

# Ten Years After the Bet: The More Things Change. . .

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by Michael D. Mallinger

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**T**he late Julian Simon's victory in his famous bet with Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich was a defining moment in the free-market movement's victory over Malthusianism. In 1980 Simon challenged Ehrlich to choose five commodities that would become more expensive over the next ten years. Ehrlich had long expected the prices of resources to rise because of population growth. Ehrlich chose chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten. By 1990 the price of each had fallen from its 1980 level. As a result, Ehrlich paid Simon \$576.07 for the aggregate drop in price for all five metals.

When Simon emerged the victor, many individuals assumed the Malthusians would take a step back and revise their rhetoric on the effects of population growth. However, in the ten years since, very little about the debate over population and natural resources has changed. In many ways the contrasts between Ehrlich's and Simon's approaches to writing about population have become even more pronounced. The failure of the mainstream press to address Ehrlich's tendency to attack the credibility of economists and scientists who question him has been the most surprising aspect of the whole dispute.

Some journalists liken the population debate to an "intellectual barfight." In many respects, this is true. Simon and Ehrlich were

certainly not members of a mutual-admiration society. However, in the course of defending oneself from constant attacks from every environmentalist organization on the planet, it is only natural that scholars like Simon occasionally become exasperated with the media and respond to certain accusations in kind. What is remarkable, though, is that despite the incessant assaults on his moral character, Simon managed to maintain such a positive outlook throughout the ordeal and continued emphasizing the results of scientific investigation during the 1990s, results which proved his point.

Ehrlich's writings, however, have focused on deriding environmental research and policy recommendations made by scientists. As one would expect, he has had many harsh words for scientists who refuse to toe his line. For example, in *The Betrayal of Science and Reason* (Island Press, 1996) he asserts that most scientists who question the validity of the environmentalist agenda do not publish their work in peer-reviewed journals or test and re-test their ideas. Although he concedes that many contrarian scientists do perform the research necessary to back up their claims, he attacks all scientists who receive consulting fees from industry for blurring the line between objective and subjective reporting of their results. Specifically, he expresses extreme disgust that "in some cases, [their] messages simply confuse the issues; in others, they offer a seemingly credible (though generally unfounded) rationale for relaxing or

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eliminating environmental regulations or forestalling development of new policies to address global problems.”

Ehrlich defends scientists who are supported and funded by environmental activists on the grounds that they have no financial interest in seeing their policies enacted. He claims that scientists who perform this research are dependent on peer-reviewed government grants and private foundations. However, he declines to address Bruce Yandle’s theory of “Bootleggers and Baptists,” which explains that many corporations lobby for stricter environmental regulations to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals. He also chooses to ignore the research of public-choice economists on the problems encountered by congressional committees when attempting to monitor their grant recipients. In effect, he asserts that only his sympathizers in the scientific community are qualified to judge the work of other environmental scientists. With citizens’ concern growing over how decisions are made in Washington, this view is extraordinarily narrow-minded.

## Accentuated the Positive

In contrast, Simon, in the last years of his life, emphasized the positive trends in living standards and environmental quality. In the posthumous *It’s Getting Better All the Time* (Cato Institute, 2000, coauthored with Stephen Moore of the Club for Growth) he gives specific examples from published literature—including many documents from federal agencies—to show why the writings of environmental optimists are more accurate than people like Ehrlich would have us believe. In particular, Simon discussed how food prices have fallen, the middle class has expanded, our air has gotten cleaner, and many natural resources have actually become more abundant over the last hundred years. Although he attacked Ehrlich for having such a dismal view of the state of humanity, it is notable that he did not accuse any scientist of having a political agenda or financial stake in the debate.

In addition, Simon explained why so many scientists, especially biologists, have a ten-

dency to sympathize with the population-control agenda. In another posthumous work, *Hoodwinking the Nation* (Transaction, 1999), he discussed why specific characteristics of biological research can lead people to make incorrect assertions about the effects of population growth. In particular, he highlighted the fact that many biologists, including Garrett Hardin of the University of California at Santa Barbara, steadfastly refuse to accept that animal and human adaptation techniques are fundamentally different. He pointed out that even Malthus came to accept that when man is “impelled to the increase of his species by an equally powerful instinct, reason interrupts his career, and asks him whether he may not bring beings into the world, for whom he cannot provide the means of support.” Therefore, Simon rejected the biologists’ use of animal-ecology experiments to simulate human population growth. However, at no point did he attack the American Association for the Advancement of Science for supporting the research of scholars who believe that unchecked population growth will be catastrophic. He merely questioned their logic.

