

ANNALS OF DISCOURSE

The Tragedy of Common Sense Part Two: From Ideology to Historical Reality

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On Not Giving A Man A Fish

Much of Hardin's analysis in his article "Living in a Lifeboat"¹ consists of a polemic against the evils of aid. And it must be admitted that there are, in fact, evils of aid. In his attack on food aid, Hardin claims that special interests have profited from aid, that aid sometimes pushes up food prices, and that aid programs create bureaucracies that tend to develop an interest in their own perpetuation. All of these contentions are correct. In fact, he could have added that food aid is often detrimental to domestic agriculture in recipient countries and makes their achievement of long-term food security more difficult. It is because of these and other serious problems—such as the fact that aid does not go to the countries that need it most, and when it does go to these countries, it does not go to the people who need it most—that the Food First Institute has suggested that countries that have received food aid would perhaps have been better off without it. These are not, however, as Hardin concludes, arguments against aid, since the option of distributing it wisely and justly has always existed, but rather an argument against the ineffectual or even destructive forms that aid has conventionally taken.

Unfortunately, Hardin's polemic misleads and reinforces misconceptions much more often than it reveals the true nature of aid. For example, it promotes the conventional but erroneous view that the U.S. government distributes large amounts of food aid to the poor of the world. Hardin perpetuates the ideological cliché that foreign aid consists of uselessly throwing money at intractable problems, while at the same time unjustly taking away the hard-earned wealth of productive citizens. He notes that "in the years 1960 to 1970 a total of \$7.9 billion was spent on the 'Food for Peace' program, and that during the years 1948 to 1970 an additional \$49.9 billion were extracted from American taxpayers to pay for other economic aid programs, some of which went for food and food-producing machinery." He complains that "though all U.S. taxpayers lost" by paying for such programs, "special interest groups gained handsomely." He lists numerous groups that profited, ranging from farmers, to manufacturers, to the transportation industry. He is at a loss to imagine any rational justification that could have made such profiteering possible, blaming it instead on an obviously misguided and self-defeating humanitarianism that is apparently beyond the very realm of justification. It is in his view nothing more than a fraud that opens the way for abuse and opportunism. He remarks that "foreign aid has become a habit that can apparently survive in the absence of any known justification."

Amazingly, Hardin did not consider the one rationale that has in fact been most commonly used to defend such programs—their role in the pursuit of global political and military policy and, essentially, the national self-interest. He shows no awareness of their function of exerting political influence and that they are so transparently (and indeed are even sometimes described explicitly as) a tool of foreign policy. He might have taken as a hint the fact that that so-called "developmental aid" and "humanitarian aid" have had such a minimal correlation with any real global food needs. He might have noticed that in the years preceding the publication of his article, the poor country that was at the top of the list of foreign aid recipients was U.S.-occupied Vietnam, and that Israel, a very rich country, was already receiving more aid

¹ Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat." The article can be found online on the Garrett Hardin Society's site at http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles/art_living_on_a_lifeboat.html. All quotations below from Hardin are from this article unless stated otherwise.

than any of the poor countries of the world other than Vietnam.² By the late 70's, Israel and Egypt would be receiving about one-third of all foreign aid, and by the late 80's they would be receiving about one-third of all economic or developmental aid."³ Poor countries with large populations and widespread malnutrition would be competing for a small fraction of 1 percent of the total, while Israel, a single rich country with .01 percent of the world's population, would receive as much as most of them combined.

Hardin reinforces the constantly repeated cliché that the United States is "the most generous country in the world." It is widely believed by Americans that the U.S. gives the most governmental and individual aid to the needy of the world, and such supposed over-generosity to wasteful and ungrateful foreigners is one of the stock right-wing arguments for slashing aid. A poll taken by the University of Maryland Program on International Policy Attitudes in the mid-90's showed that 75 percent of the U.S. public thought that foreign aid expenditures were excessive and that 64 percent wanted them cut. Respondents were asked how much of the federal budget they thought went to foreign aid, whether it should be either cut or increased, and, if so, how much. On average, they thought that foreign aid ate up 18 percent of the federal budget, and that although it should be decreased drastically, reducing it to only 3 percent would be too great a cut. In fact, less than 1 percent of the budget was allocated to foreign aid.⁴ Thus, the public thought that foreign aid should be slashed to a total that was more than three times greater than the existing level. Despite this irony, the real message of the poll was that the illusion of vast generosity and enormous waste had been bought by the public.

