

THE PROFITS OF DOOM: HOW TO ACHIEVE FAME AND FORTUNE BY BEING SPECTACULARLY WRONG

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Back in 1968, both Paul Ehrlich, an entomologist at Stanford, and Julian Simon, a professor of economics at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, were disciples of eighteenth century economist Thomas R. Malthus. Malthus claimed that population grows geometrically (2, 4, 8, 16) while food production grows arithmetically (2, 4, 6, 8); hence the world's population would eventually outstrip its food supply and massive famine would result. Ehrlich wrote a book on the subject that applied it to modern conditions. *The Population Bomb* was a huge seller and catapulted this once humble studier of insects (apparently butterflies are his specialty) to world-wide fame and fortune. Ehrlich became so big that when he got a vasectomy it made national news.

In *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich wrote:

The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines - hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked on now. At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate.

Elsewhere, in what was presented as a plausible scenario of events by the year 2000, Ehrlich had no less than 65 million Americans starving to death. To prevent such a calamity, he suggested that forced sterilization programs and the injection of birth control drugs into water supplies might be necessary.

As we now know, hundreds of millions of people did not starve to death in the 1970s, and to the extent there was starvation it was the result of flawed political and economic policies, as in the case of the Ethiopian famine of the 1980s. As to those 65 million Americans, with only nine years until the millennium they'd better get going. (Ehrlich has also been quoted as saying, in 1970, "If I were a gambler, I

would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000." Nine years to go on that, too.)

Whatever you think of Paul Ehrlich, when it comes to recycling he definitely practices what he preaches. In 1990, Ehrlich and wife Anne produced *The Population Explosion*. In it they write:

The Population Bomb warned of impending disaster if the population explosion was not brought under control. Then the fuse was burning; now the population bomb has detonated ... One thing seems safe to predict: starvation and epidemic disease will raise death rates over most of the planet.

Sound familiar? But while in the business world being consistently wrong spells failure, in the shadowy world where politics and science mix, it is entirely possible to be consistently wrong and yet be proclaimed a prophet. Thus, Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University, who like Kevin Phillips is one of those people everyone calls a conservative but no one can remember why, provided an endorsement for the back of *Explosion*: "Paul Ehrlich was right in 1968 ... and he and Anne Ehrlich are right again."

The latest book, of course, is complete with all the new buzzwords like "global warming" and "ozone layer", but the basic premise is exactly the same: virtually all of man's problems can be laid at the feet of an ever-growing population.

First, a little information, courtesy of the Bureau of the Census's *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and *Historical Statistics of the United States*. Food production per person is up, both in the U.S. and the world. Likewise for the availability of natural resources as measured by their prices. In the United States, increases have been registered in the cleanliness of air and water, amount of space per person in homes, and most importantly, in the length of life. In fact, Ehrlich could hardly have been more wrong if he had predicted that the nation wouldn't land a man on the moon before the end of the century.

Notwithstanding Ehrlich's dismal track record, some people are taking this book very seriously. It has been endorsed by the likes of Senator Al Gore, who says it is, "Lucid, knowledgeable and utterly convincing." Sen. Tim Wirth (D., Colo.) calls it "Superb, closely reasoned, and fact-filled", and, perhaps more importantly, Robert Redford hopes the book "will be read by anyone who wants to understand why our planet is threatened and what we can do about it."

Of all the fallacies in the two Ehrlich population books, two stand out. The first, found primarily in the first book and left unretracted in the second, is that population growth is static. Ignoring the universal trend line - which indicates that as nations become more affluent they tend to breed more slowly - and using outdated figures from an earlier

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

point on the line, Ehrlich forecast huge population increases which simply haven't taken place. In fact, the United States, Japan, and much of Europe are producing children at rates *below* replacement level, although this condition would have to continue for a few decades for actual net population decreases to show up.

