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Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) ISBN 978-0300176483.

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Introduction by Christopher F. Jones, Arizona State University

Five hundred seventy-six dollars and seven cents. A modest sum by nearly any standard. Yet in October of 1990, it took on an outsized importance. Ten years before, the famous biologist Paul Ehrlich (along with the physicists turned environmental scientists John Holdren and John Harte) had made a bet with Julian Simon, an economist of comparable ambition but considerably less renown. They wagered a thousand dollars on the prices of five raw materials: chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten. Ehrlich and his colleagues, strong believers in the limits of planetary resources, trusted the prices would increase as a result of expanding populations and the pressures of economic growth. Simon, an ardent supporter of human ingenuity and markets, expressed confidence that the values would decline. Events proved Simon correct: the prices of these resources fell by an average of around fifty percent over the decade, and Ehrlich begrudgingly wrote a check for \$576.07.

The importance of the bet, of course, lay not in its financial consequences; the true prize could be found in its symbolic value. For many observers, particularly Simon, the wager's outcome was simple: it demonstrated the dangerous and misguided ideas of radical environmentalists and the greater credibility of the optimistic economist. Ehrlich, predictably, sought to diminish the results, emphasizing the limited time frame and admitting his naiveté in believing that commodity prices would serve as an adequate proxy for population growth over a short time period.

Paul Sabin shows the consequences of what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called "the scholarly wager of the decade" to be more nuanced than either Simon or Ehrlich ever acknowledged.¹ ***The Bet*** uses the personal history of these two men to trace much broader shifts in environmental and economic thinking over the last third of the twentieth century. In particular, he analyzes their life stories, their intellectual arguments, and their reception by public audiences to trace the disturbing trend of increasing polarization in environmental politics. While many of the nation's landmark environmental acts passed with broad bi-partisan support in the 1960s and early 1970s, much greater partisan division has marked the following decades. Nowhere is this clearer than in discussions of climate change, where efforts to enact meaningful policy have been derailed for decades by seemingly insurmountable political divisions. Simon and Ehrlich's bet, Sabin shows, both symbolized and exacerbated these tensions. Such extremism and failure to listen to the other side, Sabin cautions us, represents a deeply concerning feature of our contemporary world and a threat to humanity's future.

For environmental historians, *The Bet* encourages us to think about the dynamics of environmental politics, the promise and perils of forecasting, and the possibilities and limitations of biography as a genre. It is therefore a great pleasure to introduce

¹ As quoted in Paul Sabin, *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble Over Earth's Future* (Yale, 2013), p. 137.

four distinguished scholars who have offered their insights into these and other vital topics raised by the book.

I invited **Sarah Phillips** of Boston University to provide comments because of her interests in the intersections between the environment and policy. Her notable publications include *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (Cambridge, 2007) and a recent state of the field essay on American environmental history in *American History Now* (Temple, 2011) edited by Lisa McGirr and Eric Foner.

I was pleased that **Patrick N. Allitt** of Emory University agreed to join the roundtable to provide a perspective on environmental politics more sympathetic to Simon than to Ehrlich. In his most recently published book, *A Climate of Crisis* (Penguin, 2014), Allitt argues that environmentalists have consistently overstated the severity of ecological problems and underestimated the ability of human ingenuity to find adequate responses. He has also published six other books on topics including American religious and intellectual history and classroom pedagogy.

I asked **Peter Shulman** of Case Western Reserve University to participate because of his broad interest in the intersections between natural resources and governance. His forthcoming book *Coal and Empire: The Birth of Energy Security in Industrial America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) analyzes the intersections between energy history, environmental history, and the history of foreign relations. He was awarded the Ellis Hawley Prize from the *Journal of Policy History* for his 2011 article "The Making of a Tax Break: The Oil Depletion Allowance, Scientific Taxation, and Natural Resource Policy in the Early Twentieth Century."

Keith Woodhouse, of Northwestern University completes our panel. His research focuses on late-twentieth century environmental politics, thought, and activism in the twentieth century. He was awarded the Allan Nevins Prize by the Society of American Historians for "A Subversive Nature": his dissertation examining the history of radical environmentalism.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to offer sincere thanks to Jacob Darwin Hamblin on behalf of the environmental history community for pioneering the *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* series. He has devoted countless hours (all unpaid, of course) to editing more two dozen roundtables with several more in the pipeline. This forum has created an invaluable source of ongoing intellectual dialogue about recent scholarship that nicely supplements annual conferences and quarterly journals. The field of environmental history is much richer as a result of his labors, and he deserves our collective appreciation.

Thanks are also in order for all the participants taking part in this roundtable. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, all *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* are available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

Comments by Sarah Phillips, Boston University

I've always found a historian's agenda more interesting than a book's thesis, source base, supplementary arguments, or methodology. I'm defining agenda here in generous, not critical terms: as the motivating passion for a few years' work, as the reason a scholar is invested in a particular topic. The agenda is rarely placed front and center, because it reveals political commitments, values, and moral choices—subjectivities we're taught to cover up and to channel into clear arguments and forceful historiographical contributions. The agenda is usually hidden in the preface or acknowledgments, lurking in the conclusion, or just plain invisible. But it's the heart of a book. Paul Sabin's *The Bet* is a rare treat. Intending to reach an audience wider than the academy, he opens this perceptive analysis of the pathology of modern environmental politics by revealing his heart and showing his hand as both an academic and an experienced environmental advocate.

First the heart. The book begins in the 1970s, with a winter snapshot of Sabin and his brother reading beside their home's heating vents because their house is so chilly. Their dutiful parents, influenced by emerging ecological considerations, have turned down the thermostat in their bid to conserve resources in this new age of limits. Why, Sabin asks, was his house so cold? And the more poignant question: what was so distinct about the 1970s that a regular middle-class family would endure privations that most contemporary families, in our current age, wouldn't consider?

Now the hand. Sabin's got scholarly credibility along with activist credentials. He's the genuine academic article, a Yale history professor. His underappreciated first book, *Crude Politics*, examined the California oil market in the first half of the twentieth century and demonstrated how American petroleum dependence followed from a structured, yet often hidden, foundation of political choices and public policies—certainly not the “free market.” But Sabin's academic training was also punctuated and defined by activism: in the 1990s, he helped start a nonprofit to foster a leadership discussion about difficult environmental choices. Of course, by then, the “environmental decade” of the 1970s—a decade of surprising bipartisan legislation and widespread citizen sympathy—was long gone, replaced by vicious partisan sorting, a definitive conservative ascendance, and the transformation of environmentalism into a wedge issue and oft-mocked signifier of “liberal elite” status. What, Sabin now asks, can explain this enormous political shift? What were the roots of this ferocious partisan divide?