The belief in American hyper-generosity, while ordinarily taken as a self-evident article of faith, is sometimes supported by reference to figures for U.S. gross giving, rather than those for per capita giving or giving as a percentage of Gross National Income. Such figures present overwhelming evidence that more aid emanates from the United States than from Luxembourg, for example. However, since the other affluent countries of the world have only a fraction of the U.S. population, gross figures are meaningless as a standard for generosity, even under the implausible assumption that the motive for most U.S. developmental aid is, in fact, generosity. Nevertheless, if we set aside considerations of altruism and take "generous" to mean simply "sending a lot," Americans are among the least generous, and are indeed perhaps the stingiest, of the citizens of all affluent countries.

In reality, U.S. proportional contributions are dwarfed by those of many other countries. In one recent study of developmental aid, Norway was the biggest donor, giving .93 percent of its GNI. Among 22 developed nations, the United States was twenty-first in such aid, its .22 percent of GNI only slightly ahead of Portugal's .21 percent. Two countries gave more than four times as much per capita than the U.S., five gave more than three times as much, eleven gave more than twice as much, and 20 of the other 21 gave more per capita.⁵ A report on quality-adjusted aid, with aid expressed as percentage of Gross Domestic Product, showed the top twenty donors ranging from Sweden's .50 percent of GDP to the U.S.'s .07 percent. By this measure, one country gave over seven times as much as the U.S., three gave more than six times as much, four gave more than five times as much, seven gave more than triple, twelve gave more than double, and nineteen gave more than the U.S.⁶

² *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1974* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1974), pp. 785-86; *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1976* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976), p. 838.

³ *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1979* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979), p. 829; *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1993* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993), p. 807.

⁴ Michael Kinsley, "The Intellectual Free Lunch," *The New Yorker*, February 6, 1995, p. 4.

⁵ "Aid Flows Top USD 100 Billion in 2005," OECD, April, 2006, online at: http://www.oecd.org/document/40/0,2340,en_2649_33721_36418344_1_1_1_1,00.html.

⁶ David Roodman, "An Index of Donor Performance," Center for Global Development, April 2004, online at: <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Debt/USAid.asp>.

For Hardin, such statistics would show only that other rich countries are even more addicted than is the U.S. to the evils of charity. And he is quite concerned that we understand just how evil charity is. He comments that “the demoralizing effect of charity on the recipient has long been known,” after which he quotes that gem of conventional wisdom: “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will eat for the rest of his days.” This is the principle concerning helping those in need that has been most consistently quoted by my students for over 30 years. I would estimate that it has been cited by a ratio of over 100 to one over any other principle or maxim. Occasionally, one hears “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Mark 12:31) or “Do unto others as you would have others do on unto you” (Luke 6:31). Though I teach at a Jesuit university that is explicitly committed to social justice, I almost never hear such more radical Christian principles as “Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). As was noted, Hardin cites the supposed Christian maxim of “being one’s brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4:9). However, this is not in fact a Christian moral injunction but rather Cain’s ironic reply to God about his dead brother Abel’s whereabouts in the ancient Hebrew myth of the first murder. There is great irony in Hardin’s citation of this passage, for while “being another’s keeper” is hardly the best way to describe disinterested love or care, Hardin’s own rejection of responsibility to help those in need is echoed rather well in Cain’s bitter retort.

While most students like the “teaching to fish” idea and often attribute it to Hardin himself when summarizing his position, he actually invokes it only to argue against it. In his view, it is the principle behind the “Green Revolution,” which he thinks has been a disaster. In fact, it *has* been a disaster in so far as the introduction of chemical-intensive monocrop agriculture that is at the heart of the Green Revolution has hurt rather than helped the poor in whose name it is often defended. But he has no objection to the program’s actual failures. According to his analysis, “‘Miracle wheat’ and ‘miracle rice’ are splendid technological achievements in the realm of plant genetics.” He fully approves of science working miracles. The problem for him only arises when the miracles are used, for example, to help needy human beings have more food to eat, and he fears that the Green Revolution may have had such a noxious effect. Not only does Hardin not want to give anyone a fish, he is not interested in allowing fish to remain where they might do harm. The unrecognized principle behind his lifeboat world is “take a fish from a man and you can eat for a day, get a man to fish for you and give you the fish, and you can live on a rich lifeboat for the rest of your days.”

On Letting Indians Die

The brutality of Hardin’s position becomes most evident when he comes to the topic of India, the country that has long aroused great horror in the neo-Malthusian imagination. He states that “the present population of India is 600 million, and it is increasing by 15 million per year,” and that “every one of the net 15 million lives added each year stresses the Indian Environment more severely.” He concludes that “*every life saved this year in a poor country diminishes the quality of life for subsequent generations.*” (Emphasis in the original.) What is most disturbing about this principle is what it clearly implies but discretely refrains from stating explicitly: “every life *lost* this year in a poor country improves the quality of life for subsequent generations.”

