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Made In The USA: The Rise And Retreat Of American Manufacturing (MIT Press)



Synopsis

"There's no author whose books I look forward to more than Vaclav Smil." -- Bill Gates

In Made in the USA, Vaclav Smil powerfully rebuts the notion that manufacturing is a relic of predigital history and that the loss of American manufacturing is a desirable evolutionary step toward a pure service economy. Smil argues that no advanced economy can prosper without a strong, innovative manufacturing sector and the jobs it creates. Smil explains how manufacturing became a fundamental force behind America's economic, strategic, and social dominance. He describes American manufacturing's rapid rise at the end of the nineteenth century, its consolidation and modernization between the two world wars, its role as an enabler of mass consumption after 1945, and its recent decline. Some economists argue that shipping low-value jobs overseas matters little because the high-value work remains in the United States. But, asks Smil, do we want a society that consists of a small population of workers doing high-value-added work and masses of unemployed? Smil assesses various suggestions for solving America's manufacturing crisis, including lowering corporate tax rates, promoting research and development, and improving public education. Will America act to preserve and reinvigorate its manufacturing? It is crucial to our social and economic well-being; but, Smil warns, the odds are no better than even.

Book Information

Series: MIT Press

Paperback: 280 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press (August 21, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262528355

ISBN-13: 978-0262528351

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (22 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #177,475 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 inÂ Books > Business & Money > Industries > Manufacturing #61 inÂ Books > Business & Money > Industries > Industrial Relations #503 inÂ Books > Business & Money > Biography & History > Company Profiles

Customer Reviews

Sure, there are some really interesting insights. Sure, Bill Gates recommends it. But, you know what? I had to slog through it, and I'm normally fascinated with economics. Here's why: Smil draws

some really interesting insights from economic data, but decided to include all of that economic data in pretty much raw text. There's nary a graph or chart in the entire book, but rather entire pages full of "In 1980, the United States' GDP was \$3.7 trillion. In 1981, it was \$3.9 trillion. In 1982, it was \$4 trillion. This represents a 9% growth over 3 years." There's a reason graphs were invented: to show numerical data in a way that's easier to understand at a glance. If Smil re-wrote the book with this one fix, it would be a quarter the length and actually enjoyable to read. Until then, don't bother.

I was pretty sure I would appreciate this book even before I bought it, since Prof. Smil's track-record for books is impeccable. Since the future of U.S. manufacturing and its essential role for U.S. energy security is of interest to me, I decided to look at the broad picture that Prof. Smil provides here. In particular, I am interested in how a combination of solar thermal infrastructure and advanced nuclear power stations -- all U.S. built -- will improve U.S. security, prosperity, and climate stability. To understand where we need to go, and how to get there, an expertly written and comprehensive history needs to be understood. After reading the book I grasped the high growth years and the key role of electricity generation in the late 1800s, the U.S. leadership in many fields in the 1950s and 60s (truly impressive in light of today's competition with China and Western Europe), and the gradual (and sometimes steep) decline in the 70s and 80s. Just as in his other books, Prof. Smil has a way of presenting insights that few realize, just a few here are: the overall increase resource intensity in spite of the common idea that an information economy and computers reduce resource consumption; the narrative showing US federal government and semiconductor chip company R&D alliances (a partial model for U.S. energy infrastructure alliances in the future?). Finally, there is Prof. Smil's partly inspiring and partly foreboding last chapter of the book.

Provides well documented review and historical significance of manufacturing in the development of the US economy and compares it with other nations. Has a well-reasoned argument for building our economic base as an important corner-stone of the economy. Automation will prevent huge increases in employment, but will likely help provide jobs for properly trained workers. The Walmart's of the country have little loyalty to the country seeking only to maximize profit by seeking the lowest cost labor. This being the case we need to find ways to encourage companies to sell products from here and return capital here to bring the trade deficit back into balance. The imbalance in manufacturing and service and consumption appear to be creating areas of economic illness.

Everybody who is concerned for America's future should read this (if they can stand all of the facts).

Captains of Finance and Government have grossly overlooked the value of basic manufacturing and have concentrated on skimming commissions from real value added transactions (fees and taxes). Real value is created in manufacturing and the folks doing the work spend their earnings in our economy and they derive a certain dignity from making something. This dignity and sense of accomplishment is hard to come by sitting at a desk looking at a computer all day.

If you are interested in a broad historical overview of American manufacturing, this is a good place to start. Smil's book is packed with remarkable facts about the rise of various consumer and producer technologies and America's competitive place in the global economy. (I love it when he compares the U.S., China, Japan and Germany at various points throughout the book.) At times the book is recursive, and Smil also makes a number of arguments that are not adequately supported by the evidence presented. However, Smil's book is nonetheless enormously valuable. His opinions do not seem to be driven by ideology, but by his analysis of macro-trends in the global economy. Five stars!

Smil demonstrates our rise and retreat and paints a bleak picture of our future. The real question that went unanswered is what now? Are we doomed to watch government, health care and entitlements eat our GDP? I'm not optimistic

First and foremost, this book provides a sobering chronicle of what happened over the past couple of decades and what the effects are on the society. While this book is focused on what happened in the U.S., it can be replicated almost anywhere in the western world (or far East world, given the amount of off-shored products from Japanese or Korean brands), where rush for profit and 'outsource-offshore' lead to the growth of former OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) brands which now dominate the market (i.e. Westinghouse offshored its manufacturing to TCL, TCL is now a multi-billion dollar giant Xx times bigger than Westinghouse, for example). It also offers an uncanny outlook into what is happening now in the return to manufacturing on U.S. shores, albeit by companies you would not expect (Chinese offshoring the production to U.S. etc.).

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