

Garrett Hardin, Ph.D.

A retrospective of his life and work

by Richard Lynn

Garrett Hardin (born 1915) has been the leading advocate over the last three decades of the 20th century for the necessity of controlling the growth of world population and of reducing immigration into the United States. He has written numerous books and articles to promote these objectives. His work has consisted of four principal themes. The first is that the world is experiencing a population explosion which will deplete natural resources, damage the environment, and reduce the quality of life. To prevent this from happening, ways need to be found to reduce world population growth. Second, while it is going to be difficult to stabilize population growth in the economically developing world, it can be stabilized in the United States by a reduction of immigration. Third, he believes that multicultural societies are inevitably fraught with social division and conflict and this is another reason why immigration into the United States should be reduced. Fourth, the aim of reducing or stabilizing population growth needs to be supplemented by the principle that it would be desirable to control not only the quantity of children but also their quality.

Garrett Hardin was born in Dallas, Texas in 1915. His father was a freight sales representative with the Illinois Central Railroad. Although the family moved frequently because of his father's job, they had secure roots in his grandfather's farm in southwestern Missouri. Hardin's high school and college days were spent in Chicago. He showed promise in writing from an early age. At the age of 15 he won a city-wide contest run by the *Chicago Daily News* with an essay on the importance of Thomas Edison. For this he was

awarded a trip east to visit the aging inventor.

In 1932 Hardin won both a University of Chicago academic scholarship and a dramatic arts scholarship at the Chicago College of Music. A month's attendance convinced him that he could not follow both paths simultaneously, and so he abandoned the dramatic scholarship. In 1936 Hardin graduated from the University of Chicago in zoology, studying under the ecologist W. C. Allee. He then transferred to Stanford University, where he obtained his Ph.D. in microbial ecology in 1941. His most influential mentors were the microbiologist C. B. van Niel and the geneticist George W. Beadle, later to be awarded the Nobel prize. Shortly after graduation Hardin began work at the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Division of Plant Biology, which had a laboratory on the Stanford campus. For four years he was part of a team investigating antibiotics produced by algae, as well as the future possibility of using cultured algae as animal food.

In 1946 Hardin resigned his research position at the Carnegie Institution to accept an associate professorship at the University of California's campus in Santa Barbara. During the next two decades he devoted much of his time to developing an ecologically-oriented course in biology for the general citizen, which he adapted to closed-circuit television. He was appointed full professor of human ecology in 1963. Hardin's work on population control and immigration reduction has been supported by grants from the Pioneer Fund from 1988 through 1992.

The Tragedy of the Commons

Hardin achieved a major impact for his views on the desirability of reducing the world population explosion in 1968 with his presidential address, "The Tragedy of the Commons," delivered to the Pacific Division of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.¹ Hardin began his lecture by reference to the point made by an English mathematician named William Lloyd in a pamphlet published in 1833. Lloyd argued that if a public purse were made available for everyone to dip into, the

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money in the purse would rapidly disappear. Hardin suggested the alternative analogy of a common land on which all people are allowed to graze their cattle. When this right is available, there is a natural tendency for people to exploit the grazing to the full because the gain to them as individuals outweighs the cost. The

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result is that the common land becomes overgrazed and deteriorates. Hardin argued that this was inevitable and called it “the tragedy of the commons.” He noted that this problem had been solved by the introduction of property rights in land. Once land became owned by individuals, rather than in common, it became in the owners’ own interest not to overgraze it and to maintain its productive capacity.

The general principle of the tragedy of the commons is that individuals will exploit anything that is free in order to maximize their own advantage, but that this entails a cost to society as a whole. Hardin then applied this principle to the production of children. People who have a large number of children, he argued, are imposing a cost on society, which they themselves do not have to bear. “Freedom to breed,” he wrote, “will bring ruin to all.”² How, therefore, can we prevent people from damaging the public well-being by producing excessive numbers of children? Hardin observed that those concerned with this problem were making appeals to the conscience of the offenders. He argued that this would not be effective, partly because it would not work and partly because it would generate guilt, and that Freudian psychoanalysts have demonstrated that guilt is psychologically

damaging.

Since appeals to the conscience of the group he called “the nations’ (or the world’s) breeders” would be both ineffective and psychologically undesirable, Hardin argued that coercion would be necessary to prevent people from having excessive numbers of children. He recalled that the United Nations issued a statement in 1967 to the effect that it was a natural right of couples to have as many children as they wished, but he said that this had to be rejected. He recognized that the restriction of people’s right to have unlimited numbers of children would necessarily involve a reduction in individual freedom. Nevertheless, this was justifiable for the good of society as a whole, just as the freedom to rob banks is curtailed by the criminal law. Hardin concluded:

The only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing the freedom to breed, and that very soon.³

Neither in this address nor subsequently has Hardin suggested the ways by which people’s right to have children would actually be curtailed. Presumably they would be punished in some way if they exceeded the permitted limit, or possibly they would be compulsorily sterilized. Hardin leaves his readers to work these details out for themselves. But although the measures for reducing birth rates are not spelled out, Hardin made it clear that some kind of sanctions would be required to enforce family limitation. Hardin has reiterated and elaborated the themes in his 1968 lecture on a number of occasions over the course of the succeeding quarter century.