Hardin’s ideology prevented him from following such somber reasoning to its logical conclusion. If saving lives in poor countries harms posterity, saving lives in rich countries in which each person consumes 30 times as much as a poor Indian can only be absolutely devastating to future generations. Allowing these heavy consumers of scarce resources to die, would, by his own standards have highly beneficial long-term consequences. Yet, he raises no questions about the enormous amounts of money that are spent on such evils as saving the lives of heart patients, cancer victims, etc. in the developed world. He must realize that merely allowing infants in rich countries (any infants, but especially those from rich families) to die rather than caring for them would cut short highly damaging futures of enormous consumption of resources and pollution of the environment. *Every death of an infant allowed to die in a rich country* would reduce the stress on the biosphere vastly more than the death of that poor person in India whom Hardin cautions us against

saving. Nevertheless, Hardin, who prided himself on being a fearless iconoclast and “stalker of taboos,” lacked the courage to track down such clear implications of his deranged logic.

Regarding Hardin’s central claims about famine in a country such as India, is there any truth in his contention that famine in such countries results from population stress on the resources of the country? The answer to this question emerges quite clearly from a source that Hardin would never think of investigating: the actual political, economic, and demographic history of India. An excellent presentation of the evidence offered by this history is found in Mike Davis’s brilliant and powerful work, *Late Victorian Holocausts*. There he traces in three fascinating and horrifying chapters the ways in which economic and political domination created the conditions for food scarcity and ultimately mass starvation in the subcontinent.⁷

It is a long and complicated story, but there are three essential moments: first, the forcible disruption of the traditional Indian subsistence economy; second, the use of law, policy, and brute force to make Indian labor completely subservient to the demands of imperial economic interests; and finally, when economic and political factors combined with climatic conditions to produce severe food scarcity, the refusal to allocate for purposes of famine relief the large food surpluses that existed either elsewhere in India or in the stricken areas themselves.

Davis cites Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of British India (1876-80), who, in the face of the Great Famine of 1876-78, which killed between 6 and 10 million Indians, decreed that “there is to be no interference of any kind on the part of Government with the object of reducing the price of food,” and “denounced ‘humanitarian hysterics.’”⁸ Expressing similar views during a debate on the famine, Finance Minister Sir Evelyn Baring, who was considered a progressive reformer among British colonial administrators, stated that “every benevolent attempt made to mitigate the effects of famine and defective sanitation serves but to enhance the evils resulting from overpopulation.”⁹ Hardin’s warning about the evil of saving Indian lives reads a bit like latter-day plagiarism of Sir Evelyn’s words.

Sir Richard Temple, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, takes the analysis one inevitable ideological step further, blaming the victims in the most contemptuous manner for their own suffering. Reacting to reports of high mortality rates, he remarks that “the infatuation of these poor people in respect to eating the bread of idleness; their dread of marching on command to any distance from home; their preference often for extreme privation rather than submission to even simple and reasonable orders, can be fully believed only by those who have seen or personally known these things.” He judges most of the victims to be in fact victims of their own irresponsibility, and predicted that few will “be inclined to grieve much for the fate which they brought upon themselves, and which terminated lives of idleness and too often of crime.”¹⁰ Such views are, of course, echoed in Hardin’s identification of the roots of crisis to the rapid “breeding” of the poor and their desire to live off the wealth of others rather than solve their own problems.

As is typical of colonial agricultural policy globally, the British colonial regime undermined India’s traditional subsistence economy for the sake of its imperial economic interests. Davis explains that “subsistence farming in many parts of the North Western Provinces had been recently converted into a captive export sector to stabilize British grain prices” and “most of the provinces’ cruder grain stocks like millet were commercially exported to the famine districts in Bombay and Madras Presidencies, leaving local peasants with no hedge against drought. The profits from grain exports, meanwhile, were pocketed by richer zamindars, moneylenders and grain merchants—not the direct producers.”¹¹ Thus, the peasants’ own

⁷ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

traditional “safety-net” was undermined so that they would be at the mercy (or mercilessness) of the imperial economy.

