

Uncle Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire "To the Edge of the Universe With Julian Simon"

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In some circles, the late Julian Simon has fame as a Dragon Slayer. The Dragon that Sir Julian slew was the dread Doomsdayer. The largest and most fearsome of its many poisonous heads was Ehrlich. Not only did Sir Julian lop Ehrlich off with his magic sword Blind Optimism, he pried back the thick scale Malthus that covered the Black Jewel Prudence, an evil vat of pessimism and restraint, and pierced it with his eternally shining lance point Pollyanna, thereby showing Doomsdayer's heart had no power. In the Fairy Tale world of *Wall Street Journal* cornucopians, this is the new favorite fable. But it has much wider acceptance than the libertarian right, witness *The New York Times* editorial welcoming the 300 millionth American last fall.

Even a few so-called environmental spokespersons are now saying that population growth really isn't a problem. There are a host of practical, strategic, political, emotional, and other reasons for individuals and groups within the environmental and conservation movements to back away from the population issue. I can even understand why some may want to just stay out of the doomsday battle (though it's one thing

to acknowledge the problem of the population explosion and support stabilization but not to work on it further, and another to say there is no problem). But I've been mystified by what *intellectual* justifications leaders and others must use to themselves.

So. To simplify, I think it is likely that the intellectual reason *The New York Times*, public intellectuals, the antipoverty industry, progressives, moderates, traditional conservatives, and, to a lesser degree (I hope) *some* environmentalists and conservationists pooh-poo the problems of human population growth is their belief that Paul Ehrlich (and other doomsdayers) were wrong with their dismal predictions, and Julian Simon was generally right with his optimistic views. At least, this is part of the answer to the question of why population growth isn't taken seriously anymore.

We can take two paths on straightening out this mistaken belief. We can show that Paul Ehrlich and his colleagues have been remarkably right, and I intend to do that in future essays. And we can show how dangerously mad Julian Simon was, which is what I intend to do here. I reckon that most conservationists have at best a passing acquaintance with Simon. They should know him better. He was an amusing fellow.

Julian Simon's careless boast in 1994, "We now have in our hands—in our libraries, really—the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years,"¹ is the clearest expression of irrational exuberance among cornucopians. It is particularly astonishing because one would presume that economists

¹ Norman Myers and Julian Simon, *Scarcity or Abundance: A Debate on the Environment* (W. W. Norton, New York, 1994), 65.

would understand something about arithmetic. Seven *billion* years, he said. The planet Earth came into being only about four and a half billion years ago. Early life first developed no more than four billion years ago. Animals evolved less than 600 million years ago and hominins split off from chimpanzees about five million years ago.² Agriculture and settled life was not invented until 10,000 years ago. Yet, Simon believed that the human population could continue to grow for seven billion years. The first real civilization started about seven thousand years ago. Seven billion years is *ten million times the length of time human civilization has lasted so far*.

In 1994, the year when Simon popped off about seven billion years, the world population growth rate meant that world population was doubling every forty-three years. A simple calculation shows that at this rate in a mere 774 years there would be “*ten human beings for each square meter of ice-free land on the planet*,” according to Paul and Anne Ehrlich.³ Furthermore, “After 1900 years at this growth rate, the mass of the human population would be equal to the mass of the Earth; after 6000 years, the mass of the human population would equal the mass of the universe.”⁴ I know the Ehrlichs, and they are generous and fair to a fault. So, they cut Marketing Professor Simon a great deal of slack and calculated with a growth rate “*one million times smaller than the actual 1994 value*—that is, if it were only an infinitesimal 0.0000016 percent

² I’m referring to modern animal phyla for any evolutionary nitpickers out there.

³ This was before we understood that much of the ice might melt over the next few centuries because of the greenhouse gas effect.

⁴ Ehrlich and Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*, 66. In case you don't want to do the math yourself, the Ehrlichs do it on page 264.

per year—Earth's population would still reach a mass exceeding that of the universe before the end of the 7-billion-year period Simon mentioned.”⁵

University of Colorado physics professor emeritus Al Bartlett writes that some of his friends contacted Julian Simon after his seven-billion-year pronouncement and Simon backtracked to claim that he meant only seven million years. (Be glad this guy wasn't doing your taxes!) Bartlett whipped out his calculator and figured out what would happen if we grew only one percent for seven million years. He got 2.3×10^{30410} . He says, “This is a fairly large number!” Bartlett went on to calculate the total number of atoms in the universe—about 3×10^{85} . The first number is thirty kilo-orders of magnitude larger than the total number of atoms in the universe. So, if Simon only wanted the total number of people to equal the total number of atoms in the universe, how long would it take to get there at a growth rate of one percent? A mere 17,000 years.⁶

Were you to hear some bedraggled street-corner prophet telling a lamppost that we could keep growing for seven billion (or million) years, you would chuckle and keep moving. However, Julian Simon was not a homeless schizophrenic. He was (and remains) the most lauded no-limits-to-growth economist for the *Wall Street Journal* crowd.

Let me admit that I am no whiz at arithmetic. However, even I can understand Al Bartlett when he teaches simple math to the cornucopians. I don't know anyone smarter. But he is smart in a matter-of-fact way, such as over summer barbeque and beer. Bartlett explains that a round

⁵ Ehrlich and Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*, 66-67.

⁶ Albert A. Bartlett, “The Exponential Function, XI: The New Flat Earth Society,” *Focus*, Carrying Capacity Network, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1997, 34-36.

Earth presents a problem because a “sphere is bounded and hence is finite.” He sees “a new paradigm...emerging which seems to be a return to the wisdom of the ancients.” “The pro-growth people say that perpetual growth on this earth is possible. If the pro-growth people are correct, what kind of earth are we living on?”

Bartlett answers that

*a flat earth can accommodate growth forever, because a flat earth can be infinite in the two horizontal dimensions and also in the vertical downward direction. The infinite horizontal dimensions forever remove any fear of crowding as population grows, and the infinite downward dimension assures humans of an unlimited supply of all of the mineral raw materials that will be needed by a human population that continues to grow forever.*⁷

He warns of the Flying Leap Syndrome: jumping from a high building, an anti-Malthusian is exhilarated and, after a couple of seconds, assumes everything will be fine forever. The ground is the boundary the jumper ignored.⁸ Bartlett also describes the various kinds of anti-Malthusians in his essay “Malthus Marginalized.” He suggests that many of them are not scientists and “put their faith in Walt Disney’s First Law: wishing will make it so.”⁹ As a realist, however, I prefer the Iron Law of Traven: *This is the real world, muchachos, and you are in it.*

⁷ Albert A. Bartlett, “The Exponential Function, XI: The New Flat Earth Society,” *Focus*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1997, 34.

⁸ Bartlett, “Malthus Marginalized,” 241.

⁹ Albert A. Bartlett, “Malthus Marginalized: The massive movement to marginalize the man's message,” *The Social Contract*, Spring 1998, 240.

We conservationists must keep our feet firmly planted in the real world. It is vital that we tell people about Simon's 7-billion-year dream world. We must consistently remind others of the real world when they drift off into fantasy worlds with Tinker Bell and Julian Simon—especially when they are fellow conservationists and environmentalists who have fallen for the big lie that Simon was right and Ehrlich was wrong. Not on your life.

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