

Scarcity or Abundance?

A Debate on the Environment

Norman Myers & Julian L. Simon



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Foreword

One Earth, Two Worlds

Now that the fear of global nuclear holocaust has receded, it is difficult to imagine any issues of greater significance for planetary survival than those debated in this book. It is also difficult to imagine two more different views of that prospect than those expressed by our two authors, Julian Simon and Norman Myers.

The first tells a story of environmental plenty if not bliss, of progressive improvement in the human condition. The reassurance voiced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his inaugural address, “that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” aptly captures Simon’s message. Human ingenuity and institutional adaptation in the long run are the most powerful forces of all, he insists, prompting opportunity and the search for solutions.

The second tells a story of ecological degradation that is potentially catastrophic in its effects. It is a few seconds before midnight, and the erosion if not collapse of planetary life-support systems, species extinction, and the material as well as spiritual impoverishment of humankind are but ticks of the clock away. “We are now playing God,” Myers concludes, and will pay the price unless we cease and desist.

What accounts for these radically different views about what is, presumably, the same “real world”? The reasons are many and varied, and include the use of different assumptions in model construction, different baselines for trend data, different guesses in place of poor or non-existent data, different methods of extrapolation, as well as errors of commission and omission on the part of the analysts. A very different kind of reason, however, is that, to some degree, our two authors are not assessing the same “real world” at all.

Their difference in world views goes beyond the fact that Simon tends to focus on increases in material measures, such as minerals availability, grain harvests, or the life expectancy of populations, whereas Myers focuses on the sustainability of biogeophysical systems and their complex feedback loops. The underlying ontology of their worlds also differs. Simon’s world is composed of palpable and infinitely divisible units, existing within a field of discrete events. In contrast, Myers’s world is made up of indivisible wholes, linked together by cycles and conjunctures that are subject to butterfly effects. If Simon’s dominant metaphor is mechanical, Myers’s is organic. If Simon is virtually whiggish in his commitment to the idea of human betterment, Myers conjures up the *Weltschmerz* of the Romantic movement at the height of the Industrial Revolution.

Humankind does not now know whether Simon is right, or Myers. We must come to know. Our collective existence could hang in the balance. The debate between our two authors sparked extensive controversy and discussion when it took place at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. The School and W. W. Norton, joint organizers of the debate, hope and believe that it will have a similar effect among the public at large.

John Gerard Ruggie

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