Famine upon famine was to come. It again raged from 1896 to 1897, during the reign of the second Lord Elgin, Viceroy from 1894 to 1899. The government conceded that 4.5 million died, but later estimates place the death toll at 12 to 16 million. It was to be followed shortly by another great famine of 1899-1902, under the rule of the subsequent Viceroy, Lord Curzon. An official report on the 1899-1902 famine found that “there was a surplus of grain in Bengal and Burma sufficient to compensate even such gigantic shortfalls in western and central India.” The report observed that it was a “regional deficiency of employment and income,” rather than any scarcity of food in India as a whole, “that posed a mortal threat to so many millions.”¹² At the same time that available food was denied to the famine victims, Lord Curzon moralized that “any Government which imperiled the financial position of India in the interests of prodigal philanthropy would be open to serious criticism; but any government which by indiscriminate alms-giving weakened the fiber and demoralized the self-reliance of the population, would be guilty of a public crime.”¹³

Davis notes that in Rajputana almost a million people died while “grain traders earned immense profits as they shifted rice and millet stocks from the countryside to the cities.”¹⁴ In the official famine report, a district officer gave the following familiar explanation of famine deaths in Gujarat: “The Gujarati is a soft man, unused to privation, accustomed to earn his good food easily.”¹⁵ As millions died in the midst of agricultural surpluses and exports, Lord Curzon could state that “there had never been a famine when the general mortality has been less, when the distress has been more amply or swiftly relieved.”¹⁶ How could the British public possibly accept such a description of imperially engineered mass starvation? The answer lies in large part in imperially engineered ideology and imagination. Some aid was, in fact, being distributed to what had continually been depicted as the lazy multitudes of the Subcontinent. It was certainly no more difficult to believe than today’s widely held precept that the American empire is essentially over-generous to the impoverished, exploited debtor countries of the world. In fact, many of these countries these get far less aid than Lord Curzon was willing to bestow on the starving masses of India.

The horrors of famine in India were only the most brutal manifestation of a long, complex history of exploitation and immiseration. Davis notes that “only moneylenders, absentee landlords, urban merchants and a handful of indigenous industrialists seemed to have benefited consistently from India’s renewed importance in world trade,” while the result for peasants was pauperization.¹⁷ He observes that many small farmers replaced millet production with cotton, even though cotton prices were declining and they had then to buy the grain with their proceeds. This seemingly irrational choice made sense only because land was scarce for small producers and cotton had a higher return per acre. Most small farmers had so little land that neither crop was adequate to provide subsistence. In addition, other areas that formerly produced subsistence crops such as millet switched to more profitable export grain crops such as wheat.¹⁸

While Hardin asserts on the basis of vague stories that a commons leads to collapse, Davis presents actual historical evidence that in India, as elsewhere, it was the destruction of the subsistence economy, and, indeed, the dissolution of the ancient commons that paved the way for disaster.

Village economy in India, as elsewhere in monsoonal Asia, augmented crops and handicrafts with stores of free goods from common lands: dry grass for fodder, shrub grass for rope, wood and dung for fuel, dung, leaves,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

and forest debris for fertilizer, clay for plastering houses, and, above all, clean water. All classes utilized these common property resources, but for poorer households they constituted the very margin of survival.¹⁹

Davis notes that as late as 1870, the 20 percent of India that was forested remained as common land, but “by the end of the decade, [these lands] were completely enclosed by armed agents of the state.”²⁰ The colonial administration stripped the peasants of much of their traditional subsistence safety net and left them at the mercy of a brutal and morally blind system of economic exploitation.

In the context of the actual history of India, “carrying capacity” in any given locale took on a very precise meaning: whether the continued existence of any given group of Indians was economically profitable for the Empire. This is the identity of Hardin’s unnamed “something else” that might effect, and sometimes reduce, the “carrying capacity” of a given area: the vicissitudes of social domination.

The British Empire has passed into history, but the history of India today in the age of the global economy teaches many of the same lessons as did the colonial period. Arundhati Roy, in her essay “The Greater Common Good,”²¹ explains very well the relationship between food resources and the condition of the poor in India. Roy notes that in 1995, though India’s population had increased from the 600 million when Hardin wrote his article to 932 million, “the granaries were overflowing with 30 million tons of unsold grain.” Thus, Hardin was wrong in his assumption that countries like India would not be able to increase food production more rapidly than population increased. Roy also observes that at the same time that such surpluses existed, 40 percent of the population was living below the poverty line, and the poorest of the poor were vulnerable to food scarcity, particularly in times of crisis. She notes that during the drought of 1996, people in Kalahandi (in Orissa) died of starvation, though not only was there a surplus of grain in India, but rice was being exported from Kalahandi itself.²²

Roy points out the deep economic and political reasons for such a tragedy. Today, just as a century ago, the subsistence economy and small peasant farming are being destroyed in response to the demands of evolving global capitalism. Earlier, this took place in the context of the British Empire; now it is occurring in the context of transnational corporate economy. In both cases, an alliance between the centers of economic power and domestic elites has driven the processes of economic transformation. Roy shows how the dominant model of development led to massive dam-building projects that displaced enormous masses of the poor. Legions of the *adivasi*, or tribal peoples, were forced out as a result of the flooding of lands. Poorer farmers, who could not afford new capital-intensive methods of production based on large-scale irrigation were also dispossessed. As she states it,

Lands on which farmers traditionally grew crops that don’t need a great deal of water (maize, millet, barley, and a whole range of pulses) suddenly yield water-guzzling cash crops—cotton, rice, soya bean, and the biggest guzzler of all (like those finned ‘fifties cars), sugar-cane.... People stop growing things that they can afford to eat, and start growing things that they can only afford to sell. By linking themselves to the “market” they lose control over their lives.

