Review of:

Simon, Julian L. *A Life Against the Grain: The Autobiography of an Unconventional Economist* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002 (359pp.).

Julian Simon, who died in 1998, was a remarkably productive and independent-minded economist. He is most well known for his brilliant though controversial research in population economics, upon which subject he published eight or so scholarly books, but he wrote at length on numerous other subjects, including books on (among other topics): running a mail-order business; advertising; statistics; and the treatment of depression. His work was enlightening, intellectually honest and (in part due to that honesty) very politically incorrect.

His work on the effects of population growth, most popularized in his book *The Ultimate Resource,* argued for the view that the planet’s resources are not threatened by population growth, indeed, that every aspect of human material wealth will continue to improve indefinitely. This made him an enemy of the environmentalist left. (Simon’s work provoked Bjorn Lomborg, a Green-oriented statistician, to set out to debunk him—but as Lomborg documents in his recent book *The Skeptical Environmentalist,* he found Simon’s work basically sound.) Simon’s work on the economic effects of immigration, which argued for the view that immigration greatly benefits the economy in the long term (however disruptive in the short run), made him an enemy of the anti-immigration right. And his willingness to investigate issues that went beyond his academic specialty made him an enemy of pedants of all stripes.

Simon’s account of his life is characteristically honest and frank. He grew up in a lower middle class family in and around Newark, New Jersey. He was bright at school, though showed no signs of exceptional genius. He attended Harvard, again doing well but by no means outstandingly, and served in the U. S. Navy. After his Naval service, he worked his way into advertising. While working in a New York ad agency, he won a fellowship to attend the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, where he earned his Ph.D.. After a brief stint in small business (he started mail-order business), he took a teaching position at the University of Illinois (at Champaign-Urbana). He started out in the Department of Advertising, winding up at the College of Commerce. It was there that he first started doing research in demographic economics.

Ironically, Simon initially supported the dominant Malthusian view that overpopulation is a world threat, and wanted to use his skills in marketing to help halt population growth (by selling birth control to Third World countries). But his views started to change in 1969 as he studied the data, and by 1972 he held the contrary view of population growth as being beneficial and self-correcting. He published a technical treatise (*The Economics of Population Growth*) refuting alarmist Malthusianism in 1977, and his aforementioned popular treatment in 1981. Also in 1981 he started to examine the issue of whether immigration is an economic threat, which led to his book *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*, published in 1989.

He tells his life story with openness, discussing not just his academic and intellectual history, but his personal life (perhaps a bit too frankly!) as well, including his long battle with depression. This makes for a delightful read, as well as for a good primer on the thought of a most iconoclastic economist.

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