Other scholars, mainly in political science, have certainly tackled that question, and Sabin acknowledges them, but he asserts that their answers, while not incorrect, are incomplete. I agree. Neither political nor environmental historians have fully addressed this question. We still need more narratives to explain, historically, how exactly the conservative backlash against environmentalism in the late 1970s and 1980s created our contemporary political gridlock—on climate change in particular,

of course, but also on many other environmental issues. Sabin does not presume to supply the whole story, but he does want to focus our attention on the genuine clash of ideologies and ideals that environmentalism engendered. Furthermore, *The Bet* wants to sell a fairly provocative thesis: that immoderate and extreme ideas on the environmentalist side were in large part to blame for the backlash and organized assault against them.

But how should one present this complicated story? How do you play out your hand while retaining that wider audience you've brought in with your heart? Sabin makes two risky but engaging narrative choices: biography and suspense. He explores the clash of values that modern environmentalism provoked by examining the entwined professional careers of biologist Paul Ehrlich and economist Julian Simon. He gracefully places their fierce intellectual disagreements within the broader political and intellectual currents that swept from the 1960s to the present day, and he ties it all together with the story of Ehrlich and Simon's contentious wager over whether the price of five metals would rise or fall between 1980 and 1990 ("the bet" of *The Bet*). The characters are unique historical actors, of course, but they also perform double duty as ideological and political archetypes. Ehrlich represents the doomsayer, the resource and population pessimist; Simon, not nearly as famous as Ehrlich but every bit as feisty, represents the technological and market optimist, the cheerleader for a more populated, happier, and wealthier planet. In Sabin's skilled narration, the absurd reductionism of the bet itself—the idea that the movement of a few commodity prices might accurately reflect ecological realities—captures precisely the reductionist political style ("The planet is doomed!"; "No, it's not!") that overheated environmentalist rhetoric in the 1960s and 1970s needlessly incited.

If this were a standard book review, I'd make sure the audience received a more complete summary of *The Bet's* contents. But because that thoroughness isn't necessary for this forum, what I'd like to do instead is to conclude with a few thoughts about how some of the book's strengths and weaknesses flow from Sabin's admirable decision to seek a wider audience for his story. That general decision, of course, always involves trade-offs, and other readers might list them differently. I consider myself mainly a political historian, so I don't feel capable of addressing squarely the argument about whether doomsday predictions on the environmentalist side were too extreme. It seems a fair point and Sabin certainly presents evidence to support it. But I can imagine how controversial that thesis might be, and I hope someone else speaks to its incendiary qualities. Speaking as a political historian, I regard *The Bet* as an accomplished book, written with verve and nerve, and it deserves the audience it seeks. But there are gaps in the analysis that deserve mention for the sake of future scholarship.

Sabin's great accomplishment is the smooth integration of original arguments with insights gleaned from a wide array of secondary scholarship on the history of science and economics, on postwar liberalism and the rise of conservatism, and on the Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Bush presidencies. So smooth is this narrative

integration that it is difficult, even for an informed reader, to spot and appreciate Sabin's original contributions. Let's face it: a standard monograph usually toots its own horn, and here the reader has to do more work. But a little extra work is rewarded. For example, I don't believe that anyone has so carefully or open-mindedly traced Paul and Anne Ehrlich's fraught relationship with the rights-based liberalisms of racial justice, modern feminism, and immigration rights. True, the Ehrlichs and their allies were population-control proponents, and, as population biologists and ecologists, they always saw resources as a limited condition that would inevitably force scarcity or crisis. But the Ehrlichs navigated liberal politics more carefully and sensitively than has been appreciated.

This is not to say that environmentalism meshed easily with liberalism; it did not. Sabin reminds us that environmentalists spoke "easily and freely of a 'no-growth' society and 'de-development'" (98). We have some great work on how much in terms of public policy and altered cultural attitudes that environmentalists were able to accomplish, but given the truly radical nature of ecological considerations, scholars have only just begun to explore how environmentalists even made the dents they did. In an essay on the conservation and environmental policies of state governors, I ventured an argument about how genuinely radical modern environmentalism was, given postwar liberalism's dependence on constituency-building growth, the provision of public goods, and the redistribution of resources within an expanding economy. Environmental policy could sneak through, I suggested, in the same manner as conservationist policy had: when politicians had the maneuvering room to assemble alternative growth coalitions.² Sabin shares my analysis here, but he says it better, and it's kind of the point of the whole book. Environmentalism was a unique ideological challenge to both the left and the right, and environmentalists left themselves vulnerable because they did not do enough to acknowledge that poverty and inequality were scourges every bit as scary and as fearsome as ecological deterioration. Economic conservatives, market proponents, technological optimists, and biblical followers didn't have to make this hole; they found it.

Now the critique. *The Bet* is a fine history of moral, scientific, and economic disagreement. It's a fantastic intellectual history, in other words, of ideological conflict, and also, I might add, of the author's own heart (while he still sets the thermostat low, he believes we need to search for answers in a less certain world of shifting parameters and possibilities). But I don't think the book delivers the political goods; I don't think Sabin bridges the divide between ideology and governance. His policy and presidential summaries are solid, but they mainly stand apart from the intellectual and ideological conflict that is the heart of his story. He recognizes this, I think, and hedges with verbs that acknowledge the gap. First verb: Reflect. "The sharp divide in Congress," he writes of the 1990s, "with its presidential vetoes and government shutdowns, reflected harsh rhetoric that persisted outside

² Sarah Phillips, "Resourceful Leaders: State Governors and the Politics of the American Environment," in *A Legacy of Innovation: Governors and Public Policy*, ed. Ethan Sribnick (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

of Washington” (197). Second verb: Contribute. “Extreme voices have come to dominate American politics, and the partisan divide has deepened,” he begins the concluding chapter. “Contributing to this division are profoundly different ways of seeing the world, such as the divergent perspectives of Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon” (217). Final verb: Represent. “The conflict that their bet represents has ensnared the political debate and helped to make environmental problems, especially climate change, among the most polarizing and divisive political questions” (217).

I’m a generous reviewer; I like this book; and I don’t need to flesh out my critique any further because I think Sabin’s own word choices acknowledge that in telling the story the way he did, he did not offer us many direct analytical connections between the clash of values and governance regimes. That would involve not just an analysis of Congress and the presidency, of course, but also of the courts, and myriad other administrative locations of rule setting, rule bending, and policymaking. That would be too boring a story, of course, but it’s still a necessary one.