The conclusion is absolutely clear. It has not been population increase or anything related to “carrying capacity” that has driven the poorest of the poor of India to the point of such a precarious existence, but rather the imposition of the dominant model of “maldevelopment,” as Vandana Shiva calls it, and the destruction of the subsistence economy,.

Looking To India

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²¹ Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good,” April 1999, online at: <http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html>. This essay later became half of her book *The Cost of Living* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), pp. 1-90.”

²² See Devinder Sharma, “The Kalahandi Syndrome: Starvation in Spite of Plenty,” online at: <http://www.mindfully.org/Food/Kalahandi-SyndromeSharma19apr02.htm>.

Recently the limits of academic discussion of global ethics issues has been expanded by the increasingly frequent inclusion of the human capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This is a promising development in so far as it helps shift discussion toward more complex substantive debates concerning the effects of practices and institutions. Increasing attention has been directed to Sen's well-known analysis of world population issues in which India plays an exemplary role.²³ However, contrary to that country's role in Hardin's account, it appears not as the bad example in a cautionary tale, but rather as the locus of a model for sane and humane solutions, and indeed as the possible source of inspiration for a new path in global development.

Why are so many so blind to any signs of hope that emanate from this land that is so emblematic of the global South? Sen is perhaps too discrete to write explicitly of "capitalist ideology" and the "racist imaginary," referring instead to certain "delusions," but his analysis points to both of these realms. He notes that "[m]any Northerners fear being engulfed by people from Asia and Africa," a long-held sentiment that has prevailed in much of the West and certainly underlies the appeal of Hardin's analysis to citizens of affluent countries. He observes that while the proportion of the world's people living on these continents has increased in recent history, projections for the year 2050 would only return them to the 78 percent of the world population that they constituted from 1650 to 1750, before the modern European population explosion and mass colonization took off. Demographic shift is a much less significant dimension of the changing character of the world system than is the generalized economic and political shift away from the Eurocentric world of the modern period. The declining economic and political hegemony of European society forms a strong historical basis for this reactive racist imaginary, in which anxiety about the growth in the relative wealth and power of the non-European world is denied direct recognition and is instead ideologically biologized and channeled as fear of excessive reproductive growth. In view of such a state of the imaginary, a punitive reaction to population growth in poor countries has immediate appeal ("immediate" meaning mediated so powerfully by ideology that it appears powerfully self-evident).

Sen explains that if we exit the world of delusion for that of demographic reality, we find that there are two approaches to attaining the goal of reducing population growth. One, which in an extreme and brutal form is found in Hardin's lifeboat ethics, Sen calls the "override approach." It assumes that coercion, punishment, and negative contingencies of various types are necessary to influence reproductive behavior. It follows Hardin's dictum that "all persuasion takes place through coercion."²⁴ Sen says that according to such an approach, "the family's personal decisions are overridden by some agency outside the family." He has in mind primarily policies such as those of China, in which benefits are withdrawn, fines are imposed, and harsh social and pressure is exercised as means of punishing families for having more than the allotted number of children. However, Hardin's proposal that scarcity of food should discipline families and regimes into limiting reproduction also qualifies as such an "override" approach. Sen argues that such an approach, in producing immiseration, may not only be ineffectual, but even have "exactly the opposite effect on family planning than the one intended."

Sen argues that the collaborative approach, which prioritizes the participation of families in decision-making and improvement of their lives, is not only the most just and humane policy but also the most effective one. Such an approach "relies not on legal or economic restrictions but on rational decisions of women and men, based on expanded choices and enhanced security, and encouraged by open dialogue and extensive public discussions." Sen, along with many who have done careful research on population trends, has found that certain positive social variables correlate strongly with declines in fertility rates. These include expanded employment opportunities for women, improved standard of living, greater economic security;

²³ Amartya Sen, "Population: Delusion and Reality" *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 41, No. 15, September, 22, 1994, pp. 62-71, online at: http://www.uwmc.uwc.edu/geography/malthus/sen_NYR.htm. Subsequent quotations from Sen's argument are taken from this article.

