities in Latin America today. Hesketh's article shows that while important similarities exist, underscoring the continuing relevance of the themes Schumacher discussed half a century ago, there are also important differences, which show productive ways in which Schumacher's work needs can be extended and revised. In particular, Hesketh speaks to the greater inflection on materially grounded, structural, anti-colonial praxis, in Latin American everyday environmentalism; developments he sees as productive and important for those seeking to return to Schumacher's work to further ecological social critique today.

Robin Jervis's article, 'Climate change, critical theory and economic democracy: "Small is Beautiful" and the challenge to growth' delves into the challenges of actually implementing radical social change of the sort Schumacher outlines in *Small is Beautiful*. Jervis does this by turning to key concepts from the Frankfurt School, looking at how pathological forms of rationality and consciousness are reproduced which impede any meaningful transition. In particular, Jervis focuses on Schumacher's terminology of 'acting economically' in the context of the instrumental rational core of capitalism, which naturalises the application of privatisation, commodification and market-based mechanisms to environmental problems, in line with the 'treadmill of production'. Jervis questions the potential for technological innovation to disrupt hegemonic modes of production and consumption. Drawing on Schumacher's arguments for public and social ownership, Jervis suggests new forms of economic democracy as a way of challenging such capitalist modes of thought and activity.

Speaking more to the themes of the second part of *Small is Beautiful*, David Berry and James Stockman's article, 'Schumacher in the age of generative AI: Towards a new critique of technology', reconstructs Schumacher's philosophy of technology and bring it into dialogue with recent advances in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). They deploy insights and concepts from *Small is Beautiful* that help build a humanist politics under conditions of increasingly computational capitalism. Aligning with Schumacher's insistence on human creativity, they utilise his concepts of intermediate technology and human scale to critique the rise of pathologies of meaning and the giantism of current digital transformations, focusing in particular on ChatGPT and Dall-E. Instead, they advocate a decentralised network of human-scale technology that might deploy AI more prudently, in the service of people and planet.

The final two article shift focus to the relationship between meta-economics and metaphysics, with both paying attention to the Catholic underpinnings of Schumacher's work. The penultimate article, Steven Quilley's 'Schumacher against globalism' and 'Ecomodernism: Ecology, subsidiarity and the politics of scale', defends Schumacher's vision and advances a post-liberal, covenantal Christian Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and distributist political economy, that goes beyond both capitalism and socialism, drawing upon Polanyi's substantivist economics. Quilley offers a

defence of an alternative modernity, rooted in smallness, localness and subsidiarity, involving patterns of embedded production, consumption and reproduction, mediated by family, household and place-bound community. He argues that Schumacher's vision requires an ontology of sovereign, self-actualising individuals, bound by the transcendent relationality of the *Imago Dei*, which is incompatible with dominant eco-modernist environmentalism.

In contrast, Lucy Ford and Neal Harris argue in their article, 'Meta-economics, scale, and contemporary social theory: Re-reading E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*' that Schumacher's Catholicism has infected his social theory and needs to be expunged. In contrast to Quilley's defence of CST and his explicitly Catholic metaphysics, Harris and Ford argue that Schumacher's Christian commitments are truly problematic and risk invalidating his otherwise insightful conceptual developments. In particular, they comment on the merits of his work on 'meta-economics' and 'scale', which they contend need rescuing from his Catholic metaphysics. For Ford and Harris, Schumacher's metaphysical anthropocentrism is unjustifiable philosophically and an impediment to building a broader progressive coalition. They argue this problem is compounded by Schumacher's lack of an explicit theoretical explanation of global power structures, which leads to asymmetrical understandings of technology and agency between the global North and South. Their article reconstructs Schumacher's approach to socio-ecological critique through a non-partisan meta-economics, informing a discussion of global scale and the discourses of degrowth. With his Christianity displaced, Ford and Harris seek to show the continuing relevance of Schumacher's conceptual apparatus today.

All of the contributions gathered here serve to demonstrate the continuing relevance of engaging with Schumacher's work and point to the timeliness of critically engaging with his conceptual arsenal. While Schumacher is acknowledged throughout this special issue as being a contradictory, and at times an infuriating author, the originality of his thought and the uncompromising nature of his social critique are undeniable. We contend that *Small is Beautiful*, 50 years after its initial publication, continues to hold great merit for critical reflections on the environment, on technology, on the economy and on the fundamental ends to which society is structured. With a focus on the present state of social theory in particular, we stress the significance of a conceptual arsenal capable of uniting social critique and political economy; something identified throughout this issue in Schumacher's work. We contend that Schumacher's concepts, such as 'gigantism' and 'meta-economics', despite needing critical reconstruction, therefore, continue to offer much of merit for social theory today.

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Notes

1. See Schumacher (2012, p. 9).
2. See Duhs and Alvey (1989, p. 67).
3. At one point, to avoid anti-German sentiments, he went by the name of James (Schumacher, 2012, p. 10). He wrote for *The Times*, *The Observer*, *The Economist* and other publications with various pseudonyms.
4. For an excellent biography of Schumacher, see either Wood (1984) or Schumacher (2012, chapter 1).
5. His father was the first Professor of economics at Berlin University (Schumacher, 2012, p. 9).
6. For an excellent summary of the relationship between Keynes' and Schumacher's mature work, see Hession (1986).
7. There are clear echoes with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Nature* [1836] in chapter 3 of *Small is Beautiful* (see pp. 41–43).
8. See Meehan (2013).

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