Comments by Patrick N. Allitt, Emory University

Paul Sabin's *The Bet* is enjoyable, informative, and useful. It links the lives of two intellectuals to bigger themes in late-twentieth-century history, especially the question of whether the world faced a catastrophic future or a rosy one. By 1990 it was difficult to think about the idea of environmental disaster without thinking of Paul Ehrlich. Similarly, to enjoy sunnier thoughts about the human condition brought Julian Simon to mind. Sabin shows, skillfully, not only how each man's career developed and how they clashed, but also how each stood for a characteristic way of thinking about humanity. He also shows how the two men's abrasive egotism intensified their confrontation, with consequences still being felt today.

The mood of the sixties and seventies favored Ehrlich, who rode the great wave of environmental apocalypticism, whereas Simon struggled to find an audience for what looked to him like *good* news. Simon, upbeat in theory, was depressive in practice, and found his own obscurity a galling contrast to Ehrlich's celebrity. No wonder; the outcome of their bet showed him to be mainly right and Ehrlich to be mainly wrong. That didn't change the disparity of their fortunes. In one bravura passage, Sabin describes how Ehrlich, fresh from defeat in the bet and from being shown wrong in his prediction of massive famines, was awarded \$1 million in prize money by an array of foundations and organizations unruffled by his failure.

Sabin offers sympathetic summaries of their views, enabling the reader to get inside each man's head at least for a while. The more exotic a pattern of ideas now seems, the more important it is to show how apparently sensible people could once have entertained it. The passage of time is beginning to make some of the environmental ideas of the 1960s and 1970s seem as disproportionate to the actual dangers the nation faced as the anti-German spy scares of World War I. Sabin recreates a world in which Ehrlich's feverish alarms could seem reasonable.

Americans have always been fascinated by the prospect of catastrophe. Puritan "jeremiad" sermons warned sinners not to take pleasure in their worldly success, but to prepare for divine chastisement. Condign punishment, meted out by an angry God, was always imminent. Ehrlich was a nearly perfect secular embodiment of the jeremiad tradition. He said, in effect: pay less attention to the astonishing achievements of our industrial society, and more to the ruin that lies just over the horizon. He had the good luck to find a receptive audience, many of whom also felt that their world was too good to be true. Each new triumph of medicine and improvement in nutrition gave him another opportunity to prophesy calamity.

It's surprising, in retrospect, how willing historians were to listen to Ehrlich. They should have been among the first groups to demur. One of the great achievements of twentieth century historiography, after all, was the recognition that cultural, not biological factors, are decisive in human affairs. Any historian who suggested that

the behavior of ants or butterflies might provide useful guidance in thinking about human affairs would have been laughed at, and his or her work rejected by all the historical journals. Yet Ehrlich's analogies from his insect studies won widespread acceptance in the 1970s and 1980s, and few historians called him out. On any other topic he would have been censured. Carl Degler's *In Search of Human Nature* caused a stir in 1992 for offering cautious support to the idea that biological explanations, even of a highly nuanced and chastened kind, might have applications to history.

Historians also know, or ought to know, better than any other group that it is impossible to predict the future. The history of forecasting the future is a history of uninterrupted failure. As many studies have shown in recent years, predictions tell us plenty about the frame of mind of the predictor and his or her world, but nothing at all about the time being predicted. The increasingly dynamic world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries made attempts to predict the future even more hazardous and even less useful. Ehrlich was wrong about famines, and wrong about resource depletion. Simon was equally wrong in his wild assertion that "even the total weight of the earth is not a theoretical limit to the amount of copper that might be available to earthlings in the future" (132). The future is thin, vague, and imaginary—the perfect zone for projecting wishes—whereas the past is dense, real, and particular, disciplining historians' imaginations with reminders of what actually happened.

Nevertheless the developing field of environmental history actually borrowed much of its energy from the frightful future scenarios imagined by Ehrlich. The polemical anger so apparent in books like Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange* (1972) and Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl* (1979) came from their authors' conviction that the world we had made over the last few centuries was a world of exploitation, greed, folly, and destruction, and that it was getting worse rather than better. I certainly don't mean to imply that these brilliant books exhibited Ehrlich's biological reductionism or his bad manners, merely that they shared some of the indignant pessimism that was his trademark.

The second wave of environmental historians, by contrast, best represented by William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* (1991), owed rather less to Ehrlich and rather more to Simon. Cronon showed the way sophisticated market mechanisms grew up with Chicago, facilitating the transformation of corn, wheat, wood, cows, and pigs into marketable commodities. Despite the populist protest against domination by bankers and urbanites, and despite the socialist protest embodied in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the growth of Chicago benefited far more people than it victimized. Cronon traces the early history of the markets that are so central to Simon's cheery optimism. He shares Simon's view that economics is not a zero-sum game, and that human ingenuity can—to a phenomenal degree--create better institutions and increase abundance.

Sabin begins his own book with reminiscences about his childhood, during which his family believed in the reality of an environmental crisis and practiced the virtues

of conservation and recycling. For a while he was an environmental activist, but he recalls his growing awareness of the complex interplay between economics and environment. By the end of the book his head is telling him that Simon got the better of this confrontation, but Ehrlich still tugs at his heartstrings. In the conclusion he argues that “the environment got cleaner partly because of warnings by environmentalists like Ehrlich . . .” (222) and that we are aware of global warming because of “the vital insights of environmental scientists like Paul Ehrlich” (226). “Like” is the key word in both those sentences. Ehrlich was not involved in the pragmatic and largely successful business of pollution mitigation, and made no contributions to climate science.

I teach a course on American environmental history every fall semester. I have already put *The Bet* on the reading list for the Fall semester of 2014—it’s short enough to be ideal for an upper-division undergraduate class, just right for sparking discussion. I expect it will become a standard part of the curriculum in many other such courses around the country for the foreseeable future.

Comments by Peter Shulman, Case Western Reserve University

Last May, the liberal commentator Jonathan Chait pilloried two Fox News regulars, Charles Krauthammer and George Will, for their serial misstatements about the threat of global warming. Krauthammer and Will had been on television to discuss this year's U.S. National Climate Assessment—officially the *Highlights of Climate Change Impacts in the United States*—the third official American government report on the anticipated consequences of climate change. Employing rhetorical strategies to dismiss climate science that have been around for at least two decades, Krauthammer and Will denied any reason to act on climate with appeals to everything from the natural variability of weather to the irrelevance of American action in the absence of commitments from the rest of the world to the supposed meaninglessness of overwhelming scientific agreement (“I’m not impressed by numbers,” Krauthammer scoffed). Point by point, Chait held the conservative pundits’ claims up to scientific consensus and repeatedly found them wanting.³

On one point, however, Chait appeared unsure how to respond. When Will turned to the subject of predictions, he pointed to Barack Obama’s senior science advisor, John Holdren. “Now, Mr. Holdren, who introduced this report,” Will explained, “has his own record of very interesting failed forecasts, not to mention Al Gore, who in 2008 said by 2013, for those of you keeping score at home, that’s last year, the ice cap in the North Pole would be gone. It’s not.” To this Chait simply replied, “It is not clear what failed Holdgren [sic] forecasts Will is referencing,” before moving on to minimizing Gore’s claims as a clearly stated worst case scenario.