²⁴ From "Garrett Hardin Quotations," selected by the Garrett Hardin Society. See <http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/info/quotes.html>.

readily available contraception, availability of information on family planning, improved education (especially for women), improved health care; lower mortality rates (above all, infant mortality rates), and improved diet.²⁵

Such research shows that empirical evidence leads to precisely opposite conclusions than Hardin's concerning the relationship between food security and fertility rates. Sen points out that

Sub-Saharan Africa lags behind other developing regions in economic security, in health care, in life expectancy, in basic education, and in political and economic stability. It should be no great surprise that it lags behind in family planning as well.

This region, which has the world's highest rates of population growth, is also a world leader in another area, food scarcity. Sen compares food production for two three-year periods a decade apart and found that the largest increases in food production took place in the Global South. More specifically, however, the greatest increases (as much as 22 percent per capita in Asia) were in regions where birth rates were declining, while Africa, the one continent in which high birth rates were persisting, actually experienced a 6 percent per capita *decline* in food production.

It is noteworthy that Sen's paradigmatic evidence of the success of collaborative approaches comes from India, Hardin's prime example of a country that needed to be starved into demographic compliance. Sen compares China's coercive or "override" approaches to the collaborative one that has prevailed in the state of Kerala in southwest India. He argues that "the roots of Kerala's success" lay in the place of women in society. He points out Kerala's 86 percent female literacy rate compared to China's 68 percent and the high level of participation by women in politics and the economy and observes that

the adverse reactions that have been observed in China, such as infant mortality, have not occurred in Kerala. The results have been striking. Kerala's birth rate fell from 44 per thousand in the 1950's to 18 by 1991.

Since Sen wrote this, the birth rate in Kerala has dropped to 14.6 per thousand, lower than that of the U.S., and is still falling.²⁶ Moreover, Kerala's declining fertility was accomplished along with a low infant mortality rate. It was only 16.5 per thousand births (as opposed to China's 31 per thousand) when Sen wrote, and it has now fallen to 12 per thousand.²⁷

Comparisons of Kerala and China make a strong case for participatory, voluntary, "collaborative" methods as opposed to authoritarian, coercive, "override" policies. Sen points out that "despite China's one-child policy and other coercive measures, its fertility rate seems to have fallen much less sharply than those of Kerala and Tamil Nadu." Sen makes the important point that even though China has been less successful through coercive methods than Kerala has been through non-coercive ones, it would be fallacious to attribute the results that have been achieved to the use of these coercive factors. He notes that China has instituted many positive programs that create the conditions for voluntary reduction of fertility rates. These include programs that have "expanded education for women as well as men, made health care more generally available, provided more job opportunities for women, and stimulated rapid economic growth." Thus, as a result of these programs, one would have expected a decline in fertility rates, even in the absence of coercive measures. The relative importance of the various factors must be determined through comparative analysis.

Sen makes an excellent point concerning the costs of just development. He notes that some believe that needed innovations in education, health care and other areas would be very expensive. However, in

²⁵ On these factors see, and Francis Moore Lappé et al., *World Hunger: Twelve Myths*, Ch. 3; and Robert Engelman, *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2008).

²⁶ Official Government of Kerala website at <http://www.kerala.gov.in>, updated on August 4, 2010.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

reality such programs are very labor-intensive, and given the relatively low price of labor in poor countries, the cost of highly effective, sustainable development programs can be very modest. Sen points out that “Kerala, India’s star performer in expanding education and reducing both death rates and birth rates, is among the poorer Indian states.” Even today, the several thousand dollars that an American family might spend in a given year on a new big-screen TV, for example, might cover a year’s operating expenses for a health clinic or community center in an Indian town or village.

Hardin’s Sinking Ship

Hardin’s “lifeboat ethics” commits the eternal fallacy of ideological thinking. It perpetuates the illusion that certain elements or moments can be abstracted from the larger whole—the social historical whole and the natural historical whole—of which they are an inseparable part. More specifically, Hardin’s position is a very extreme and rather crude version of the sort of view that Thomas Pogge dissects in his analysis of the clearly untenable but commonly accepted “Purely Domestic Poverty Thesis.”²⁸ Hardin offers absolutely no explanation of why a crisis, even if it involves a food shortage, should be blamed on overpopulation or exceeding carrying capacity. Hardin’s argument is circular since the nature of “crisis” is never investigated but rather merely defined as an event caused by population increasing beyond “carrying-capacity” (or failing to decrease to a diminished “carrying-capacity”).