Second, Ehrlich steadfastly embraces Malthusianism which, for the last century, has been proved wrong in fact because it is wrong in theory. Both population growth and food productivity result from a large number of factors, none of which could possibly be reduced to a simple mathematical formula. Indeed, population is utterly irrelevant to the issue of hunger. Instead, there is one simple rule: Those countries with collectivist economic systems have difficulty feeding their people; those with capitalist economies do not. Uninterested in this reality, the Ehrlichs make much of one recent year, 1988, in which U.S. crop production actually declined from the previous year and forced the nation to draw on its overflowing storage capacity. What they don't point out is that about one-third of all U.S. crop land lies fallow, pulled out of production by government price support programs. In fact, the root of the entire "farm crisis" (to the extent there is one) is that Malthus and Ehrlich are wrong. The ability to squeeze more crops out of the same amount of land has far outstripped the capacity of the growing human population to consume it. Thus, farmers find it difficult to make a profit.

The one time the Ehrlichs deign to deal with their critics concerns the observations that some of the most densely populated nations like Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Singapore have some of the highest standards of living in the world. No problem, say the Ehrlichs. Using the Netherlands as an example, they note that the nation must rely heavily on imports to maintain that standard and to support these imports, it must export. Thus, the Netherlands has demonstrated its inability to sustain itself without outside support.

But that is like saying that because the Ehrlichs do not milk their own cows and grow their own wheat, but instead produce scary books which make money to buy milk and bread, therefore their household must be overpopulated. Using international interdependency as the standard, even nations with populations a fraction of the Netherlands per square mile are still overpopulated.

Explosion may be the ultimate alarmist book. The authors claim that overpopulation is at the root of global warming, rain forest destruction, famine, air and water pollution. They do draw the line at blaming it for the Chicago Cubs' failure to win a pennant since 1945, but there are few other catastrophes, real and imagined, that they do not attribute to human fertility. AIDS, for example, is one result of overpopulation. Never mind that the Black Death was an incomparably worse epidemic that occurred on a much more sparsely populated planet. Further, only in today's world of "swollen population" has one of the world's greatest pestilences (smallpox) been wiped off the face of the earth.

NO MORE MALTHUS

1968 was also a watershed year for Julian Simon in that it was his last year as a Malthusian. The next year, he not only became a convert but a missionary. And like all too many missionaries, he has been viciously attacked by the authorities who have seen him as a threat to their orthodoxy. A reviewer from the World Wildlife Fund called him a terrorist, while another critic said his work is "schizophrenic

nonsense and baloney ... sabotaging the human race." With criticism like that, he must be doing something right.

Julian Simon likes people. I don't necessarily mean on a personal basis, though I suspect that to be the case as well. Simon simply thinks that when it comes to *Homo sapiens*, the more the merrier. About a decade ago he wrote a landmark book, *The Ultimate Resource*, which not only put Ehrlich to shame but made an excellent case, both with words and masses of statistics, charts, and graphs, that the best answer to the problems of humanity lie in the proliferation of free thought, free markets, and human beings free to propagate more or less to their hearts content.

Last year, he made perhaps an equally compelling argument that this applies not just to native-born additions but even more so to those who come into our country after birth. Relying again on data and eschewing emotion and prejudice, Simon devastated myth after myth of the alleged evils of immigration in *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. A few examples:

Myth: Immigrants over-use welfare services (a 1986 national poll found that "47 percent of Americans felt that *most* immigrants wind up on welfare"). *Fact:* Since immigrants typically arrive when they are young and strong, they are ready-made taxpayers and far away from the day they'll start collecting the most expensive welfare services, such as Social Security. Thus, immigration contributes more to the public coffers in taxes than it draws out, on average about \$1,300 more each year per immigrant.

Myth: We are being swamped with immigrants, especially the illegals. *Fact:* Immigration as a percentage of U.S. population now is a fifth of what it was earlier in the century. The number of illegal aliens in the U.S. is probably about one-fifth the estimate of 16 million once thrown around by the head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Surprisingly perhaps, Simon finds that there isn't that much difference between the economic effects of illegal aliens and legal ones.