To the preponderance of his audience, Chait’s uncertainty about Will’s comment about Holdren probably made little impression. Will made a vague statement; Chait moved on to material he could rebut. Yet to Will’s more conservative audience, his reference was surely obvious, for John Holdren holds a prominent place in conservative intellectual circles. In the 1970s, John Holdren had enthusiastically promoted the theory of an impending global overpopulation crisis—a crisis that never came. As a friend and co-author to the leading spokesperson on overpopulation, the biologist Paul Ehrlich, he had been party to “the bet”—a wager between Ehrlich and economist Julian Simon that the prices of five metals would all rise over ten years, thus indicating the unstoppable pressures of population on natural resources. When these prices actually dropped and Simon won, Holdren, like Ehrlich, became to conservatives someone whose claims are instantly dubious, an environmentalist “Chicken Little.” As Josiah Neely replied to Chait in *The Federalist*, Holdren was “The Scientist Who Cried Wolf,” someone with “the sort of record that might make someone with a historical memory (like Krauthammer and Will) a bit

³ <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/05/krauthammer-george-will-attack-climate-science.html>

skeptical of whatever doomsday scenario Holdren is now promoting.” Like the threat of global warming.⁴

Now, Holdren’s concern over overpopulation in the 1970s (for which there was never much scientific evidence) should bear little on contemporary discussions of global warming (about which the scientific evidence is overwhelming). But Holdren’s work on overpopulation matters a whole lot to many American conservatives and by extension, to contemporary science policy, to fractious partisan politics, and to the very understanding of scientific evidence and proof in contemporary America. Though left-leaning news sites typically refer to Holdren as “one of the most distinguished scientists in America,” on conservative sites, he remains linked with failed predictions of overpopulation and discussions of hypothetical means for implementing population control—from forced abortions to mass sterilization. The overpopulation issue has taken on a disproportionate role in Holdren’s long career in both science and public policy. To take one barometer, on Holdren’s Wikipedia page, his involvement in Ehrlich and Simon’s bet constitutes the entire second paragraph of his four paragraph biography and in a section on “Early publications” (the only section devoted to describing his prodigious publication record at all), only his work with Ehrlich on overpopulation receives any discussion.⁵

Paul Sabin’s important new book helps make sense of Holdren, the overpopulation scare, and the two distinct worlds of environmental values inhabited by liberals and conservatives in the late twentieth century. Over the past fifteen years, historians have produced a rich literature on American conservatism, examining its intellectual, economic, social, and political origins.⁶ This work is distinguished by its authors taking conservative thought seriously, rather than simply employing it as a deviant foil to a historical American liberalism. Until Sabin, conservative thought on

⁴ <http://thefederalist.com/2014/05/13/john-holdren-the-scientist-who-cried-wolf/>

⁵ <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/03/03/3349411/john-holdren-roger-pielke-climate-drought/>; <http://www.examiner.com/article/science-czar-john-p-holdren-s-disturbing-beliefs-about-america-capitalism-and-humanity>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Holdren

⁶ For a sample of some of what is now a vast literature, see Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010); Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012); Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

the environment has not yet received as much attention as its historical significance deserves.⁷

Sabin structures the book around three interwoven narratives. Two are biographical studies, one of Paul Ehrlich, a scientist at the pinnacle of American academe, terrified of impending resource exhaustion, expressive of post-World War II ecological values, and, at least until now, completely wrong in his predictions of an imminent population crisis. The other study examines Julian Simon, a somewhat marginal figure in mainstream economics, contemptuous of environmentalist hysteria even as he proclaimed his great love of humanity, an early figure in the neoliberal wave that would soon engulf American economic policy, a man confident that no matter the question, free markets were almost always the answer. These two studies stretch from Ehrlich's and Simon's childhoods through their professional and public careers through their increasingly acrimonious debates in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s (Simon died in 1998). A third narrative thread traces the larger intellectual and political world the two men both shaped and reacted to. This contextualizing narrative connects the ideas of Ehrlich and Simon to changes in public opinion, American environmental policy, and patterns of resource consumption.

The three narratives are united by "the bet." By 1980, Ehrlich and Simon were openly feuding, Simon insisting that the public never held Ehrlich to account for his erroneous and exaggerated predictions, Ehrlich certain that Simon misunderstood physical reality and misled innocent readers into a dangerous complacency. After a sort of dare, Simon and Ehrlich agreed (along with Ehrlich colleagues John Holdren and John Harte) to gamble on whether the prices of five key metals would rise or fall in the coming decade, a proxy metric for resource exhaustion. When Simon won, he and fellow libertarians gained more than the \$576.07 prize: seemingly tangible proof that environmentalist pessimism was mere hysteria.

For Sabin, the Ehrlich-Simon bet symbolizes more than a clash between "neo-Malthusian" pessimists terrified that population growth would produce an eco-catastrophe and "cornucopian" optimists certain that human ingenuity and market forces would create unparalleled human prosperity. It also offers a lens for understanding the arc of American environmental policy in the late twentieth century. First, more than the historiography usually reflects, fears over runaway population growth contributed to a widespread and largely bipartisan consensus on environmental policy. Second, as people like Simon challenged the premise that population growth was a problem, environmental politics devolved into vicious, mutually-incomprehensible ideological camps. Much of Sabin's work is making these camps comprehensible, and especially in the case of Simon, particularly

⁷ One notable exception is Brian Allen Drake's *Loving Nature, Fearing the State: Environmentalism and Antigovernment Politics before Reagan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), which reads well alongside Sabin. In addition, the conversation is continued in fellow roundtable participant Patrick Allitt's recent publication of *A Climate of Crisis* (Penguin, 2014).

sympathetic. We cannot understand the collapse of bipartisan environmental politics simply by changing party dynamics, economic interests, or the development of counter-establishment think tanks alone, Sabin argues, but only by also understanding the how and why liberals and conservatives developed opposing environmental ideas and values.

