
The book encapsulates a new conceptual approach to understanding the interconnected economic, political and social situations and systems, and how they work. Their metaphor—society is a garden—provides a vision of citizenship, democracy, and role of the government. It advocates the need to adapt to meet the prerequisites of economic, political and social evolution. The authors have drawn a comparison between gardeners and statists to highlight the complexities and limits of social policy, and urge free marketers and government to see how the system needs some tending. Gardening requires the right setting: fertile soil, good light, water, fertilizers and nurturing what we seed, and so do government, society and governance. In other words, insert proper inputs to get beneficial outputs. The writers eloquently manage to convey their noble message; that is “we harvest what we plant”.

The authors have invited individuals and government to reconsider self-interests as being what serves public interest through new thinking about how to advance our shared interests, how decision makers should rethink about issues pertaining to everyday life governance, through reassessment of what went wrong with the world economic system since Reagan’s war against the middle class till 2007-2008 financial crisis. Hence, they advocate a new approach, best summarized in a process of government and individuals change to “adapt or die”.

The book comprises of neatly-woven six parts dealing with interconnected social, economic and political dimensions:

1. A comparative approach to how great gardens and political systems work. Gardens need seeding, weeding, watering, fertilizers, tending and not left to factors of nature. Symmetrically, government and society building need effective cooperation culture between government and individuals, to address the illness that plague the political, economic and social system, which requires redefining individual and collective self-interest, freedom, and role of government.
It stresses upon the true self-interest as mutual interest imposed by technological innovations and potential default in the whole system. Self-interest is not selfishness as wrongly embedded in the conventional perception of free market economy. It rejects the saying ‘it is not my problem’, since what happens in the neighborhood is epidemic. Various paradigms of the system are projected and criticized, to come up with the conclusion that:

a) What goes around comes around.
b) The better you do, the better I do.
c) It’s survival of the smartest—only the cooperative survive.
d) Teamwork wins.
e) There’s no such thing as a self-made person.
f) All for one, one for all.

The book enumerates five rules for great citizenship. They reflect new ways of looking at civic life. Citizenship is how you behave in a society as a whole encapsulated as follows:

a) Small acts of leadership compound. They accrue and yield similar patterns of politics and common life. Your behavior builds up.
b) Infect the super carriers. Looking at good citizenship as a contagion to accelerate rather than contain is true citizenship.
c) Create Dunbar units. The maximum size of a coherent community to highlight social relationship has always been about 150 units. This is known as Dunbar’s number, after the social scientist Robin Dunbar.
d) Make courtesy count. True citizenship Courtesy begins with a cooperative consideration of the needs of others.
e) Trust in trust. Trust is foremost among the social virtues that make healthy societies. When market actors behave in ways that erode the trust among citizens—as has happened during 2008-2009 crisis—they send a signal that “dumb money” deserves its fate.

These rules emphasize that making a Society is how individuals and government collectively behave, weed the bad and seed the good, like great gardeners do.

It further lays out a new perception of true capitalism, and criticizes trickle-down economics. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, under the banner of “limited government” and “trickle-down economics” widened the gap between the rich and the poor and killed the middle class due to the default
of imbalanced, self-rulled market fundamentalism. It means money will trickle down from wealthy capitalists to everyday Americans, but proved wrong. During the financial crisis in 2007-2008, governments had failed to anticipate the scope and speed of the meltdown because their model of the economy was detached from reality of the complex evolutionary system. The writers prescribe what can be done to address social and economic inequality by advocating the garden’s paradigm. They cite Michael Kumhof and Romain Rancière, IMF economists’ argument (November 2010) attributing 2007-08 and 1929 crises to radical income inequality, which lead to society’s illness. The problem was accumulation of wealth and devour the middle class, as explained below.

