

In Carbon And Capitalism We Trust?

John Murdock

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At the crossroads was ostensibly a conservative gathering in Austin to discuss energy and “so-called global warming” as Senator Ted Cruz put it, but at its core was a celebration of cornucopianism. That progressive philosophy sees an ever improving world flowing from the mind of man and the power of markets. The movement’s modern prophet was remembered as “the great Julian Simon” and the optimistic tune he sang was on the lips of many deep in the heart of Texas. On matters divine, Simon was an agnostic, but he was certainly a man of faith—a deep faith in man. This late Cato Institute fellow and business professor at the University of Maryland preached a humanistic gospel centered on the infallibility of innovation. He entitled his most famous work *The Ultimate Resource* referring to “people—skilled, spirited, and hopeful people who will exert their wills and imaginations for their own benefit, and so, inevitably, for the benefit of us all.” And energy was “the master resource” that fueled this endlessly positive creativity.

Mark Mills, a *Forbes* columnist and one of the event’s keynote speakers, has channeled a Simon chapter—“When Will We Run Out of Energy? Never!”—with a book title that, if possible, features even grander rhetorical bombast: *The Bottomless Well: The Twilight of Fuel, the Virtue of Waste, and Why We Will Never Run Out of Energy*. Jim Henry—oilman, fracking pioneer, and key funder of the host Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF)—said it more pithily: “Don’t ever bet against technology.”

Stephen Moore of the *Wall Street Journal* fondly remembered Simon as his “mentor,” and other speakers recounted the famous wager that Simon won against Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich saw deprivation just around the bend while Simon envisioned a world of ever-decreasing scarcity and thus decreasing commodity prices. Ehrlich could have won—not everything went down in price during the 1980s as Simon predicted—but Ehrlich’s picks proved to be the wrong ones. *The Bet*, as Paul Sabin’s book dubbed it, turned Simon into a folk hero of market-based optimism. Even though he later paid out to another, for his star-struck fans here Simon was still the man who “won all the bets.”

Simon's intellectual progeny continue to gamble, as he and co-author Moore entitled a joint work, that *It's Getting Better All the Time*. Of course, it's not. At least not all the time. In the forward to that book which was timed for the new millennium, Rita Simon described herself as "somewhat uncomfortable with the conclusion" that Moore and her husband who died unexpectedly in 1998 had reached. Noting the sad story of the Russians, Chinese, Armenians, Gypsies and Jews in the twentieth century, she would entreat, "Julian, please, please exercise some moderation." To the list of human have-nots, one could also add lions, and tigers, and, oh my, elephants, buffalo, whales, redwoods and host of other species that have been pushed to the brink of extinction, if not over the edge, since the Industrial Revolution began.

But calls to moderation and conservation were not to be found. Instead, there were hockey-stick type graphs showing personal income shooting up after 1800 along with carbon dioxide emissions. Those who want to tap the brakes on this rocket ride of prosperity were presented as enemies of human flourishing. "They're Stalinists," said Moore to applause, later adding, "Greens are the new reds." The possibility that those who disagree could ever be people of good will was not a message coming from the stage—with a few notable exceptions such as MIT's Richard Lindzen who argued that climate change catastrophism was really a creation of the media and activists, not his fellow climate scientists. More typical was Senator John Cornyn mocking those who had "imbibed the climate Kool-Aid" and Brooke Rollins, President of TPPF, warning of a "climate change cult" that sees only "doom."

Nor was Pope Francis spared. E. Calvin Beisner, head of the Cornwall Alliance which attempts to fuse Christianity and libertarian economics and who worked closely with Simon in the past, dismissed the encyclical *Laudato Si* as the product of a misguided leader who has long promoted a liberation theology that "sees capitalism [and] free trade as an evil and sees socialism as the solution." Beisner theorized that Francis is now on board the "climate bandwagon" because he recognizes this as "the current rationale for wealth redistribution around the world." Beisner further asserted that for Catholics the papacy does not have "any authority whatsoever on issues of economics [and] public policy." (I'm glad no one told Pope John Paul II that.)

Simonism mingles a certain truth—we certainly were created to be creative—with the temptation of limitless possibilities and autonomy: "Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God." Cornucopians have more in common with transhumanists than Christians. Nevertheless, current political coalitions being what they are, the conference meals were blessed "in Jesus name" while during the sessions the "invisible hand" of the market was much, much more relevant than the nail-scarred palm of the suffering servant.

Some in attendance were quick to label environmentalists as religious zealots, but attendees seemed blind to the possibility that they, in the words of another University of Maryland scholar named Robert Nelson, were similarly treating Economics as Religion. Indeed, Nelson sees the two secular green religions of economics and environmentalism as engaging in *The New Holy War*, and many in the crowd certainly had the passion of crusaders. To be sure, there were also

thoughtful and likable people present along with some valuable information. Unfortunately, all panels were decidedly one-sided. Two mainstream atmospheric scientists declined the only invitations to “the other side” and so the dozens of “debunkers” found themselves, in the words of one slightly disappointed participant, merely “preaching to the converted.”

More than the lack of any opposing viewpoints, it was the syncretism that left me uneasy. The distinctly American blending of Christianity and Capitalism is an odd amalgamation. Jesus told us rather clearly that primary service to God and Mammon do not mix. Markets make good secondary things but poor first things. The same can be said of democracy and tolerance, fine concepts in their place but ones that draw a similarly over-elevated (if inconsistently applied) devotion from the left. “Brass,” as C.S. Lewis noted, “is mistaken for gold more easily than clay is.”

Julian Simon rightly reminded the Paul Ehrlichs of the world that humanity is not predestined to be a cancer and that downward trends are not inevitable. Positive innovations do sometimes save the day (even if they might also create a new problem for another day). But the possibility of beneficial technological solutions is not a guarantee that they will always occur. We live in a world of wheat and tares, not one of always increasing material harvests. Neither is the economic “virtue” of self-interest the ultimate solution to the problem of sin. Our savior is not ourselves. American conservatism does increasingly find itself at a crossroads. The way of the cross and the way of the economist are not one and the same.