Myth: Immigrants cause unemployment, especially among low-paid and minority groups. *Fact:* New entrants take jobs but they make them as well, both by starting up new businesses and through their purchasing power, although there may be some marginal increases in unemployment in some specific area for a certain length of time.

Simon says there may be a point of diminishing returns whereby the marginal immigrant contributes less and less to his new homeland, and suddenly throwing the doors wide open may result in unforeseeable consequences. To that end, he favors some limits, perhaps using preferences in favor of immigrants with higher education, the ability to speak English, and the amount of assets of an immigrant, with all of these subject to an "ethical veto", meaning they must not be allowed as a pretense to screen ethnic or racial groups much as earlier quota systems have been used.

Simon believes the easiest system may just be to auction off immigration rights, pointing out that this need not simply favor the rich since: (1) the rich are less likely to emigrate, (2) immigrants may be allowed to pay off their fee over a period of years, and (3) the fee need not be set terribly high to do the task. Surely the immigrants who are seeking to leave behind countries that for decades have suffered under communist and socialist economies would see a bit of justice to applying capitalism here.

Unfortunately, there is a strong anti-immigration sentiment among some American conservatives. Their belief is represented by such statements as, “We now have a large population, the increase of which is quite sufficient ... Our labor market is over-stocked in many places and that means a tendency toward a decline of wages.”

As it happens, the statement was made exactly 100 years ago by Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge, but it was reflected as recently as a *National Review* book review a few months back, a knee-jerk effort in which James Shenfield wrote that Simon, “makes his argument with a bewildering array of graphs, charts, formulæ, and anecdotes.” It would seem that if he was so bewildered then perhaps he should have declined to tackle what is to him so difficult a topic. At any rate, Mr. Shenfield’s alleged review was nothing more than the same “Lock the door after I get in!” cry that anti-immigrationists have been shouting for over a hundred years. Once it was the Irish hordes, then it was the Italian and Eastern European hordes, and now it’s the Asian hordes.

Most recently, Simon has published a set of his assorted essays, articles, letters, and speeches, put out in conjunction with the Hudson Institute, called *Population Matters*. This is probably Simon’s most enjoyable text in that it covers so much ground on so many important issues and is completely comprehensible to the layman. (Two chapters in *The Economic Consequences of Immigration* are so full of numbers and formulæ as to induce a stroke in non-economists who try to figure them out, though Simon provides his readers ample warning.) Once again, Simon sets out to bust myths and does so with the seeming ease of popping balloons.

He looks, for example, at the highly influential 1980 book, *Global 2000 Report to President Jimmy Carter*, which stated that “Hundreds of thousands of species - perhaps as many as 20 percent of all species on Earth - will be irretrievably lost as their habitats vanish,” and shows that the statement was based on nothing more substantial than an extrapolation from a guess, with no basis in reality. From 1600 to 1900, species of birds and mammals appeared to have become extinct at a rate of about one per four years, then from 1900-1980 at a rate of one per year; by 1980 it was guessed that 100 species were disappearing per year, and then a rate of 40,000 per year from 1980 to 2000 was extrapolated. All of this is as logical as saying that since it’s Tuesday it will rain fish. Yet, the claims of some environmental activists that the entire Amazon rain forest will be wiped out at the present rate by 2000 stem from the same sort of formula. In fact, actual satellite surveys of rain forest depletion by the U.N.’s Food and Agricultural Organization have shown the rates to be much lower than claimed, although deforestation is a real phenomenon. As to species disappearance, no one really knows its extent, but a good guess would be a one-per-year loss, the same rate we’ve had for the last 90 years.

The best way to determine the effect of population, notes Simon, is to compare population growth with the standard of living and both have increased more or less steadily since the beginning of recorded time. For example, even as the population of China was “exploding”, its life expectancy in recent decades has risen fully 20 years. In capitalist Hong Kong, one of the most densely populated areas in the world, things have improved even more. “There is no convincing economic reason,” he says, “why these trends toward a better life should not continue indefinitely.”