Ehrlich's dominant motif was crisis—not in the distant future but his present day. His impassioned *The Population Bomb* of 1968 became a bestseller, thrusting him into the public spotlight with an argument that the wolf was not at the door but already in the kitchen. He variously concluded that a stable planetary population demanded just 17% to 40% of the population of 1970, which Ehrlich believed was an already unsustainable 3.7 billion people. To push population downward, he began organizing, including founding Zero Population Growth, a group that before *Roe v. Wade* advocated for access to contraception and abortion as tools for population containment. Not a natural manager, he more often kept a steady drumbeat for policies to control population through essays, lectures, and television appearances. To receptive audiences, Ehrlich wrote casually about preparing for an impending societal collapse. If some of his ideas to ward off disaster—like banning internal combustion automobiles—seemed fantastical, he believed it would only take a few years before the country came around to his point of view. Other ideas, such as radically limiting immigration, brought him to issues usually associated with the political right. He vocally supported sterilization (widely publicizing his own) as well as women's liberation as a way to move women into the workplace instead of keeping them at home bearing more children. Though he (and his closest associates) considered coercive sterilization both ethically acceptable and possibly necessary, he acknowledged the political pitfalls of advocating it and preferred instead to focus on encouraging voluntary measures. Still, Ehrlich's published musings on coercion—along with those of Garrett Hardin, John Holdren, and others—remain today a hook for conservatives looking to discredit what they consider environmentalist hysteria as mere pretense for subverting liberty, whether misguidedly or deliberately.

Simon, meanwhile, entered 1968 sympathetic to the idea of an impending population crisis (he published research on how to better market contraception and on the economic value of limiting family size), but by 1970 had concluded that population growth presented no demonstrable threat. Of course humans were animal species, Simon acknowledged, but unlike butterflies, could count on markets and technological innovation to manage resource scarcities. He preferred to measure social stability by social measures—longevity, wealth, leisure time—instead of quantities of available molybdenum, but came to view resources as effectively infinite anyway. In part, his views were ideological—influenced by Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, Simon's experience fighting regulations while running small businesses validated his libertarian sentiments. But his early concern about population growth eroded principally because new economic data uncovered no demonstrable connection between population size and economic growth and instead suggested the capacity of agriculture to adapt to rising populations with new

methods for greater productivity. Simon also experienced what Sabin describes as a “spiritual as well as intellectual” transformation, with the economist concluding that he had no business preventing the births of those who might enrich the world or the lives of those around them. By the early 1970s Simon argued that population growth helped rather than hurt national economies.

Ehrlich’s view seemed to capture the mood, and fears, of the 1970s. The first oil crisis of 1973 (predated by little-noticed warnings of impending energy shortages) helped define the 1970s as a decade of limits—to American power, economic growth, and physical resources themselves. Quadrupled oil prices, gas lines, and peak domestic production led many Americans to conclude that the country was indeed confronting absolute limits, a sentiment further reinforced by general inflation, the collapse of the Vietnam War, and Watergate. Richard Nixon flirted with warnings about unchecked population growth and first as a candidate and later as president, Jimmy Carter gave sustained voice to the gospel of limits. Still, Ehrlich’s extreme rhetoric often exceeded any evidence and alienated other scientists sympathetic to environmental activism, not to mention those who didn’t agree that population growth represented a special problem.

The election of Ronald Reagan replaced the limits-sympathetic Carter with a boundless cornucopian. By the late 1980s, Simon had come to reject all international population control efforts, from those of the World Bank to Planned Parenthood, convinced that the problem was not growing populations themselves but the political institutions that oppressed them. By then, consensus social science had largely backed off its alarmist view of growth, as represented by a 1986 National Research Council report that largely accepted Simon’s and other economists’ views that there was no impending population crisis, no imminent threat of resource exhaustion, and no reason to fear that markets could not handle scarcity when it arose. In the 1990s, Ehrlich and Simon descended into mutual loathing and bitterness as neither man believed his views were accorded the respect they deserved.

One of Sabin’s great accomplishments is turning a critical eye on an underappreciated aspect of post-war environmentalism. Ehrlich has hardly been ignored (most broad accounts of the period at least mention him or the population issue) but few works accord him the importance he deserves in galvanizing public opinion, both across the country and in Washington.⁸ Instead, historians tend to emphasize the environmental issues that appear, well, more rational. Smog, acid rain, excessive pesticide use, radiation, pervasive consumption of lead and

⁸ For mentions of Ehrlich and overpopulation, see, for example, Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013); Samuel P. Hays with Barbara D. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard N.L. Andrews, *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

asbestos—these (and many other issues) were real threats to ecosystems and public health alike. Yet Ehrlich's imagery of the population bomb helped tie these threats together in a terrifying yet comprehensible way.⁹

And yet... Ehrlich's repeated predictions never came to pass. For his part, Ehrlich continued to insist that the reckoning was simply postponed. Simon, of course, replied that no population problem even existed. Sabin recounts both positions with the goal of a critical synthesis. If Ehrlich and Simon represented two poles in an American debate about limits, Sabin asks us to consider the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each. Ehrlich failed to see that markets could successfully manage resource scarcities; Simon failed to see that the improving environmental indicators he used to critique Ehrlich was, in part, the result of laws passed in response to predicted threats. The acrimony of their debate and increasingly ideologically polarized audiences prevented both from acknowledging the merits of the other's arguments.

If Sabin seeks a dispassionate synthesis, however, his account of the role of "crisis" in this story presents some troubling notes of caution. Ideas of crisis and limits were not simply failures of rationality, they were also necessary conditions for both legislative and cultural change. Sabin identifies liberals and conservatives alike who criticized Ehrlich's apocalyptic rhetoric as beyond any scientific evidence, but at the same time, it's difficult to imagine the successful passage of landmark environmental legislation like the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act without a widespread sense of impending eco-collapse, however overstated the case. Equally troubling, cultivating an ongoing sense of crisis seemed necessary for the very survival of national environmental groups. When these groups found themselves shut out of Reagan's White House in 1981, they simultaneously saw donations soar from worried environmentalists. When the groups succeeded in ousting James Watt from the Interior Department and Anne Gorsuch from the EPA (two administrators committed to undoing much of the regulatory framework constructed in the 1970s), fundraising dried up and news reports moved on to other issues. Later, when climate scientists sought to present their understanding of the threats of global warming, their deliberate choice to produce sober, measured reports instead of 70s-era hyperbole not only failed to rouse public attention but resulted in ideologically-driven climate skeptics

⁹ This concern shows up in public opinion polls. Back in 1960, before Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb* but after other scholars had raised the question of overpopulation, a Gallup poll found that fully three-quarters of Americans were aware of concerns over impending population growth but that only 21% of them worried about it. As if to underscore the lack of concern, fully 45% of the sample claimed that having four or more children would create the ideal family. Concern inched up over the course of the decade, but it was only in 1971 that Gallup found over half the population—54%—seriously worried. The number was higher still—68%—for those between 21 and 29 years old. Only 18% of Catholics had been worried in 1963; by 1971, 47% were. When polls asked for the most important problem facing the nation, air and water pollution and overpopulation show up as separate concerns; as Sabin shows, of course, Ehrlich effectively argued that the two issues were intimately related. On polls, see George H. Gallup, et al, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971*, vol. 3 (New York: Random House, 1972).

exploiting uncertainties to argue that the entire issue was manufactured. Both Ehrlich and Simon acknowledged their own hyperbole and rhetorical excess as the price of getting heard and countering what each imagined was a more dangerous approach to the future. Crisis had its merits—but was it—and is it—the only way? If extreme claims by environmentalists produced equally extreme claims by conservatives, why don't moderate, defensible claims draw American politics back towards consensus?

