



What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth

Wendell Berry , Herman E. Daly (Foreword)

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Over the years, Wendell Berry has sought to understand and confront the financial structure of modern society and the impact of developing late capitalism on American culture. There is perhaps no more demanding or important critique available to contemporary citizens than Berry's writings — just as there is no vocabulary more given to obfuscation than that of economics as practiced by professionals and academics. Berry has called upon us to return to the basics. He has traced how the clarity of our economic approach has eroded over time, as the financial asylum was overtaken by the inmates, and citizens were turned from consumers — entertained and distracted — to victims, threatened by a future of despair and disillusion.

For this collection, Berry offers essays from over the last 25 years, alongside new essays about the recent economic collapse, including "Money Versus Goods" and "Faustian Economics," treatises of great alarm and courage. He offers advice and perspective that should be heeded by all concerned as our society attempts to steer from its present chaos and recession to a future of hope and opportunity. With urgency and clarity, Berry asks us to look toward a true sustainable commonwealth, grounded in realistic Jeffersonian principles applied to our present day.

What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth Details

Date : Published May 18th 2010 by Counterpoint (first published April 23rd 2010)

ISBN : 9781582436067

Author : Wendell Berry , Herman E. Daly (Foreword)

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Economics, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Environment, Sustainability, Philosophy, Politics, Social Issues, Cultural

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Patti says

Wendell Berry is one of my touchstones and again he didn't fail me in this book. I finished the book saddened however because his thoughts and warnings over the past 20+ years have not been heeded and the effect of Economics on communities and individuals has been much more damaging than he imagined or feared.

I would have given the book 5 stars, but there were a couple of essays that I didn't connect with and I skipped over them. The essays I connected with spoke truth and common sense as always.

"The only true and effective 'operator's manual for spaceship earth' is not a book that any human will ever write; it is hundreds of thousands of local cultures."

In the essay "Economy and Pleasure" Berry the effect of Economics under the guise of altruism still has the same ruinous effect on communities and individuals. "This work has been done, and is still being done, under the heading of altruism: Its aims, as its proponents never tire of repeating, are to 'serve agriculture' and 'to feed the world'. These aims, as stated, are irreproachable; as pursued, they raise a number of doubts. Agriculture, it turns out, is to be served strictly according to the rules of competitive economics. The aim is 'to make farmers more competitive' and 'to make American agriculture more competitive'. Against whom, we must ask, are our farmers and our agriculture to be made more competitive? And we must answer, because we know: Against other farmers, at home and abroad. Now, if the colleges of agriculture 'serve agriculture' by helping farmers to compete against one another, what do they propose to do to help the farmers who have been out-competed? Well, those people are not farmers anymore, and therefore are of no concern to the academic servants of agriculture. Besides, they are the beneficiaries of the inestimable liberty to 'seek retraining and get into another line of work'.

In the essay "An Argument for Diversity" Berry describes how the best use of things in our lives should be determined. "If we wish to make the best use of people, places, and things, then we are going to have to deal with a law that reads about like this: AS the quality of use increases, the scale of use (that is, the size of operations) will decline, the tools will become simpler, and the methods and the skills will become more complex. That is a difficult law for us to believe, because we have assumed otherwise for a long time, and yet our experience overwhelmingly suggests that it is a law, and that the penalties for disobeying it are severe."

Kara Bennett says

I did not agree with many of his ideas, but it was thought-provoking and will stay on my shelf to go back to a few underlined sections now and then.

Matt says

Essays are chock full of redundant information. The thread through all of them is that Mr. Berry does not like technological solutions to farming or other resource extraction, as they destroy soil, communities, woodlands, jobs, people, etc. To this, I mostly agree, but could have read the first longer essay of the book and been done with it. As of this synopsis, I am a bit over half way through and probably will stop here.

Ouida says

Stewardship of what we can use

Berry provides a thoughtful look at how we use and misuse what we have locally and its impact. For example, local farmers were bought out by large corporate agricultural companies. This displaced farmers and overused the land. How would the impact be different if a harmful product was used on a small farm instead of a conglomerate? What if lumber was managed by landowners to minimize deforestation?