Ehrlich has had harsh words for members of the press. He demands that they refuse to give scientists skeptical of the environmentalist agenda equal time to respond to the activists because the skeptics represent a minority view. In fact, he believes that the press has a “right”-leaning bias against environmentalists. Like most other claims about vast media conspiracies, those statements border on the absurd.

Simon also expressed frustration with the media’s coverage of environmental issues. *Hoodwinking the Nation* gives examples of how unscrupulous scholars manipulate statistics to deceive reporters who lack the training to recognize biases in data samples. He also discusses what he calls the “intellectual-cognitive” causes of error that lead many reporters to assume that environmentalists are usually correct. These include what economists call “the zero-sum mentality”—the assumption that the amount of wealth in the world is finite and that exhaustion of resources is inevitable—a lack of understanding about how economic growth occurs, and

the belief that even if the environmentalists are wrong scientifically, they should be given the benefit of the doubt because they lead people to be better stewards of the environment. Because their understanding of economic principles is limited, many journalists do not understand how environmental regulation can cause more harm than good.

## Blames Economists

Ehrlich largely blames economists for the public's ignorance of his brand of biology. He has blasted graduate students in economics for not considering biology or ecology to be important to their development as economists. In *The Stork and the Plow* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995) he attacks economists for labeling negative aspects of behavior "externalities" and excluding them from cost-benefit analyses. In a survey of leading environmentalist scholars in the January/February 2000 issue of the Sierra Club's magazine, *Sierra*, he stated that the environmentalist revolution must be led by social scientists. "At the center stage," he said, "will be the economists, some of whom are beginning to grasp both the depth of the crisis facing humanity and the crucial role that their discipline must play in solving it."

What Ehrlich declines to mention is that economists have long considered environmental issues important. Most college economics programs—including those at schools with free-market leanings—offer courses in environmental economics. Some schools even offer environmental economics as a separate degree program. Prominent economists such as Tom Titenberg have written books on how to perform cost-benefit analysis on environmental issues.

Contrary to Ehrlich, economists' refusal to adopt uncritically the environmentalist agenda should be viewed as evidence that they take a sensible view of the contributions of biologists and ecologists to economic thinking. In contrast, biologists such as Ehrlich could gain new insight into key aspects of human behavior by studying economics more closely. As Nobel Laureate James Buchanan wrote in *What Should Economists Do?* (Lib-

erty Fund, 1979): "The physical scientist can, I think, learn much from the economist. Essentially, he can learn humility as he appreciates the limitations of science and the scientific method in application to the extraordinarily complex problems of human relationships. To the extent that he can learn that, by comparison, his own problems are indeed elementary; despite his great achievements, he becomes both a better scientist and a better citizen."

Both Ehrlich's and Simon's academic work offer their thoughts on the economic approach to human behavior. Ehrlich's most recent book *Human Natures* (Island Press, 2000) explains how biological and cultural evolution interact to influence people's actions. He discusses F. A. Hayek's contributions in these areas. Curiously, he claims that Hayek supported "planning . . . as the creation of a strong system of laws to provide a level (and relatively monopoly-free) playing field on which competition would be acted out and a system of controls to protect the public health, provide personal security, preserve ecosystem services, and maintain an adequate social safety net." He asserts that Hayek understood that the increasing size and impact of human civilization would be harmful for people everywhere.

Simon addressed the environmentalists' distortion of Hayek's views in his latest posthumous book, *The Great Breakthrough and Its Cause* (University of Michigan Press, 2000). Simon pointed out that as part of his economic logic in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), Hayek had explained how people increase the availability of natural resources. In addition, Simon discussed how Hayek "suggests that . . . [legal] institutions, as well as the rest of the rich tapestry of cultural patterns, developed by a process of cultural selection wherein communities that grow in numbers are more likely to have their institutions be dominant in the wider world than are groups that do not increase in population." In other words, by enabling their populations to increase, civilizations are able to improve their prospects for survival in the long run. Thus, he turned Ehrlich's argument that Hayek sympathized with some elements of

the population-control agenda on its head.

## The Precautionary Principle

The intellectual debate on Hayek's view of cultural institutions has important implications for the political debate about the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle is quickly becoming the new approach for environmental groups that wish to prevent technological innovations before they occur. Although the sentiment behind the principle has existed for a long time, Robert Goodin and David Pearce first formalized it in 1980. They stated that as a matter of principle if the use of a new technology entails a catastrophic risk, the risk should be removed before the technology is permitted.