The book goes on to discuss redistribution. It claims that redistribution kills profit motive, is less efficient than market forces, and thus works to decrease overall wealth. By contrast, incentivizing those with capital to accumulate even more—even if it results in great and inherited inequality. It is like when a “single big toe is as big as a watermelon and contains twice as much blood as the entire head and torso—the body has fallen grotesquely out of Balance, left untreated, it will die. But when you have good circulation, the entire body grows stronger”. This discipline advocates that in management of the economy, it means using tax policy to put more wealth in the hands of the wealthiest so that they can invest it in job-creating businesses. However, the writers refute this discipline and propose another.

It focuses on circulating wealth in ways that bring prosperity to the middle class so that it can buy goods and services and set in motion a feedback loop that benefits everyone—rich and poor—over the long term. They propose five core principles:

i. Grow from the middle out. Foster a healthy middle-class customer base with purchasing power and everyone will get richer. Maximize the number of able, diverse competitors. The point of this is not to enrich the few but to empower the many.

ii. Break up opportunity monopolies. In economic life both advantages and disadvantages compound. What we end up with are opportunity monopolies dotting and clotting the economic landscape. There is a need for real competitive environment empowering every one.

iii. Promote true competition. In American policy today, we don’t help people become rich; we reward the already rich for being rich.
iv. Harness market forces to national goals. Economic right-wingers insist that heroic individuals “do it themselves” and that such people are “self-made”. This claim is not true. The writers argue that “Government’s job, in collaboration with the private sector, is to set great goals. The market’s job is to unleash a truly competitive frenzy in pursuit of those goals”. In other words, government identifies and facilitates the process.

v. We are all better off when we are all better off. Unlike advocates of Limited-government, the writers believe the goose of economy lies in the broad middle class, and nurturing an economy from the middle out and the bottom up is the way out for real prosperity, therefore, government’s role is to be a circulator and investor. They also argue that too much inequality is as fatal to society as enforced equality. Thus, grown-up middle-driven economics get us back on track as a country. The authors conclude their argument about government’s role by saying “the government tends the garden of economic life. It seeds, feeds, and weeds. The reframing of what an economy is and how it works changes the story of what government is”.

The concluding chapter diagnoses various approaches to government’s shape and role in embracing society. It projects failed past experiences, and prescribes medicines after gathering data to identify the problem, and then do the needful. The authors diagnose the government’s situation.

The book argues that the right and left wingers differ on government’s scope, shape and role; whether it should be, big or small and how? The problem lies in the appropriate balance. The right envisions democratic government in its legitimacy from the people, protects their rights and freedom, and its military power is for defense, policing and applying law etc. But they failed from theoretical, empirical and political perspectives.

- Theoretical: free entrepreneur is hypothetical because individuals are not free and equal; freedom goes to the elites and capable.
- Empirically: The zero-sum, and the straight line between government and freedom proved failure of right and left respectively. This means limiting individual freedom constrains individual’s work in the short-run for great work in the long run.
• Politically: the question whether limited government proponents put their ideas into effect when in power. Modern systems thinking shows that humans are not rational.

The left big government’s social, economic and political governance failed to address complex human problems and needs, and made government impractical, unadoptable and detached from reality. The authors ascribe big government to be big and effective. Big to draw strategic objectives for the society, empower individuals by all means: improve education, health care and social security systems, encourage trust and cooperation, and maintain real competition and break up accumulated wealth and power. Effective is to concentrate. At the local level inject money for local authority, be a think tank to them, and create incentives. This means to continuously weed the bad and seed the good.

The book stresses that democratic system should be reformed through changing the rules of practice and federal government, particularly election campaign funding which at present helps pressure groups influence government legislations. There is a need to Reform long speeches, make voting mandatory. These are the necessary remedy for reforming society because government is what the society makes to solve problems. To “adapt or die” is the final words.

The authors have concluded their book with concise, yet perfect revision of what they have been trying to prove. It would have been easy to summarize this part to give you an insight to the overall book content. It is really an interesting, coherent, consistent and useful book to be read by all who want to know the disparity between the rich and poor, and the dangers of fossilized ideologies in a changing world, and the real benefits of democracy.

Jihan Mohammad is Ph.D. candidate enrolled with Jindal School of International Affairs, O. P. Jindal Global University.