John says

Wendell Berry is a man born into the wrong century. He, like Richard Weaver, has a unique insight into the ravages of modernity upon a culture. Berry's counter-cultural economics is almost Utopian, though he works hard to steer clear of this label.

The book is a collection of essays arguing that we must re-prioritize people, communities, and place over "the economy" and "efficiency." Berry argues that Americans have sold their birthright for a bowl of porridge. We've traded short-term security and comfort for an insecure and mortgaged future.

We have turned all enterprise into colonialist mining--destroying the resources in our places and giving the wealth to distant corporations without seeing any real profit on the enterprise.

This is the same phenomenon we see at the national level--there is no plan for the future. We've decided collectively to mortgage the future for satisfying today's desires.

Some will object that Berry is a radical Luddite environmentalist. Yet I think this sort of caricature is unfounded and dangerous, as it refuses to deal with the prophetic voice warning against disaster. If there is anything that Berry loves it is people--not trees, spotted owls, or endangered fisheries.

What is at stake is the God given resources unique to each place. Berry's desire is to see man take dominion over his place, husband it, use it, but leave it the same or better than when you found it. Berry believes we've either become exploiters ourselves, or allowed others to exploit God's gifts on our behalf.

Berry doesn't use the language of dominion, which is my strongest objection to the book. He's not clear enough on the biblical mandate given at creation as he should be. Yet it is clear that his position is a Christian one.

This is an important work, but I fear he'll be ignored as the idealistic, cranky old uncle--just like all prophets.

“As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.’ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes—and come it will!—then they will know that a prophet has been among them.”

(Ezekiel 33:30-33 ESV)

Dave says

He's one of the only writers who can use the Bible as his rationale without being totally irritating but it's still a little too much for me, and as far as solutions go this doesn't go anywhere near far enough in my opinion. This is probably a good stepping stone for anyone who isn't ready to hear a more radical analysis yet and his anti-city back to the land attitude is still more radical than a lot of other stuff at least.

Mark says

Wendell Berry needs no introduction to those who are interested in the environmental costs of living in societies that define corporate interests and the consequential consumerism as progress. He is a Luddite by his own admission; a proud one at that. This collection of essays is a really one solid argument against the priorities that we have set up as societies using economic arguments to warrant his claims.

First, he defines agrarianism as a prioritized list based upon importance: 1) nature, 2) economies of land use, 3) manufacturing economy, and 4) the consumer economy. The entire collection flows from this definition and this set of priorities. He points out that the modern priorities that we have accepted in today's societies are in the exact opposite order.

His attack on ignorance, blind acceptance, unopposed greed, irresponsible activities, academic support of ignorance and usurpers and the modern definition of "rights" as anything that "I" want is unparalleled. The irony, he points out, of suburban and city life as well as agri-business and unlimited consumption is that while they contain the facade of a comfortable community they maintain it at the cost of real communities: "neighborly, economically sound, local community".

Often Berry's essays contain a sense of religiosity that can overpower his more important message: "simple solutions [to environmental problems] will always lead to complex troubles, and simple minds will always be surprised." But, in this collection of essays his religious convictions take a needed backseat to the solutions that he offers.

Berry is a prolific writer to say the least, but this collection stands out among the collections of his writings that I have read to date. The solutions he offers will not be popular with many, but his arguments are sound and point out two specific truths that we all must accept: we must change our priorities in order to survive, and "when nothing is valued for what it is, everything is destined to be wasted." Kudos to Berry for his honesty and ability to remind us of what is really important.

Zoe says

He's clearly not an economist, but ol' Wendell consistently serves up hot takes. Ties in nicely with Bookchin's Ecology of Freedom (which is more fleshed out and concrete).

Nate says

Wendell Berry should be required reading for most college students. He provides a much needed perspective from outside of academia on issues ranging from farming to finance to higher education itself. This collection of essays examines economics in the United States and shows how its relentless focus on wealth accumulation is harming our communities.

John Lucy says

Well, some of the essays in this collection are included in other Berry collections. With essay-writers, that type of thing is almost guaranteed to happen--I hope it happens with me someday--but it is still disappointing that there weren't more essays written specifically with this book in mind. Only the first essay/chapter was written for the purpose. Of course, all the essays, more or less, pertain to the subject and are certainly worth reading. Still, some of the essays have the feel of being a tangent and that's less than fun.

