

Preface

This book started life, as many have done, while seated at a bar. In fact, it was in a brewpub in Ann Arbor, Michigan where I was attending a conference on Industrial Ecology in 2003. Sitting in the ABC Brewpub on 114 Washington, the thought occurred: Why do microbreweries and brewpubs exist? Or more accurately: Why do microbreweries exist in the United States? After all, the United States is the cultural home of true mass production, standardisation, and least cost. It is also home to powerful brands such as Budweiser, commanding huge volumes and impressive market share with a consistent, high-quality, fresh and low-price product that defined for Americans what beer really meant.

Yet here in Ann Arbor, and many other locations, microbreweries were being constructed and were being run successfully with a formula that seemed deliberately antagonistic to economic logic. They offered multiple types of beer, but only in limited 'campaigns'. When that beer was gone, the customer had to wait until the next campaign or choose another beer. In the meantime, whatever beer was chosen the prices were far higher than a standard bar or liquor store would charge and the beers were frequently significantly different in taste and appearance to mass-produced lager types.

Initial discussions revealed more. Many of the owner-founders were idealistic enthusiasts who were keen on self-sufficiency in their own business but were far from the profit-maximising, growth-hungry stereotype of corporate America. The microbreweries were often strongly linked to their localities, offering local seasonal foods for example. Moreover, the customer base tended to be educated, relatively affluent, cosmopolitan and, like the owners, enthusiasts for the range and variety of the beers produced. The ABC Brewpub website has the following statement, which is typical of the genre:

Our founders, Matt and Rene Greff, are committed to making great beer and delicious food that's served in a comfortable, friendly atmosphere. We're passionate about producing in a conscientious way. We buy locally, support sustainable farmers, give back to our community, and work to reduce our environmental impact. We know our beer speaks for itself, but we also feel

each pint tastes that much better knowing it was made thoughtfully and responsibly. (<http://www.arborbrewing.com/>)

More than anything else, the US microbreweries and brewpubs showed that it was possible to create and sustain an alternative to the omniscience of entrenched mass production. Innovative business models combined with appropriate technologies yielded something that changed the terms of competition, and created something that the vast multinational breweries could not easily compete with. The microbreweries showed that diversity was not only possible, but actually fundamental to locally-grounded sustainable business. The apparently immutable trend towards ever-increasing scale could be challenged and even reversed.

From that simple insight a growing interest developed in understanding how manufacturing economies of scale might be challenged, and the significance of such a challenge for the wider project of sustainable business. There seemed a possibility of connecting up the themes of localisation, small-scale, diversity, economic self-reliance, resilience and work enrichment. The relationship with economic concentration was also intriguing. In some sectors it appeared that such concentration was still ongoing in the sense that corporations were getting bigger and absorbing their smaller competitors, but at the same time actual manufacturing operations were not following the same relentless 'bigger is better' pathway. While global production and consumption levels continued to rise, there also appeared to be a possibility that profit growth achieved only through volume growth (and hence increased resource use) could be challenged and ultimately reversed. Hence the de-coupling of resource use from economic growth might be achieved, in part at least, by the re-emergence of small-scale business.

The following book is far from perfect. The examples are not all equally developed. The extent to which they may be sustainable is greatly variable and subject to dispute. But there is sufficient evidence presented to at least make the case in outline and to stimulate further research, preferably within the cosy confines of a few more microbreweries!