

Scarcity or Abundance? A Debate on the Environment

by Norman Myers and Julian Simon

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Reviewed by Jonathan H. Adler

On October 14, 1992, students at Columbia University gathered in the Kellogg Conference Center to witness a clash of worldviews. Cornucopian economist Julian Simon and apocalyptic ecologist Norman Myers were staging a debate on the future of human civilization and the natural environment. At issue was whether present rates of economic development, population growth, and environmental disruption pose a significant threat to humanity. The exchange that ensued, along with pre-debate statements and rebuttals, is included in *Scarcity or Abundance?*, a useful encapsulation of current environmental debates.

The approaches of Simon and Myers could not be more different. Simon, author of *Population Matters* and *The Ultimate Resource*, is a data-driven economist. His preferred mode of analysis is to ask "What do the numbers show?" By analyzing long-term trends, Simon believes it is possible to show significant improvement in virtually every material aspect of human welfare. To wit, he shows that people are living longer, healthier lives than ever before, while in many important respects environmental indicators show significant improvement over the past several decades. "Almost every economic and social change or trend points in a positive direction," he declares, adding "there is no persuasive reason to believe that these trends will not continue indefinitely." So confident is Simon that this will continue, he is willing to bet on it. Pick the trend, the time period, and the size of the wager, and Simon will take you on.

If Simon sees trends that can continue, Myers sees the end of progress. "We are at a watershed stage in human history," he counsels. Myers fears an "unparalleled threat" created by the forces of "environ-

mental decline in conjunction with rapid population growth." He is undaunted by holes in the data that purportedly make his case. The state of the world may seem rosy, but Myers sees a world "poised" on the brink of catastrophe. Human activity has finally reached a magnitude capable of initiating complete ecological collapse—an environmental "breakpoint." Urgent action is absolutely essential to ensure human survival. "No human community in the future will ever have our chance to save the planetary ecosystem," he warns, "because if we don't master the problems, they'll have nothing left to do but pick up the pieces we pass on to them."

This contrast in worldviews is certainly stark. One could even wonder if Simon and Myers could be speaking about the same world. Indeed, it is not clear that Myers and Simon recognize each others' critiques. *Scarcity or Abundance?* provides an excellent overview of the two contrasting positions, and is thus a valuable source of environmental information. Its disappointment is the limitation imposed by the debate format that prevents elucidation of the Myers and Simon positions. At times, arguments that could have clarified the two sides are left implicit in the text. This is not a serious failing, but at times it can leave those unfamiliar with environmental issues at a loss as to which side to believe.

That experts could find two separate sets of data to justify antithetical assessments of the earth's present condition would be amazing. Perhaps too amazing. Upon closer reflection one sees that the clash is not always between the data. As the debate over global warming centers around whether one places his faith in empirical evidence or speculative computer models, so too the Simon-Myers clash is about whether one trusts analysis or instinct. Time and again Myers responds to Simon's assertions of fact with speculative predictions of future want, often premised on the assumption that humanity has exhausted the possibility for technological advance. Some may find "it could happen" scenarios compelling, but after a while they lose their punch.

A good microcosm of the Simon/Myers clash is their exchange over population. Myers, like many contemporary environmentalists, sees the escalation of human numbers as the overarching environmental threat. The world now houses over 5.5 billion people, a number that increases by nearly 100 million each and every year. Thus far, increases in food production and accumulated wealth may have exceeded the multiplication of people, but, cautions Myers, this has come at a tremendous cost. Today, "there is much evidence that human numbers with their consumption of resources, plus the technologies deployed to supply that consumption, are often exceeding carrying capacity"—the ability of the planet to sustain human existence. As evidence, Myers points to a slowing in global farm output (brought about, in part, by changes in subsidy programs and other government policies), and predicts that agricultural productivity will irreversibly decline as the number of human beings on the planet continues to soar.

Simon, as one would expect, sees the population issue quite differently. He does not accept that "overpopulation" is a real problem, and he feels the data back him up. "There is no basis in the statistics for the belief that faster demographic growth causes slower economic growth," he asserts. The Myers position is based on the Malthusian premise that population will increase exponentially, while increases in food supply climb at a slower rate. If Malthus was right, then the end result can only be disaster. "But if the resources with which people work are not fixed over the period being analyzed, then the Malthusian logic of diminishing returns does not apply," Simon counters. Indeed, humans, unlike other earthly creatures, are not dependent upon an immutable resource base. People are capable of combining "intellectual capital" with physical substances to enrich their lot.