One of the more disturbing sections of *Population Matters* says much with the title, “Adventures Getting Truth Publish-

ed in the United States”, and recounts, among other stories, that of the editor of the world’s most important scientific journal, *Science*, “rigging the system so as to keep me from defending myself and my ideas.” Most readers are unaware that *Science* is an ideologically biased magazine, a lesson I learned the hard way when they assigned a radical feminist linguistics professor to give my book on AIDS a thrashing that they could not have gotten from a scientist or doctor. But Simon goes even further to reveal that *Science*’s parent organization, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, may have broken ethical standards by accepting \$1.2 million in grant money for a study on the effects of increased population growth; the grant had two conditions of acceptance: the study financed must conclude that increased population is detrimental and Simon’s argument must be relegated to a footnote.

One especially interesting passage in *Population Matters* was originally an oral exchange between Simon and James Carey, Dean of the College of Communications at the University of Illinois. Carey approaches the issue of life from a traditional Catholic perspective, Simon from an economic one perhaps encouraged by his Orthodox Judaism. Yet, both come to remarkably similar conclusions and Simon states that the Catholic church is the best hope for a bulwark against population fanaticism. Says Simon:

Clearly Protestantism does not today urge “Be fruitful and multiply.” And I was saddened that Judaism does not either. As a non-Catholic, however, I was sure that at least the Roman Catholic is still committed to this belief, and I hope that the Catholic Church would take the lead in promulgating the message about what I consider to be a fundamental tenet of our common religious heritage - that life is good.

He goes on to say, “The Catholic Church seems the only U.S. institution that is committed to the message that more life is good, and to encouraging people to have as many children as they can bring up well.” People-bashing, says Simon, is not merely a fruitless academic exercise. “This error has cost dearly. It has directed our attention away from the factor that we now know is central in a country’s economic development, its economic and political system.”

Thus, thinly-populated Ethiopia, with its thinly populated country, is ignored even as it starves its people, but the population controllers wage their fingers at the Netherlands.

VERIFYING THE HYPOTHESIS

Ten years ago, in an exchange with Paul Ehrlich, Simon offered to make a bet that the cost of any set of non-government-controlled raw materials would not rise over the next ten years. It has been a tenet of Simon’s (drawing on the ideas of Harold Barnett) that such materials become cheaper over time as man becomes more adept at finding and extracting them, or replacing some of their functions with other material. Ehrlich and company, on the other hand, claim they must become more expensive because we are gradually running out of them. In reply to Simon’s offer, Ehrlich said, “I and my colleagues ... jointly accept Simon’s astonishing offer before other greedy people jump in.”

Lucky for those “other greedy people” they didn’t jump in. As of September 29, 1990, Ehrlich ended up owing Simon money, \$576.07 to be exact, paid by personal check, which got Simon a nice write-up in the *New York Times Magazine*. But a much more substantial \$345,000 went to Ehrlich,

which means he wasn't in much of a hurt from the \$576. That grant came from the MacArthur Foundation, their so-called "genius award". Another \$120,000 went to Ehrlich from Sweden's Royal Academy of Science, the people who give out the Nobel Prize. The co-recipient of the Swedish award, unsurprisingly, was Edward O. Wilson.

Is this the ultimate reward for incompetence, or is something else going on? Ehrlich has been consistently wrong, and Simon has been just as right. So Ehrlich gets \$465,000, major publishers, and continual world-wide attention, and Simon gets \$576.07, academic publishers (his largest book advance was \$2,500, while the recent apocalyptic environmental book *The End of Nature* received a \$275,000 advance) and scorn. What gives?