Population, Resources, and Pollution

Hardin’s basic argument is that the earth has a limited carrying capacity for the size of the population it can accommodate. He believes that the optimum carrying capacity had been reached by the last quarter of the 20th century and any further increases in world population will bring about a deterioration in the quality of the environment and of human life. As the numbers of people increase, there will inevitably be rising levels of pollution, degeneration of the quality of agricultural land, deforestation, and deterioration of air and water quality. To prevent this deterioration, Hardin believes our first aim should be to arrest the growth of world population.

Hardin notes that fertility in the United States and Europe fell to about two per woman or even lower in the 1980s and that this would stabilize the size of the populations at approximately their present numbers for several decades to come. He welcomes this development. To ensure that fertility remains low Hardin advocates a variety of measures including subsidized birth control and abortion, paying adolescent girls an annual allowance conditional on their not having a child, the abolition or reduction of tax allowances for children to discourage people from having them, and rewards for those who have only one child or none, which might take the form of prestigious subsidized vacations.⁴

Immigration

Because fertility is low in the United States and Europe, Hardin believes that the problem of excessive population growth would be largely under control if it were not for immigration. He sees immigration as the major problem that will lead to increases in population in the economically developed world. To prevent this growth he advocates the reduction of immigration nearly to zero. In a striking metaphor, Hardin has on several occasions used the analogy of a nation as a lifeboat.⁵ A lifeboat can only hold a certain number of people. If more are taken on board, the lifeboat sinks and everyone will be drowned. The only rational course of action for those in a full lifeboat is to refuse to take anyone else on board. It is the same with a nation. "To survive," he writes in his last book, *Living Within Limits*:

*rich nations must refuse immigration to people who are poor because their governments are unable or unwilling to stop population growth.*⁶

Two years later he reaffirmed this reasoning in a journal article, this time drawing an analogy from microbiology.⁷ Biologists see immigration as a developmental phenomenon. ... Just as the thyroid gland withers away during growth from babyhood to adulthood, so too must immigration disappear as the country matures by becoming filled up.⁸

Multiculturalism

Hardin advances another reason for reducing immigration. This is that most immigrants into the United States following the 1965 Immigration Act have been Mexicans, blacks from the Caribbean and Africa, and Asians. This is bringing about an

increasingly multicultural society, and Hardin believes that this is a recipe for social disorder. He writes:

*Diversity within a nation destroys unity and leads to civil wars. Immigration, a benefit during the youth of a nation, can act as a disease in its mature state. Too much internal diversity in large nations has led to violence and disintegration.*⁹

In 1991 he wrote that the cult of multiculturalism has been responsible for the large scale immigration of non-European peoples into the United States and this will destroy social unity:

We are now in the process of destabilizing our own country through the unlimited acceptance of massive immigration. The magic words of the de stabilizers are "diversity" and "multiculturalism." Diversity is good, yes: but like all good things, it is possible to have too much of it in one place. The telling example of our time is Beirut. For a while the diversity of

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this city was beautiful and exciting, it was called the Paris of the Mediterranean by the Arab millionaires who flocked to it. But as it grew in population, and as the proportions of the disparate ethnic groups changed, peace vanished. Within the bounds of a single nation the mutual stresses of intolerant groups became too great.

Popular anthropology came along with its dogma that all cultures are equally good, equally valuable. To say otherwise was to be narrowminded and prejudiced, to be guilty of the sin of ethnocentrism. In time, a sort of Marxist Hegelian dialectic took charge of our thinking: ethnocentrism was replaced by what

we can only call ethnofugalism – a romantic flight away from our own culture. That which was foreign and strange, particularly if persecuted, became the ideal. Black became beautiful, and prolonged bilingual education replaced naturalization....Idealistic religious groups, claiming loyalty to a higher power than the nation, openly shielded and transported illegal immigrants.

If two cultures compete for the same bit of turf (environment), and if one of the populations increases faster than the other, then year by year the population that is reproducing faster will increasingly outnumber the slower one. If, "other things being equal," there are advantages to being numerous, then in time the slowly reproducing population will be displaced by the fast one. This is passive genocide. It may be that no one is ever killed, but the genes of one group replace the genes of the other. That's genocide.¹⁰

The Third World Population Explosion

While the size of the population in the economically developed world has approximately stabilized in the last quarter of the 20th century except for immigration, population growth remains high in the economically developing world of Latin America, Africa and much of Asia south of the Himalayas. Hardin believes that ways need to be found for halting this excessive increase. He does not accept the theory of many demographers that as people become more affluent they automatically control their fertility, and its implication that the economically developed nations should give more aid to the underdeveloped nations to bring about the required increase in affluence.