An increase in the number of people represents an increase in the human capacity to solve problems, not just an increase in human wants—and throughout human his-

tory, the force of the former has overcome the drain of the latter.

The Cornucopian-Apocalyptic debate may be alive and well in academic circles, but it is nearly dead in the realm of public policy. The general position espoused by Myers has found its way into environmental and economic policies throughout the modern world, with negative results. "Erroneous belief about population growth has cost dearly," notes Simon. "In poor countries, it has directed attention away from the factor that we now know is central in a country's economic development, its economic and political system." A free society allows for the creative exploration of varied solutions to vexing concerns. Centralized decision-making is more apt to lead to failure. Yet the threat of overpopulation and the need for ecologically sustainable development has become the pretense for a new generation of coercive government controls.

The lesson of Simon's overwhelming array of global statistics is that the world's problems can be surmounted. Human ingenuity has always been the greatest source of hope for the future. According to Simon, "When you develop new technology, build new goods, and expand the scope of our creative activities, you are on the side of the angels—you are promoting human improvement, and the quality of life." It is a lesson the governments of the world need to learn if they are truly concerned with the well-being of their people, and it is a lesson Myers could stand to learn as well. With the publication of this book, there is at least hope for some of the former, if one must give up on any hope for the latter. □

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The Individualist Anarchists: An Anthology of Liberty (1881–1908)

edited by Frank H. Brooks

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Reviewed by Gregory P. Pavlik

Anarchism is often associated with the extremes of either capitalist apologetics or communism, particularly by those without even passing familiarity with the subject. Yet, the individualist anarchists defied simplistic categorization from the start. The vast majority of the individualist anarchists did consider themselves to occupy a pole of the socialist movement. At the same time, they variously identified with the egoism of Max Stirner, the individualism of Nietzsche, the anarcho-communism represented by the famous Russian theorist Bakunin, and even the conservatism of Herbert Spencer.

The Individualist Anarchists is a wonderful introduction to this diversity of thought and will be of interest to advocates of limited government as well as students of intellectual history. It consists of representative selections from the principal organs of nineteenth-century individualist anarchism, *Liberty*, which was edited by the best known of the individualist anarchists, Benjamin Tucker. The collection is also an excellent companion to James J. Martin's definitive historical study of early individualist anarchism, *Men Against the State*.

The book is divided into four major sections, each structured to provide a comprehensive exposition of the trends in thought and positions staked out in the pages of *Liberty*. The first section, which occupies a full third of the text, deals with issues of political ideology. The theory of individualist anarchism is based on the principle of "equal liberty," which is described by Tucker as "the greatest amount of individual liberty compatible with equality of liberty." The authors grounded their defense of property rights in a conception of property tied to labor, a position derived from Locke. There is also a substantial amount of

space dedicated to the praises of the free market.

Yet this is hardly the anarcho-capitalism that it seems to be. The writers of this genre were largely preoccupied with the "labor question," and as such an interest might suggest, they saw themselves primarily as socialists. They subscribed to the labor theory of value, and often presented fiery polemics against the bourgeois class.

The second section of the book examines the economics of the individualist anarchists, which dwells on the general theme of labor concerns. However, the individualist anarchists thought that the liberation of the proletariat would be best achieved by the abolition of the "four monopolies": the money monopoly, the land monopoly, the tariff, and the patent or copyright. In practice, this would have meant the elimination of ownership of land by those not occupying and using the soil, and the abolition of intellectual property. Such "evils" as rent and interest would be eliminated, thus bringing the worker into his own. This deviates from the contemporary conception of a free order, in which land functions as property subject to the dictates of the market. Obviously, interest serves an important market function as well.

It is important to emphasize the salient characteristics of libertarian socialism that set it apart from state socialism. To his credit, the editor dedicates a substantial portion of the section on political theory to this issue. For Tucker, the two types of socialism differ in the battle between liberty and authority. State socialism is "the doctrine that all affairs of men should be managed by government," *vis-à-vis* state monopoly. The anarchist position holds to "the doctrine that all the affairs of men should be managed by individuals and voluntary association." Other distinctions were made as well. The writer A. H. Simpson held that "Anarchism is egoism; Communism is altruism." Within the sphere of socialist or labor concerns, the anarchists, as advocates of freedom and self-interest, considered themselves always to be aligned in an antipodal relationship to the state socialists.