Those heaping praise and money on Ehrlich do so not because his arguments are good; they demonstrably are not. They do so because his conclusions are "good". If Ehrlich came to his conclusions based on reading the entrails of a chicken, he would still be lauded. Because he puts pseudoscience and pseudo-economics behind them, he is simply lauded all the more.

But why do some people like Ehrlich's conclusions? For two reasons, I suspect. One, many are those who like to control people. They may call themselves "pro-choicers", but don't believe it. Anyone who calls for forced sterilization of human beings isn't pro-choice. These are the self-styled elite, those who believe that the world would be a much better place if they called the shots, that man is perfectible through a proper social system, that government can be used to establish that social system. Finally, they don't like anything or anybody that falls outside that system.

These are the people for whom higher taxes are inherently good, in that regardless of how the money is spent it leaves more in the hands of the government elite and less in the hands of "irresponsible" individuals. They favor stiff hiring regulations with quotas, rather than allowing employers simply to choose the best employee. The idea of a free market and free choice (save when it comes to abortion) drives them right up the wall. After all, freedom includes the freedom to do wrong. Only the strictest control by the elite can prevent this.

Clearly, if the elite are so intent on controlling how the people spend their money and run their businesses, on what they should read in the newspapers or in the bookstores - when was the last time you saw a book by a major publisher criticizing feminism or homosexuality? - they can hardly allow people the freedom to procreate to their hearts content. In a sense, controlling the *numbers* of people is the ultimate control of people.

The second probable motivation is simply a visceral dislike of more people, which is exemplified by a Ziggy T-shirt I once saw. On it, the rotund cartoon figure is featured saying, "I love society; it's people I can't stand." Paul Ehrlich can't stand people, a fact which came across quickly in his 1968 book where he wrote that his thinking had been seriously affected by the sheer mass of humanity he saw on a trip to India. Said Ehrlich:

The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi windows, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people.

Many of the environmental alarmists, including apparently the Ehrlichs, share a romantic view that the best time in history was pre-industrial revolution agrarian society when there were a lot fewer of those *Homo sapiens* around. Never mind that London's famous fog came mostly from wood stoves, that horse excrement caused sickness and death far beyond that caused by air and water pollution, that life in general was nasty, brutish, and short. These modern Luddites are no more concerned with the facts of life than they are with statistics now. Their alleged science is nothing more than rationalization for the way they'd like things to be - or think they'd like things to be.

About 20 years ago, some of my family watched a television show on how increasing population would bring the world to ruin. My little brother was reduced to tears. He has now survived to the ripe old age of 28 and is living in a world that in most ways is a much better place than it was then. Probably Ehrlich had a hand in that television show, whether directly or merely through inspiration. And without a doubt he will now inspire more such shows and terrify more little boys with logic and reasoning that is most fit for that age group. He has done so well at it that it is almost certainly asking too much of him to switch into a more respectable line of work - like selling cars.

As to Simon, on several occasions Simon has repeated Arthur Schlesinger's question: "How many times does an expert have to be wrong before he loses his reputation for expertise?" The apparent answer is that you can get away with it forever, so long as the wrong things you say are politically correct. With his brains and writing ability, Simon could have been rich, he could have been more famous, he could have had major publishers with store window displays of his books. He blew it. And maybe the world is just a little bit better off because he did.

THE BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY:

Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource*, Princeton University Press, 1981.

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Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, Ballantine, 1968.

Paul Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *The Population Explosion*, Simon and Schuster, 1990.

EDITORIAL NOTE:

Libertarian Alliance readers and/or subscribers who know how much importance we attach to accurate and complete bibliographical information (author, title, publisher, place of publication, date of publication, and - if anything at all is being quoted - page number) will have noticed that in the list of books above we have broken our own rules. Apologies. We ourselves were similarly frustrated by the insufficiency of such information in the same list when the above article was first published in *Crisis*. Given that dates are such an important part of Fumento's story, their absence is especially regrettable. We deduced what we could from Fumento's article. Help in correcting these omissions in later editions of this would be much appreciated.