All in all, I highly recommend these essays to anyone and everyone. With the state of our economy, our land, our farms, and our environment, the essays in this book are a must read. Is Berry an authority on economics? No, absolutely not. But he is an insightful thinker with plenty of farming experience and cultural knowledge to bring to the task. I doubt that a professional economist could argue for Berry's vision better or more efficiently.

It's somewhat hard to read this book as someone born and bred in the suburbs, especially when farming in my family is only one generation removed. Thankfully this book includes some good thoughts even for those not readily able, physically or emotionally or anything, to personally assist in the economic and thought revolution that Berry recommends. Agree or disagree, this book can provide good provocation for anyone's life.

Fred Gorrell says

The title of this book suggested it would address a subject near and dear to my heart, and the author is held in high esteem by many for his thoughtful, contrarian perspective on the world. The book itself was a great disappointment.

Wendell Berry is known as a proponent of sustainable practices in agriculture and land management, and is admired for having committed his life to align with his ideas; he lives and works on a farm in Kentucky. The title suggested to me that he would show us a path through sustainable practice that would lead not only to better care of our natural resources, but also to improvement in our embrace of commonwealth: that now widely disavowed idea that there are things we can and should do together for the common good, instead of being constantly focused on selfish interests.

In this collection of essays, the failure of our present order from the perspective of sustainability is described relentlessly in a tone which is both tiresome and unproductive. It is hard to read this work without taking away a sense that the author's first hope is that some large number of people will simply vanish from the face of the earth, while those who remain embrace agrarian pursuits. The problem is described again and again. It is possible that the author believed himself also to be describing a plausible solution; if one was mentioned, it was too far removed from my reality to be comprehensible. To persuade, one must meet people at their points of reference, rather than expecting to be met at yours.

It is painfully clear that much of what we know as the modern world holds no charm for this author. Unfortunately, he does not hold out a hand to those of us who are enmeshed in that world, to help us find our way to a new order that would address our shared concern for the future. Is this not the first step that must be taken if we are to work together toward a commonwealth?

David says

I have been in the mood to read lots of Wendell Berry lately, I suppose it is because of all the bad news regarding the state of the country, the economy, etc. Seems like normal stuff for a presidential election year. This voice of reason encourages me but also makes me wonder why it seems like no one is listening...

Here are my dog-ears, brackets, underlines and asterisks:

pg. 5 - the fantastical consumption-based economy

pg. 6 - "the gullibility of the public thus becomes an economic resource"

pg. 22 - the Amish as an alternative economy/community

pg. 57 - more Amish wisdom - "a good Amish farmer told me that he had learned from his father never to have a horse harnessed after supper. That amenity guaranteed enough rest and good health for the horses, and also some needed leisure for the family."

pg. 131 - William Blake's "Satanic Wheels" or "Mills" and Ezekiel 1.21

pg. 133 - our short-sighted "maximum profit, minimum responsibility" economy

pg. 134 - the inextricably joined parts of the Great Economy (kingdom of God)

pg. 136 - coheres and endures vs. disintegrates and destroys

pg. 144 - the ridiculousness of insurance because of the disintegration of community

pg. 146 - imported entertainment

pg. 151 - the new norm of kids leaving home

pg. 158 - manufactured waste, desecrating flags, and desecrating country

pg. 178 - the providence of supra-national corporations

pg. 192 - being an international good neighbor

Mark says

To provide a counterweight to Kevin Kelly's techno-optimism in *What Technology Wants*, I had Berry going at the same time. As opposed to Kelly's "anything goes and it will all work out in the end" approach to technological development, Berry prefers an Amish-like approach to technology: pick and choose carefully, closely observe the effects of the accepted technologies, reassess, repeat. Hard to do, yes, but it seems that the important things are always the hard ones to manage, no? Another Berry recommendation that is hard for me to argue against: don't trade off the good things that we currently have for a promised but unrealized future.

Blair says

My first foray into Wendell Berry. His name kept cropping up, so I figured it was time to read him. There were some interesting points to glean from his impassioned arguments. I think this would be a good one to read with a group, as some of it calls for discussion. I didn't necessarily agree with everything he said, but it was a good fodder to generate some thinking. I will probably pick up some more of him, although I'm interested to see how duplicative his writings are over the years.