Another question is whether this story represents a recent episode in an old debate over future scarcity or abundance, or whether it can only be understood as particular to the late twentieth century. In a book of this length, it is impossible to probe every historical nuance in much detail. But addressing this question shapes how we historicize visions of the future and all the consequences these visions entail.

Ehrlich, as Sabin notes, was not the first American to warn about excessive population growth, nor the first to warn of impending resource exhaustion. Nor was he the first to be wrong about it. Gifford Pinchot predicted a timber famine that never came. The U.S. Geological Survey concluded in 1921 that American oil reserves would only last between twenty to fifty more years—just one of over a half-dozen episodes of predicted petroleum exhaustion beginning as early as the 1880s. Is Sabin's story merely the latest phase in an old debate or is it a contingent product of its time and place? Sabin suggests that this argument "continued long unresolved debates" while the form of the bet "matched their times" (p 8). Sabin references Ehrlich's connection to Thomas Malthus, the Anglican curate and political economist of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, who burst onto the intellectual scene with his 1798 *Essay on Population*. Malthus, like Ehrlich, worried deeply about population growth outstripping available resources, particularly food. In the 1970s, Ehrlich would become the most prominent of the latest crop of so-called "neo-Malthusians" announcing the impending crash.

But drawing a line between Malthus and Ehrlich obscures as much as it reveals. First, Malthus and Ehrlich actually held considerably different anxieties about population and resources. For Malthus, the fundamental problem was not about ecological carrying capacity but addressing poverty, the existence of which he believed an inescapable social fact. Malthus wondered what to do about it, or rather, what not to do about it. The population growth he feared was specifically growth among the working classes; as this population smashed through the limits of the food supply, Malthus imagined the poor as the ones who would suffer. The wealthy, in contrast, would always remain able to afford higher prices for scarcer food. Yet if poverty was inevitable, Malthus believed the English poor laws only facilitated population growth among the impoverished. In Malthus's view, these laws thus perversely accelerated working class immiseration rather than alleviating it (not to mention costing the state). Unlike Malthus, when Ehrlich worried about resource exhaustion he saw the problem as ultimately about physical resources themselves. Whether

humanity burned through tungsten, tin, or copper, Ehrlich believed that civilization as a whole and the planet itself would suffer, rich and poor together.

These differences complicate Malthus's twentieth century legacy. Like Ehrlich, he wrote about resource limits, but like Simon, he placed his analysis within a model of political economy. The several editions of Malthus's *Essay* contain detailed arguments about price behavior and market operations. His framework differs from Simon's, but the two share a perspective of situating resource use within a dynamic social model. A further historicization of Ehrlich and Simon would explore the intellectual history of Malthusian thought from its origins through the first "neo-malthusians" of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to Ehrlich to those predicting peak-oil in the early twenty-first century.

These are subjects for another book. Here, Sabin offers an accessible and engaging narrative that paints a compelling picture of environmental debate in the late twentieth century. He forces us to take conservative ideas seriously and not merely as smokescreen for economic interests. He presents a complex debate without any hint of polemic. He helps us understand why John Holdren means two entirely different things to contemporary liberals and conservatives. Most importantly, he shows how we might begin to bridge this liberal-conservative gap with a more honest reckoning of past mistakes, humility about the limits to our knowledge, and acknowledgment that the question we face is not likely a choice between catastrophe and utopia, but, as Sabin concludes, "What kind of world do we desire?" This book gives us new tools for answering this question and it deserves to be widely read.

Comments by Keith Woodhouse, Northwestern University

It would be nice if all debates between intellectuals could be settled with bets. At the very least it would save many pages of claims and counter-claims in scholarly journals if opponents were expected put a pile of cash on the line. Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon did so in 1981, betting on the difference in price of one thousand dollars worth of chromium, copper, nickel, tungsten, and tin by the end of 1990. Simon would pay Ehrlich however much the net price of the metals – adjusted for inflation - went up, or Ehrlich would pay Simon the difference if the price went down. The metals were all key elements in various products and processes the value of which helped measure the state of the industrial economy and so the relative merits of Ehrlich's and Simon's views. Ehrlich's view, laid out in *The Population Bomb*, was that modern society was quickly approaching hard limits in its use of natural resources; Simon's view, made clear in *The Ultimate Resource*, was that technological innovations and human ingenuity made those limits flexible and maybe even irrelevant.

Despite the title of his own book – *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and our Gamble over Earth's Future* - Paul Sabin doesn't invest this wager and its outcome with a great deal of significance. Ehrlich and Simon make the bet on page 135 and Ehrlich loses with little fanfare about 45 pages later. Sabin is less interested in the meaning of Ehrlich's loss (which, he explains, is open to some interpretation) than in the ideas framing the bet and what the clash of those ideas might teach us about modern environmentalism and our use of natural resources.

Sabin's primary interest is in the growing partisanship of environmental politics. That political divide has been explained as a consequence of the parties' use of wedge issues; a backlash against environmental regulation; and the rise of think tanks in the 1970s. None of these explanations, however, "take seriously the genuine clash between different viewpoints that occurred" (xi). Sabin sets out to do just that. *The Bet* is a sort of intellectual history of the Ehrlich-Simon debate, describing not just the premises and assumptions that grounded each side but how the two sides pushed each other further apart. According to Sabin, "the political gulf that we see today on environmental issues has been mutually created" (xi).

The Bet tells a broad story through particular lives and experiences. It begins with Paul Ehrlich, a product of mid-twentieth-century suburban America and the nearby green spaces that Adam Rome and Christopher Sellers have argued are at the center of early environmentalism. Ehrlich chased butterflies through the fields next to his New Jersey home while noticing the increasing use of DDT nearby and the transformation of meadows into subdivisions. He remained unsettled by these transformations during his graduate training in biology at the University of Kansas and his long career in the biology department at Stanford University. His research in population biology contributed to his growing concern with human overpopulation, which in turn led to political engagement. Ehrlich stepped on to the national stage in

1968 when, at the urging of the Sierra Club's David Brower, he wrote *The Population Bomb*. The book was not a cool, clinical evaluation of the potential consequences of overpopulation but an alarm-sounding and call to action. *The Population Bomb* quickly became the central text of that strand of twentieth-century environmentalism fixated on human consumption of finite resources – a fixation running from William Vogt and Fairfield Osborne to Ehrlich, Garrett Hardin, and *The Limits To Growth*. This was not a fringe group; population pressure was one of the defining anxieties of environmentalists from the mid-twentieth century through the 1970s – a period that historian Thomas Robertson has called “the Malthusian moment.”

