

# The Making of a Cornucopian

Book Review by John Attarian

Julian Simon (1932-1998) was one of America's most fervent immigration advocates, and an optimist who argued incessantly that mankind's situation was getting ever better. Published posthumously from a manuscript written in 1994-1996, *A Life Against the Grain* contains numerous clues about the psychological roots of Simon's optimism and immigration advocacy, and bleakly illuminates the flawed nature of his thought.

While his professional success may be questionable, he writes, enumerating the professional distinctions he didn't acquire, there is no question that he was right: "That the world will continue to become better-off in all material ways for the foreseeable future has so far been confirmed completely."

Ideas aren't very important in the long run, he adds. While bad ideas such as Marxism can be damaging temporarily, people's desires to make good livings, bear and rear children, and enjoy the fruits of their labor will ultimately bring about government policies enabling them to do these things. All we really need intellectuals for is to secure some degree of liberty and rule of law; the people will do the rest. The more we progress, the less economic and political ideas will matter, because the variety of political regimes and the ease of international movement "will provide the necessary opportunities for entrepreneurs

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and other talented persons." Therefore, there is a declining need for philosophers of freedom to wrest freedom from politicians. "People will achieve it anyway." Greater progress will create greater opportunities for irrational, counterproductive conduct, but Simon hoped that this will be checked by "the pressure of basic needs."

All this reveals Simon as a minstrel of economism. He not only assumes perpetual progress, he construes it entirely in material terms. To Simon, material concerns and economic incentives far outweigh the life of the mind.

Another theme which Simon establishes early is his miserably low self-esteem. He considered himself a failure and an outcast. Indeed, he flaunts his self-disparagement so relentlessly that one is uncharitably reminded of Tartuffe. When Simon reveals that he was depressed for thirteen years, it becomes horribly clear not only

that he wants his readers to feel sorry for him. There is a smell of manipulateness here. Recall that Simon also called attention to his unhappiness and sense of being in a beleaguered intellectual minority at the beginning of *The Ultimate Resource*. I cannot shake the impression that Simon had a strategy of soliciting sympathy from readers so as to get them to suspend critical judgment about his positions.

To be fair, Simon's account of his childhood is unpleasant. As soon as he could stand, his mother would put him inside a screened-in box hung outside a second-story window, to save herself the trouble of taking him outdoors for some fresh air. Naturally, he cried when he wanted her or wanted to come in. She ignored him "until I learned to stop. Maybe here was the template for my life: Yearning to be held close, but not expecting that my yearning would be fulfilled." When he was five, he went crying to his mother that someone had hit him, only to be told to fight his own

**A Life Against the Grain: The Autobiography of an Unconventional Economist**  
by Julian L. Simon  
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battles. It was the last time he asked her for help in dealing with others. For the rest of his life, he had trouble getting help from people. An only child, he had, he tells us, little contact with his mother, and for reasons which are obscure he apparently despised his father. While one cannot help pitying Simon, one wonders why he did not have the decency to keep some of this to himself.

One wonders too if Simon realized how much he was revealing. "I greatly respected Mother, and felt affectionate and protective toward her. But the distance at which she kept me (and others) worked to diminish any passion I might have felt toward her." (p. 33) "Passion" is a curious word for a son to use to describe his feelings for his mother. This is either sloppy language or a disquieting slip. Readers may speculate as they like.

Very few things in life gave Simon pleasure. He did not feel he had "any claim on others to do anything for me," and seldom asked anybody for anything, because he "did not feel I had any rights to have my desires fulfilled by others." Clearly, Simon had a depression-prone personality.

Perhaps due to his childhood starvation for affection, he also had an obsessive sexual lust, sex apparently being one claim on others which he did think he had. One of his bachelor affairs resulted in a pregnancy for which he and his partner obtained an illegal abortion. Odd that someone so hard on himself had so few sexual scruples. He has always opposed making abortion a crime, he tells us, and has no objection to contraception. Catholics who laud Simon because he told them what they want to hear about population should be more fastidious in their choice of intellectual bedfellows.

By his own account, Simon's education in economics was virtually nonexistent. A Harvard psychology major, he took no economics as an undergraduate. His graduate studies in business at the University of Chicago included one course in microeconomics, one in economic forecasting, and one in managerial economics. That was all. He had no education in demography whatsoever. This did not stop him from trying to publish articles on these fields in refereed scholarly journals – an audacity hard to square with his purported low self-esteem.

Repeatedly, Simon complains that he had a hard time getting published. One article, critical of the central work in population economics, a book by

Ansley Coale and Edgar Hoover, "was rejected by journal after journal, and only appeared at last in my 1977 book." That his qualifications as a marketing professor to pontificate on population economics were underwhelming, and that perhaps the referees sensed that he had not mastered his subject, seems not to have occurred to him.

When he began studying the economics of population in 1966-1968, he believed that population growth was one of humanity's biggest threats, and the single worst obstacle to economic progress. He claims that studying the data changed his mind. There was no

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empirical correlation between the growth rate of a country's population and its rate of economic development.