In his book *Rethinking Risk and the Precautionary Principle* (Butterworth Heinemann, 2000), Julian Morris of the Institute of Economic Affairs points out that two different forms of this principle are emerging in the scientific debate. The weak form puts the burden on regulators to determine the potential environmental harms from a new product and to regulate in anticipation of these harms. Morris writes that governments and international bureaucrats favor this approach because it expands their authority and enables them to cut deals with industries rather than being required to shut them down.

The strong form of the principle puts the burden on the user of an innovation to prove it will have no impact on the environment. Morris points out this approach is favored by environmental and self-styled consumer-protection groups because it enables them to sue any corporation that—in their view—fails to prove that its technology is safe.

Although the precautionary principle has only recently begun to be incorporated into international environmental agreements, it is a legal trump card that environmentalists can use to accomplish much of their agenda by

bypassing public opinion. Whether in its strong or weak form, it introduces great uncertainty into areas such as contract law by enabling bureaucrats or activists to stop or delay new innovations in every sector of an economy. As Morris explains in his book, "Science has not yet, and is unlikely in the future, to provide a full-fledged deterministic theory of the universe from which all particular events can be predicted. In other words, there will always be scientific uncertainty, both with regard to environmental effects and with regard to all other matters, especially concerning the future."

Environmentalists have invested tremendous resources lobbying for the precautionary principle as a way to meet Ehrlich-style demands for directed evolution in social attitudes and political institutions. If they convince people that every potential effect of a new activity must be studied before allowing it, then meeting the goals that Al Gore outlined in his "Global Marshall Plan for the Earth"—including his demand to stabilize world population—does not seem so unrealistic. If Simon were alive today, he would surely develop new insights into how the precautionary principle will eventually be expanded to examine—and possibly prevent—the environmental effects of all human phenomena—including population growth.

If there is one thing free-market scholars should learn from the past decade, it is that the environmentalist case for population control is a static philosophy. To defeat it they must demonstrate once and for all that population growth does not cause poverty, famine, and resource depletion when people are allowed to be creative. If the free-market side wins the public debate, Ehrlich and his fellow alarmists will not be able to cry wolf again. Julian Simon did an outstanding job of launching the campaign against the Malthusian trap. Finishing what he started would strike an important blow for freedom everywhere. □

# The Trouble with Teacher Training

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by George C. Leef

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**T**his is an article about an absurd state of affairs in the field of education, but I'd like to begin with a little thought experiment having nothing directly to do with education.

Imagine two countries—Freedonia and Ruloveria—whose inhabitants like music. However, the two follow entirely different methods of training the musicians who play in their orchestras.

In Freedonia when an orchestra needs a new member, the conductor holds an audition to see which of the several musicians who have applied is the best performer. The ability to play the violin, oboe, trumpet, or whatever is the determining factor. The conductor is hardly interested in how or where the individual learned to play. He also is aware that if he chooses poorly, the quality of his concerts will suffer and he may earn less money or even lose his position. The Freedonian system is not written in law. In fact, it isn't written at all; it's just the way things have been done for generations.

In Ruloveria the government has stepped in to regulate the training of musicians. To combat the previous "anarchy" in musical training, laws were enacted many years ago to ensure that all would-be musicians would have "appropriate and professional" training. Any individual wishing to become a musician must attend a government-regulated training school, and conductors may not hire anyone

for an orchestral position who has not earned his musician's certificate, unless no certified musicians apply.

Students in the music schools devote most of their time to learning the theory of musicianship as it is conceived by the professors there. They take courses with such titles as, "Interpersonal Cooperation and Conflict in Ensembles" and "Oppression and Equity in Concert Programming." The students seldom actually *play* any instrument; music professors in Ruloveria long ago stopped believing that it was important for musicians to learn how to play. "A well-trained musician can learn the mere performance aspects later," declared the influential Professor Lazarus Tinnatus. "We can see, even if the uninformed public cannot, that unless we have musicians who have been given the right outlook on the role of music in society, our social wounds will continue to fester."

What would you expect to be the consequences of the two vastly different regimes for the training of musicians?

Concerts in Freedonia are usually well attended, and the patrons come away whistling tunes from favorite compositions. Although there is no official policy to guide the training of musicians, orchestras and other musical groups never have trouble finding talented performers. Music lovers are satisfied.

Concerts in Ruloveria, in contrast, no longer attract many willing customers because most of the musicians are incompetent. The government has taken to conscript-

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