Donovan Richards says

Etymologically Speaking

Etymologically speaking, “economy” comes from the Greek word, “oikonomia.” A compound word, oikonomia comes from oikos meaning “household” and nomos meaning “law.” So, oikonomia literally translates as “the law of the household.”

Obviously, this definition differs greatly from the standard definition society places on economy. These days, we understand economy as “the wealth and resources created from the goods and services of a distinctive region.”

Clearly, a stark shift has occurred from ancient to modern times surrounding the conception of economy. Now, we live in a global marketplace. While it may have made sense in ancient Athens to contemplate the marketplace in local and family terms, these days our goods and services span the globe and our work connects with large organizations, not a nuclear family.

But can we learn anything from the etymological roots of economy? Is there value in returning to the roots of this word and establishing a new definition of economy merging the old and the new?

While he's not an academically trained economist, renaissance man Wendell Berry urges us to reconsider our conception of economy in his series of essays, *What Matters?*

What connects the essays in this book is the deconstruction of the standard view of “economy” and a reconstruction of the marketplace returning to the ancient conceptions of economy.

Deconstructing Economy

For starters, Berry contends against the basic inferences of economy—that it serves everyone through a continued upward mobility of all.

“[When] money is misused to grow from itself into heaps in the possession inevitably of fewer and fewer people, it cannot be rightly used for the production of goods or even to maintain the subsistence of the people. Workers will not be well paid for good work. The arts will not flourish, and neither will nature” (12).

In fact, Berry utilizes art as an example against this idea. We all safely assume technology and business will constantly innovate and if one business dies, another will replace it. But this belief does not mirror our understanding of creativity and art.

“We must assume that we had one chance each for *The Divine Comedy* and *King Lear*. If Dante and Shakespeare had died before they wrote those poems, nobody would have written them” (52).

Without Shakespeare, the face of English literature would be altered significantly. Shouldn't then the same principle apply to our work?

If true, then individual work matters greatly. Forcing a person out of a job or eliminating career paths for the greater good of society, then, removes the complexity and richness of our culture.

Berry drives this point home with his lamentation on work:

“Among the many costs of the total economy, the loss of the principle of vocation is probably the most symptomatic and, from a cultural standpoint, the most critical. It is by the replacement of vocation with economic determinism that the exterior workings of a total economy destroy human character and culture also from the inside” (188).

As a Kentucky farmer, Berry experiences vocation first hand. The work of his hands translates into sustenance for his local community. His daily activity carries meaning for his family and those living around him.

Berry has observed the shift in labor trends as generations move away from the farm house, even if they'd rather work in agriculture, because the jobs gestate in urban jungles.

So where ought we to go? What truly matters?

Constructing Economy

The answer, for Berry, lies with the local economy.

He notes,

“We need, instead, a system of decentralized, small-scale industries to transform the products of our fields and woodlands and streams: small creameries, cheese factories, canneries, grain mills, saw mills, furniture factories, and the like. By ‘small’ I mean simply a size that would not be destructive of the appearance, the health, and the quiet of the countryside. If a factory began to ‘grow’ or to be noisy at night or on a Sunday, that would mean that another such factory was needed somewhere else” (79).

These small-scale businesses work not exclusively toward maximized profit, but toward the flourishing of

the local community.

“People do need jobs that serve natural and human communities, not arbitrarily ‘created’ jobs that serve only the economy” (6).

Wendell Berry’s *weltanschauung*—philosophy of life—in *What Matters* corresponds with a return to the classical definition of economy. Our work must match the law of our household and the community in which we reside. Once we remove this definition, the marketplace unmoors and drifts to places which marginalize people, pillage the earth, and benefit a small few.

Wendell Berry’s voice is prophetic and *What Matters* is required reading for anyone in business, not necessarily because it offers the cure-all for how to change business, but because it presents a crucial voice against a business-as-usual approach. The local community matters because it keeps us grounded. When we work, we ought to consider how our actions influence those around us.

Go read *What Matters*.

Originally published at <http://www.wherepenmeetspaper.com>