Population activists like Ehrlich and Hardin – along with William and Paul Paddock, the authors of *Famine 1975!* – urged readers to consider once-unthinkable measures to address an overabundance of people. They openly discussed various forms of mitigation and prevention, from a triage approach to foreign aid to mass sterilization to Hardin's vague calls for “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.” The urgency and clarity of Ehrlich's own views made him into one of the best-known environmentalists of the 1970s and a regular guest on *The Tonight Show*. And those views inspired heated opposition. Within the environmental movement, Ehrlich's nemesis was the plant physiologist Barry Commoner, who argued that overpopulation and affluence were negligible components in the environmental crisis when compared to new forms of technology tied to a corporate drive for profits. Where Ehrlich tended to talk about “people” as an undifferentiated category and source of environmental harm, Commoner was more specific in his finger-pointing, blaming consumer capitalism and the products it created.

Ehrlich's bouts with Commoner were just warm-ups to his match with Simon, however. While Ehrlich and Commoner argued over what was causing an environmental crisis, Ehrlich and Simon argued over whether a crisis existed at all. Simon argued with the passion of the converted; as an economist at the University of Illinois he initially believed in a simple relationship between having children and losing income and between family planning and economic growth. Gradually, though, he became convinced by other economists' claims that larger populations meant greater productivity, innovation, and economic activity. By the early 1970s he was an unapologetic skeptic of the environmental movement's pieties. “I view the population explosion not as a disaster,” he announced to an Earth Day crowd in 1970, “but as a triumph for mankind” (62). The relationship between more people and greater pressure on resources was axiomatic for Ehrlich, while the foolishness of judging future conditions on the basis of contemporary knowledge was just as elementary for Simon. Their philosophies reflected, in part, their respective disciplinary trainings and the broader clash of values those disciplines pointed toward. “Even as ecologists moved toward a greater awareness of interdependence in ecosystems and the unique roles that individual species played,” Sabin writes, “many economists grew increasingly detached from biological systems and argued against natural constraints” (94).

The 1970s and 1980s were see-saw decades for Ehrlich and Simon and the philosophies they represented. In the 1970s Ehrlich was nationally recognized and he had an unusually receptive audience in Washington, D.C. "Although once a marginal view within American society," Sabin writes, "Ehrlich's frankly 'pessimistic view of the human predicament' had become mainstream at the close of the 1970s, with powerful adherents at the highest branches of the US government" (127). President Jimmy Carter talked of limits and sacrifice, and of central planning as a means of addressing energy shortages.

In the 1980s the political tenor changed. Ronald Reagan won the White House brimming with enthusiasm about America's limitless economic expansion. In Reagan's calculus whatever environmental issues existed should spark profitable problem-solving, not hand-wringing and sacrifice. After Reagan's election Julian Simon rode a wave of what Sabin calls "the triumph of optimism." *The Ultimate Resource* came out in 1981 and instantly made Simon into a celebrity critic of environmentalism. Two years later he left the University of Illinois and became a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. In concert with Reagan-era criticisms of environmental regulation Simon began to advocate free enterprise as the best solution to environmental problems. He published widely in newspapers and magazines and became the go-to critic of Ehrlich's arguments. The National Research Council published a report in 1986 downplaying the dangers of overpopulation and giving mild support to Simon's views. By then, "Simon had changed the political debate in Washington through persistence and provocation" (170).

Throughout *The Bet*, Sabin weaves together the story of Ehrlich and Simon with the story of a growing divide in American environmental politics and partisan politics more broadly. The Ehrlich-Simon debate was consistently bitter and divisive. "Sometimes rhetorical sparring partners hone each other's arguments so that they are sharper and better," Sabin notes. "The opposite happened with Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon" (219). This acrimonious relationship prefigured the tone of the national debate years later. "Whereas in the 1970s," Sabin writes, "major environmental legislation had passed with bipartisan support, by the early 1990s, where a politician stood on environmental policies served as a litmus test of ideology and political affiliation" (189). Amid the hardening of party lines in the 1970s and 1980s, environmental issues became a way of pitting Americans against each other rather than bringing them together, and of proving partisan commitment rather than solving environmental problems. "Along with abortion rights, gun control, and race relations, environmental policies mobilized both liberals and conservatives for all the reasons that they divided Ehrlich and Simon," Sabin writes (189).

The great strength of *The Bet* is the way Sabin concerns himself with several different contexts at once. He tells the story of Ehrlich's and Simon's gamble in order to discuss environmentalism more broadly, and he uses that discussion to illuminate the oppositional politics of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. The conflict

between these two stubborn men becomes a window onto an era. "With markers laid down in the pages of academic journals," Sabin writes, "their bet resonated with the cultural clash occurring in the country as a whole" (5). Sabin's is one of only a handful of works that have tried to situate environmental politics in a much broader arena, investigating not just the inner workings of the environmental movement but the relationship between environmental politics and the unstable political moment of the late-twentieth century. Political historians have recently taken great interest in the 1970s as a pivotal moment in the history of organized labor, economic ideology, race relations, and global affairs. Sabin is taking the essential step of including environmentalism in that larger discussion.

Political ideology does not fully explain the Ehrlich-Simon debate, though, and while the back-and-forth between the two men rang all the more loudly by echoing key terms from broader political battles, those terms often sounded out of context. The argument between Ehrlich and Simon was never explicitly along a Left-Right divide, after all. Again and again, Ehrlich showed himself to be ideologically indeterminate. In his long-running debate with Barry Commoner, Ehrlich sparked fears of eugenic sterilization within communities of color. Sabin describes the Ehrlich-Commoner debate as showing how "Ehrlich's relentless focus on population left him open to criticisms from the left. Advocates for the poor and people of color joined Commoner in slamming Ehrlich's calls for population control" (57). And this philosophical slipperiness was a quality shared by Ehrlich's entire brand of environmentalism. Those activists concerned especially with population and limits tended to easily downplay issues of social difference – as Commoner never tired of pointing out – and to criticize economic expansion regardless of what would likely be the unevenly distributed consequences of a steady-state economy. Ehrlich's vulnerabilities on such issues, Sabin notes, "illustrated the complicated relation between the emerging environmental movement and American liberalism, with its emphasis on economic growth spurred by government action and on rights-based social equality" (60). So complicated was that relation, in fact, that Ehrlich and Simon ended up arguing about immigration from inverted partisan positions, Ehrlich warning of the dangers of immigration and Simon trumpeting its advantages.