His alluringly deceptive lifeboat metaphor abstracts selected phenomena, we might say, both spatially, from the web of global interconnections between societies, economies, cultures, and ecosystems, and temporally, from their mutual determination through the unfolding and interpenetrating processes of history. We leave the space-time of earthly geography and history and enter the ideological moment. As a popular cliché goes these days, “It is what it is.” The problem is that it never merely “is what it is.” For Hardin, lifeboats are somehow stocked with large quantities of “goodies.” In his ideological imagination, “goodies” seem to grow on lifeboats. The last thing that we are allowed to think within the ideological dream world is that any of these “goodies” could come from anywhere outside those lifeboats, for example, from the exploitation of the labor of the poor of other countries or from the appropriation of their natural resources.²⁹

A reply to Hardin in *Bioscience* that appeared shortly after his original article there summarizes very well some of the overwhelming evidence that Hardin’s lifeboat world was a fantasy, and that the condition of the poor is neither a product of purely domestic conditions, nor a product of their own misguided choice:

First, by colonization and actual wars of commerce, and through the international marketplace, rich nations have arranged an exchange of goods that has maintained and even increased the economic imbalance between rich and poor nations. Until recently we have taken or otherwise obtained cheap raw material from poor nations and sold them expensive manufactured goods that they cannot make themselves. In the United States, the structure of tariffs and internal subsidies discriminates selectively against poor nations. In poor countries, the concentration on cash crops rather than on food crops, a legacy of colonial times, is now actively encouraged by Western multinational corporations. . . . Second, U.S. foreign policy, including foreign aid programs, has favored “pro-Western” regimes, many of which govern in the interests of a wealthy elite and some of which are savagely repressive.³⁰

But in the world of ideology, it is the victim who is to blame. Hardin states that a severe food crisis is an “emergency”—that is, “something like an accident, which is correctly defined as *an event that is certain to happen, though with a low frequency.*” (Emphasis in the original.) He observes that “a well-run organization prepares for everything that is certain, including accidents and emergencies.” He complains that unlike such

²⁸ See his article “‘Assisting’ the Global Poor,” in Deen K. Chatterjee (ed.), *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A version of this article can be found on several web sites.

²⁹ Nor, of course, are we to think about the fact that in return for producing “goodies” the less privileged have “baddies,” that is, social ills such as poverty, debt, corruption, oppression, and environmental devastation, imposed on them.

³⁰ William W. Murdoch and Allan Oaten, “Population and Food: Metaphors and the Reality,” *Bioscience*, 25, 1975, p. 562.

organizations, “the vast majority of the governments of the world today have no such policy,” because “they lack either the wisdom or the competence, or both.” To paraphrase Hardin’s theory: “They’re just not as smart as we are.” This is the global version of a scenario we know very well from its domestic applications. Many a community has been devastated and degraded by capitalist exploitation and racist oppression, after which the administration of its hollow shell has been entrusted to minority-group politicians. The inevitable ideological judgment is that “they don’t know how to run their communities.”

Thus, Hardin waxes philosophical as he laments the fact that “wise sovereigns seem not to exist in the poor world today,” and that “far more difficult than the transfer of wealth from one country to another is the transfer of wisdom between sovereign powers or between generations.” Yes, we all know that it’s hard to fit wisdom in a care package or a time capsule. But the real problem is that Hardin ignores the pertinent fact that many Third World rulers, far from lacking the profound wisdom of their First World colleagues, are equally wise when it comes to defending their mutual political and economic class interests to the detriment of the lives and welfare of the majority of their populations. For Hardin, the “sovereigns” who oversee the transfer of wealth and resources, including food, from poor to rich countries are wise if they happen to live in the rich country that receives the benefits, but foolish if they live in the poor country that suffers the consequences. Yet the process and the resulting poverty and malnutrition are caused by the wise, cooperative efforts of both, on behalf of the sovereign self-interest of each.

It is not difficult to perceive beneath Hardin’s judgments about the wisdom and prudence of the poor countries of the world a visceral aversion that so typically accompanies binary ideological thinking. He notes with obvious appreciation the fact that “Gregg (1955) likened the growth and spreading of humanity over the surface of the earth to the metastasis of cancer in the human body, wryly remarking that ‘Cancerous growths demand food; but, as far as I know, they have never been cured by getting it.’”³¹ The wry Mr. Gregg’s idea of “feeding” or “curing” cancerous growths is obviously absurd,³² but the analogy is still of interest. Presumably, if human beings in general are like cancerous growths and cancerous growths are malignancies that are best “starved” to death, then it would be a good thing to starve to death any given human being, whether through our action or our inaction. But Hardin is not proposing such a generalized misanthropy. As mentioned above, he is quite incapable of following his analysis to such a logical conclusion—given a world in which, as he admits, all countries have, in a crucial sense, exceeded carryingcapacity—that some have exceeded it far more than others, and are therefore more cancer-like than others. Because his ideology blocks such an analysis, he is utterly incapable of conceiving of human beings who live in the rich, “developed” world as cancer-like, despite the fact that their ecocidal impact and his lifeboatism should compel him to do so. Far from proposing that beneficent ways of starving them to death should be contrived, he is clearly concerned that such *rich lifeboat*-sinking events should never occur. As is so common in ideological thinking, there is a process of splitting in which a pervasive evil is condensed and concentrated in the other. The ideologically correct position is that we (the affluent) must think of certain other human beings (the poor) as equivalent to cancerous growths and treat them accordingly. In strictly pragmatic terms, this turns out to be the “cash value” of Hardin’s “lifeboat ethics” today.