Hardin holds the contrary Malthusian view that economic and other forms of aid simply lead to more babies being born and surviving. Aid increases the size of the populations of third world countries so that they will need yet more aid in the future. For instance, Hardin states:

sending food to Ethiopia does more harm than good. Each year the production from Ethiopian land declines. The lands are used beyond their carrying capacity because there are far more people than renewable resources.¹¹

Hardin's prescription for this problem is for the first world nations to cease to give aid to third world countries and let them solve their own problems of adjusting their population size to the productive capacity of their lands. The only aid that the United States and other rich countries should give to the impoverished third world is information about birth control and contraceptives. Hardin is aware that some people will call the denial of aid to starving third world populations genocide, but he regards his prescription as being to the long term advantage of the third world countries. He writes:

If a country is poor and powerless because it already has too many children for its resources, it will become even poorer and more powerless if it breeds more.¹²

Hardin regards the desire of many people in the United States and Europe to send aid to third world countries as what he calls "promiscuous altruism" and "short range compassion." Some of these people, he believes, are what he calls "ethnofugalists" who see

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virtue only in others and are the opposite of ethnocentrists who see virtue only in their own ethnic group.¹³

Hardin does not offer any detailed advice to governments of third world countries on how to control the growth of their burgeoning populations, but he is clear that some form of compulsion will probably be necessary and is justified. "Like it or not, the issue of coercion must be faced" he writes, and continues "the present generation has become pathologically sensitive to the word 'coercion'."¹⁴ He writes with approval of the Chinese population control policy in

which women members of production teams have to seek permission to have a child. If they become pregnant after permission has been refused, they are required to have an abortion. Hardin gives his approval to the Chinese policy of allowing couples to have only one child and the imposition of financial sanctions on those who disregard it. His only regret is that the one child policy has not been working in rural China.¹⁵ Evidently, the punishments for having more than one child have not been fully effective and, by implication, needed to be strengthened. He is critical of the American government for cutting off aid to China for the promotion of birth control when the widespread use of abortion became known.

Population Quality

Although Hardin's principal concern has been the growth of population numbers, he has also voiced concern about population quality and it is here that his writings have a eugenic dimension. He has criticized Paul Erlich's 1967 book *The Population Time Bomb* and the American organization Zero Population Growth (ZPG) on the grounds that Erlich and ZPG failed to take into account the issue of population quality. Erlich argued that the world population explosion was so serious that people in the United States and Europe had a duty not to have children as a contribution to reducing world population. Hardin argues that this would be dysgenic because the peoples of the first world are more intelligent than those in the third world. The proper solution to the world population explosion, Hardin argues, is for each country to stabilize its own population numbers.

Similarly, Hardin criticizes the Zero Population Growth movement because its message of the desirability of reducing the birth rate appeals largely to college graduates. If college graduates respond by having fewer children but nongraduates do not, the result will be dysgenic. Hardin says that:

*To put it bluntly it would be better to encourage the breeding of more intelligent people rather than the less intelligent. ZPG's entire attraction has been among the college population. So, in effect, ZPG is encouraging college-educated people to have fewer children instead of encouraging reduced fertility among the less intelligent.*¹⁶

Hardin is aware that many economists dispute his claim that world population has already reached its

optimum, but he castigates them for their failure to recognize the principles of limited natural resources, diseconomies of scale and the complexity of ecological systems which are easily destroyed by human exploitation. The thinking of economists who fail to recognize these principles, he asserts, is distorted by the Freudian process of denial, by which uncongenial realities are repressed into the unconscious mind.¹⁷

Garrett Hardin has received many honors. In 1973 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and in 1974 to the American Philosophical Society. In 1979 he was awarded the Margaret Sanger Award for his support for the wider provision of birth control and population limitation. In 1993 he was one of the recipients of the Phi Beta Kappa annual book prizes at which the chairman of the award committee described Hardin's *Living within Limits* as:

*a trenchant, learned, passionate analysis of the most difficult problem that confronts mankind since the threat of nuclear annihilation has dwindled – the threat of an apparently inevitable human over-population of the earth.*¹⁸

NOTES

1. Hardin, G. 1968. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science*. 162:1243-1248.
2. *Ibid.* 1248.
3. *Ibid.* 1248
4. Hardin, G. 1993. *Living Within Limits*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.
5. Hardin, G. 1974. "Living On a Lifeboat." *Bioscience*. 24:561-568.
6. Hardin, G. 1993. *Op. cit.* 294.
7. Hardin, G. 1995. "Multiculturalism: A recipe for Conflict." *Public Affairs*. 5:42.
8. Hardin, G. 1993. *Op. cit.* 42.
9. *Ibid.* 42.
10. Hardin, G. 1991. "Conspicuous Benevolence and the Population Bomb." *Chronicles*. 15:20-22.
11. Hardin, G. 1993. *Op. cit.* 37.
12. *Ibid.* 252.
13. *Ibid.* 297.
14. *Ibid.* 270.
15. Spencer, C. 1992. "Interview with Garrett Hardin." *Omni*. 14:55-63.
16. *Ibid.* 59.
17. Hardin, G. 1993. *Op. cit.* 274.
18. *The Key Reporter*. 1993/1994 Winter: 1.