

Garrett Hardin: Salute to a Prophet

by Walter Youngquist

In 1968, the United States produced more oil than it used. Now it imports more oil than it produces. The world now consumes twenty-seven billion barrels a year. Water tables are declining worldwide, particularly in India and China where populations have boomed. In the United States in 1968, the Colorado River flowed into the Gulf of Lower California. It no longer reaches the sea. The “commons” of world oil and water supplies now have unsustainable demands upon them. These and many other examples illustrate the concept of the “tragedy of the commons” — more and more people drawing from limited resources, some taking more than others.

But in 1968 this was apparent to only a few. Garrett Hardin was one. That year Hardin delivered his essay “The Tragedy of the Commons” as a presidential address before the Pacific Division of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Later published in *Science*, it has since been reprinted in twenty-seven languages. The message of the commons is even more relevant today than when it first appeared. Hardin summarizes: “The population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality.”

Growing problems of human existence are honestly confronted by few individuals. Good news sells, but bearers of unpopular realities are not happily received. It takes courage to carry such tidings. For nearly fifty years Hardin has stated sometimes unpopular truths. A scientist and a moralist, Hardin asks essential questions.

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Today's citizens in industrialized countries enjoy unprecedented prosperity, but some are becoming aware of the problems of population and resources. Since “The Tragedy of the Commons” was published, world population has almost doubled. Hardin's book *Exploring New Ethics for Survival on the Voyage of Spaceship Beagle* (1972) examined the concept of sustainability and optimum population size. He asked

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how this will be accomplished: by intelligent choice, or by nature's harsh realities. These thoughts in 1972 were ahead of their time, but given today's understanding of environmental interconnections, Hardin's concerns were prophetic.

Another early volume, *Stalking the Wild Taboo*, addressed the issue of abortion. Today's strident discussions of this and other population issues demonstrate that science and morality are inexorably intertwined. In *Living Within Limits* (1993), Hardin explores another sensitive issue, immigration. Here the concept of “lifeboat ethics” and the idea of “equality” emerge. A ship carrying a hundred people is sinking. There is only one lifeboat which can hold ten people. Do the ten in the lifeboat make it to the far shore safely, or do they take responsibility for the ninety in the water and attempt to take them aboard, whereupon the lifeboat sinks and everyone drowns in

perfect equality — and catastrophe?

The heading of one section in *Living Within Limits*, “Population Growth, Destroyer of Dreams,” asks what qualities of life population growth destroys. Clogged freeways, two-hour commutes, standing in long lines, open space and wildlife habitat converted to subdivisions and malls are everyday examples. Hardin again raises a key issue of our time in asking how population growth impacts individual experiences and aesthetics — our quality of life.

Hardin’s most recent book, *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia*, again sets scientific knowledge alongside moral goals by addressing the politically sensitive topic of immigration. He asks that we look dispassionately at the essential issue: the

inseparability of population size and the resources needed to support it. Energy supplies (even renewables) and water resources, two of life’s basics, are finite. Immigration is often only understood as a moral question, but Hardin reminds us of the interconnection between population and physical science, exposing the myth of unending abundance supporting an ever-growing human population.

Garrett Hardin has accurately, perceptively, and courageously presented the fundamental issues of human survival. His contributions will remain relevant as long as humanity exists. The good news is that Garrett Hardin is active, and writing another book.

Garrett Hardin:

Thank you for teaching us how to keep growing when resources keep dwindling

by John F. Rohe

Quite by accident you find yourself seated next to Garrett Hardin at a conference. During a break, as the attendees gravitate toward exits, the air comes alive with exchanges among old friends and new acquaintances.

Dr. Hardin turns your way while reaching for his crutches. In a distinctively warm and congenial style, he gestures with a cordial nod. His expressive eyes and gentle smile invite a conversation.

You are now face to face with the person who framed the ethical considerations for the pro-choice movement. Greetings are exchanged, and your awareness of the surrounding room abruptly fades. Poised for a conversation, in a split second your mind races through cascading images of his life story.

You reflect upon Dr. Hardin’s textbooks used in

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your biology classes many years ago.

You recall that fertility rates in the United States plummeted from 3.5 children per woman in the 1960s to 1.7 within a single decade. Fertility rates also dropped in Europe, the Pacific Rim, China, and (at glacial speed) in the so-called “Third World.” Dr. Hardin’s soft voice carried a heavy message as the population growth rate tumbled.

He was on the front lines during a paradigm shift. He deftly pierced conventional assumptions in making sense of the world. He taught us how to keep growing in a world where resources keep dwindling. We knew he was referring to the mental growth needed to comprehend our fragile surroundings when he spoke of the need for more growth.

Physical challenges in his childhood impeded outdoor activities. Meanwhile, he was introduced to the classics by his elders. These early experiences conspired with an inquisitive mind. Unique insights and a historical frame of reference enabled him to apply a blend of intelligence and cynicism. This allowed him to probe the unexamined convictions of our times.

He unveiled the operative forces behind our destructive potential even as the effects were eluding

cautious observers.

When bankers, brokers, and financiers quipped, “There’s no free lunch,” he would courteously remind them that the assumption of a “free lunch” on the environment underlies our economic system. Hardin dwells in a world of ecological, biological, economic, and ethical reality.

As he is seated next to you today, this man comfortably inhabits a future domain. As his thoughts are often ignored in the present day, you know that the future will claim him. His ethics belong to the future, and perhaps he does too. They will claim his ideals and his cherished values.

Ortega y Gasset reminds us that, “The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man.” In a split second, while formulating thoughts for a discussion with Dr. Hardin, you reflect upon the “Tragedy of the Commons.” This essay was first published in 1968 by *Science* magazine. It also became the very first article in the inaugural issue of *The Social Contract* eleven years ago. With brevity and clarity, Garrett bestowed “the commons” upon a pasture, and a powerful metaphor upon all of us.

In drawing analogies between “the commons” and pauperized ecosystems, contaminated groundwaters, squandered biodiversity, and degraded air, Dr. Hardin clarified the faulty assumptions in our economic system. The failure to depreciate manmade assets (vehicles, buildings, etc.) in an accounting curriculum would surely draw a failing grade. Yet the same curriculum will ignore the depreciation of our natural surroundings! With one small essay and a powerful metaphor, the flat-earthers in macroeconomics had met their Columbus. Dr. Hardin’s metaphor gave us a way to explain the human predicament for the

twenty-first century.

As you struggle for the right words to start the conversation, you realize that a “thank you” will fall short of the mark. How do we thank someone for sharing their accumulated wisdom and ingenuity in the face of bitter criticism and opposition? How might we, today, extend a token of appreciation for his courage and resilience in advocating for our successors? “Thank you” will just not suffice. We need a bigger word — a more expansive concept.

Unable to summon the right expression of gratitude for his ingenuity, his resourcefulness, and his commitment to our children and our children’s children, we remain humbled by our inability adequately to frame our appreciation for such a gift.

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