Simon's account of his population work inadvertently reveals his glaring intellectual deficiencies. He adopted Ester Boserup's theory that rising population density leads countries to adopt more labor-intensive agriculture. To test her theory, he made a cross-country study of irrigation, a measurable indicator of labor-intensive agriculture. "I found that population density has a strong positive relationship to the proportion of a country's cultivated land that is irrigated." Given that for poor countries agriculture was at least half the value of their output and that irrigation systems are a major part of agricultural capital, "this finding suggests that additional people lead to an increase in agricultural saving." Obviously, Simon deemed this a good thing.

That increased irrigation gradually salinizes the soil, ultimately poisoning it and rendering it useless for agriculture, which occurred in Sumeria and which is ruining cropland worldwide, goes unmentioned. Simon did not realize that what his finding really suggests is that greater population density pushes societies into greater dependence on unsustainable, even dysfunctional agricultural methods. His ecological ignorance, and his blithe unawareness of his ignorance, are appalling. He faults the mainstream population economics literature for focusing only on

the immediate short run, and ignoring the crucial long run. But as the foregoing shows, this criticism applies to him too.

All too clearly, Simon was a dilettante, not a scholar: facile rather than thoroughly learned and profoundly reflective. Obviously, he had never really thought things through. He certainly never grasped two of Garrett Hardin's great maxims: "We can never do merely one thing" and "And then what?"

Although Simon whines about his treatment by immigration critics such as Peter Brimelow and the Federation for American Immigration Reform, he does not answer them. The closest he comes is a nasty *ad hominem* swipe at motives tucked into childhood reminiscences. From childhood on Simon was an egalitarian with an intense dislike of elitism, or a belief in the superiority of oneself or one's group to others. Elitism "explains the willingness of people to believe arguments about the low IQs of various groups..., and combined with the innate dislike of foreigners, it explains the arguments used against immigrants." (So if you're worried about immigration driving population over carrying capacity, you must be a foreigner-baiting snob. Oh.)

Amid all this, Simon recounts his depression, triggered in 1962 by guilt over something unethical he did in one of his mail-order businesses. Finally, around 1971 Simon consciously decided that he wanted to be happy. In 1973 he began observing the Jewish Sabbath, which, giving him one day's relief a week, helped him greatly. He decided not to be a perfectionist, which helped, too. His realization that he had an obligation to his children to be happy, so as to set an example for them, was the final event in his escape from depression.

As a human being one rejoices that Simon found happiness. But note that his optimistic pronouncements about resources, population, and immigration began appearing after he shook off his depression in 1975. Was his optimism really grounded in the facts, as he claimed, or was it constructed to meet a deep personal need? How badly were debates over resources, immigration, and population warped because Simon

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needed to be happy? This need may explain his strange persistence in making counterfactual and bizarre claims (e.g., that oil and ore come out of our minds) in the face of devastating criticisms by Garrett Hardin, Herman Daly and others – which he never mentions, let alone answers, here.

Suspicion that Simon's psychological needs drove his intellectual positions deepens

when one recalls his writing in *The Ultimate Resource* that he began his population studies while depressed, and that as he came to a positive view of population growth, "my outlook for my myself, for my family, and for the future of humanity became more optimistic. Eventually, I was able to pull myself out of my depression. This is only part of the story, but there is at least some connection between the two sets of mental events – my population studies and my increasing optimism." Tellingly, after *The Ultimate Resource* appeared and was immediately seized upon by the cornucopian camp, Simon wrote in a note to himself, "I have hit the jackpot. The world has now made it easy for me to remain undepressed. I no longer must deflect my mind from my professional difficulties in order to stay happy, but instead I can now dwell on my worldly 'success' and take pleasure in it."

But perhaps Simon's most startling revelation in *A Life Against the Grain* is his apparent belief that the mind can make its own reality. A "key element" in his thinking was a belief that scientific propositions are not laws existing in nature which we discover, but rather they "follow from our own interests and perceptions as well as from the 'out there' features of the world. That is, we invent and develop the relationships we find, rather than merely discovering them." The earth, for example, is round and smooth for manufacturers of cheap globes, but flat for surveyors and farmers. "The earth does not have one shape but rather many, and the relevant 'model' – flat, round, bumpy, or whatever – depends upon your needs and interests." (Note that Simon uses "the earth" and "the relevant 'model'" of the earth interchangeably, indicative of the sleight of hand, sloppiness, or both

which pervade his work.) Reality, then, is whatever you want and need it to be. This is the sort of “thinking” which allowed Simon to dismiss population and environmental concerns and the law of diminishing marginal returns as mere pessimistic oldthink.

But if your model of reality flows from your agenda, it merely reflects your own state of mind. So by Simon’s own logic, his optimistic model of the universe depended on his “needs and interests” in

remaining undepressed. Which means that his optimism does not reflect the reality “out there.”

Julian Simon was one of the most important minds of the past twenty years – not because he was right, but because he was disastrously wrong, and worked powerfully to wrench the resource, immigration, and population debates away from reality and into fantasy. Although indifferently written, *A Life Against the Grain* is useful for what it reveals of the mind and motives of a deeply pernicious figure. •