Following the Common

³¹ Gregg’s article is interesting as an example of the absurd lengths to which Malthusian social theory can go in standing reality on its head. He notes “the marked inequalities of health, wealth, and function so conspicuous among the human beings in overpopulated countries” and speculates that “possibly man’s invention of caste and social stratification may be viewed in part as a device to rationalize and control these same distressing discrepancies of health, wealth, and status that increase as the population increases.” Social inequality is somehow generated directly by population increase, existing prior to class or caste relationships. Class and caste appear as a kind of superstructure built on the material base of population and its immediate effects. In the end, the caste system turns out to be among other things a means of coping with distress—the heart of a heartless world” of population growth. Alan Gregg, A. 1955. “A Medical Aspect of the Population Problem,” *Science*, 121, May 1955, pp. 681-682.

³² One might imagine: “My cancerous growth has been particularly hungry lately”; “My cancerous growth has a doctor’s appointment today.”

Ideology, it might be added, often has a more literal “cash value.” It is important therefore, in conclusion, to note the centrality of the question of *property* to Hardin’s outlook, something that is not made explicit throughout his argument, but which always lies just beneath the surface. In formulating his central argument against food aid, he explains that:

the fundamental error of the sharing ethics is that it leads to the tragedy of the commons. Under a system of private property the man (or group of men) who own property recognize their responsibility to care for it, for if they don’t they will eventually suffer. A farmer, for instance, if he is intelligent, will allow no more cattle in a pasture than its carrying capacity justifies. If he overloads the pasture, weeds take over, erosion sets in, and the owner loses in the long run.

One must wonder where Hardin thought he had found such a utopian world in which private agricultural property prevails and in which there is nevertheless little erosion and degradation of the soil. In the actual world of private agricultural property that is increasingly dominated by corporate agribusiness, a large proportion of all agricultural land has been severely degraded and soil erosion has become one of the most acute global environmental crises.³³

Hardin rather astoundingly ignores entirely the problem of externalities and the fact that all around him there exists a world in which property owners can—and as a matter of course often do, according to ordinary laws of economic rationality—pass costs on to society and to the natural world while appropriating economic benefits. The dismal history goes back to the ancient Latifundia and beyond, but the classic case today is the deforestation of the Amazon basin, which has produced vast social disruptions and made the single largest contribution to the global biodiversity crisis, the Sixth Great Mass Extinction, the greatest ecological catastrophe facing the planet. As is well-known, enormous areas of rain forest are burned each year by powerful ranchers to add grazing land to their expansive domains. Within a dozen years the biologically richest and most diverse ecosystems in the world are turned into degraded wastelands, after which they are abandoned for new areas in which the cycle of destruction is repeated. Though this cycle is typical in the history of large private land exploitation, it would be difficult to find a single example of any historic commons in which even a small fraction of this catastrophic “ruin” has taken place. Once again, the ideological inversion of reality is striking, for the history of private property might well be called the tragedy of the non-commons.

Hardin contends that “in a crowded world of less than perfect human beings—and we will never know any other—mutual ruin is inevitable in the commons. This is the core of the tragedy of the commons.” What is so striking about ideology is not that it is so often wrong about the nature of things. After all, it shares that quality with ordinary ignorance and stupidity, but it can certainly not be reduced to either of these. As was discovered so long ago in dialectical critique, what is so astounding about ideology is how regularly it depicts the world as precisely the opposite of what it is in reality. In the real world, “mutual ruin” in the form of social disintegration and global ecological catastrophe has long been resulting from the ruthless exploitation of human labor and the natural world and from the dissolution of the structures of care and cooperation that have historically been associated with the commons. Solidarity and mutual aid within the commons are among the social forces that have done most to avert this catastrophic course of history; they have the greatest promise of helping us reverse this self-destructive path.

³³ As a widely-cited article summarizes, “Each year, 75 billion tons of topsoil are removed from the land by wind and water erosion, with most coming from agricultural land.” David Pimentel, et al, “Environmental and Economic Costs of Soil Erosion and Conservation Benefits,” *Science*, Vol. 267, No. 5201, February 1995, p. 1117.