It is possible that an ideological explanation for Ehrlich and Simon's differences is only part of the story, and that the Ehrlich-Simon debate reveals much more about the environmental movement than its tendency to split policymakers along a partisan divide. Environmentalism has never wholly been a creature of the Left or the Right, both of which have claimed or disparaged the environmental movement selectively. And ideological as well as partisan divisions – as Sabin makes clear – shifted a great deal during the course of the Ehrlich-Simon bet and its aftermath. Sometimes the bet mapped cleanly onto the new political terrain and sometimes it did not.

What remained consistent was the choice between pessimism and optimism. In late 1972 a Rutgers zoologist asked in the *New York Times Magazine*, "How are Americans to decide who is right, the optimists or the pessimists?" (83). Ten years

later *USA Today* published the headline: “Future is a.) dim or b.) bright (pick one)” (159). The divide between pessimism and optimism is one that has vexed the environmental movement for decades, and may explain more about the movement’s relationship to American politics than does the divide between Left and Right.

The Bet begins to articulate that relationship, although it could go even further; while political context is always thoughtfully considered the pessimist-optimist split, always implicit, could be made even more central. “Ehrlich and Simon laid their wager at a pivot point in the struggle between liberalism and conservatism in the late twentieth-century United States,” Sabin says (4). The pivot here may be from sunrise to sunset; the Democratic Party in the 1970s shifted from idealism to realism and from the party that promised the end of poverty to the party that warned of the dangers of affluence. The Republicans, meanwhile, shed their traditionalism and pragmatism and adopted a sky’s-the-limit rhetoric of governance. Environmentalists like Ehrlich were more cause than consequence of this pivot. There is nothing inherently negative about liberalism – the opposite may be much more the case – but there is something fundamentally doubtful about environmentalism. While the Democratic Party and mainstream liberals learned from Ronald Reagan and moderated their gloomier views, the environmental movement continued to warn of dark days ahead. In electoral politics the choice between pessimism and optimism can be one of tone; in the environmental movement it is one of basic belief. The ideas that animated the bet – and that animate *The Bet* – are more philosophical than those that animate political partisanship. They are concerned not just with economic incentives and natural limits, but with faith in human ingenuity and acceptance of human limits.

Sabin is neither a pessimist nor an optimist – or a little of both. This is relevant because *The Bet* is not just a work of history, although it is chiefly and very successfully that. It is also a book concerned with current policy debates and interested in contributing to them. Here Sabin’s own uneasiness with environmentalism’s glass-half-empty comes into play. “I knew what I was against,” Sabin says of his own environmental views a couple of decades ago, “...but it was far harder to articulate what I was for” (x). Taking seriously the lessons of Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon, he says, means rejecting the more rigid claims of both and instead seeking “to wrestle with their tensions and uncertainties, and to take what each offers that is of value” (227). This sort of middle path might serve to “reduce the partisan conflict surrounding environmental policies and find a more pragmatic path forward” (xi).

The notion of a middle path is a complicated one for contemporary environmentalism. Around the mid-2000s some environmentalists began to question their own movement’s gadfly strategy and to embrace promotion as an alternative to critique. This has led environmentalists like Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger of the Breakthrough Institute, Stewart Brand of the Long Now Foundation, and Alex Steffen, formerly of Worldchanging, to celebrate what is possible rather than bemoaning what is probable. Optimistic environmentalism

generally involves a much rosier view of technology, innovation, and market forces than environmentalists are used to. It can also mean emphasizing what people are already doing right, like living in cities and paying greater attention to food production.

But optimism remains a hard sell for a movement that has long grounded itself in questioning greater economic activity as a solution to anything. The journalist Naomi Klein, writing several years ago about climate-change denialism, saved her most pointed attacks for “professional environmentalists” who “paint a picture of global warming Armageddon, then assure us that we can avert catastrophe by buying ‘green’ products and creating clever markets in pollution.” The urgency and scale of climate change has convinced some that the environmental movement must adapt by appealing to people on their own terms, offering them practical solutions rather than threatening them with dire predictions. It has convinced others that the movement should demand nothing short of fundamental change in order to prevent a headlong rush toward catastrophe.

In that sense the significance of the Ehrlich-Simon debate lives on, with or without the caustic edge that its chief antagonists often lent it. And that debate’s significance in the historiography of the environmental movement has been reinvigorated by Sabin’s important work, which reminds us how arguments about the future have a long and rich past.

Response by Paul Sabin, Yale University

I am grateful to Sarah Phillips, Patrick Allitt, Peter Shulman, and Keith Woodhouse for their thoughtful and generous comments on *The Bet*. Many thanks as well to Christopher Jones for including my book in this roundtable series, and for giving me a chance to respond.

Paul Ehrlich, one of the most prominent environmental figures of his generation, put his theories to a symbolic test, and he lost. Sarah, Patrick, Peter, and Keith have shared many aspects of this tale, and their lively essays show why I found this story so compelling as a way to examine the clash between environmentalists and their critics since the late 1960s. The commentators also raise a few important questions that I will try to address.

Sarah asks whether I have delivered the “political goods” and proven that Ehrlich and Simon’s intellectual conflict mattered for practical governance. She rightly catches my cautious use of verbs such as “reflect,” “contribute,” and “represent,” rather something more forceful and direct—like “caused.” Her insight highlights challenges inherent in linking intellectual and political history, and the very process of asserting narrow explanations of historical cause and effect.

The Bet certainly does not try to explain all the sources of environmental partisanship. There are many causes: party sorting and Congressional gerrymandering, political lobbying and campaign finance rules, propaganda campaigns and an increasingly segmented media environment. Values and ideas matter, as I discuss in my book, but so do institutional structure, economic interest, and political power. Given the many contributing factors, I did not want to oversell the intellectual clash that is at the heart of *The Bet*.

In addition to their broad contribution to framing a national conversation about environmental problems, Ehrlich and Simon’s views did have more specific application to population and energy policy. Ehrlich’s ideas, with millions of books sold, helped generate support for United States overseas population aid, for example, while Simon’s counterargument—that population growth did not undermine economic growth and social welfare—helped justify a later retreat from family planning and population programs. Warnings of resource scarcity by Ehrlich and others, such as the authors of *The Limits to Growth*, boosted federal policies favoring efficiency, conservation, and alternative fuels. Jimmy Carter infused his [April 1977 speech](#) on energy policy with these ideas about limits and an imminent crisis due to shrinking resources. In the book, I also discuss how the earlier clash over population and resources has carried over to more recent debates over climate change. Before the 1992 Rio Conference, for example, Republican Congressmen John Doolittle and Tom Delay took to the House floor to denounce climate treaty proposals, emphasizing that “ecofreaks” like Paul Ehrlich had a long track record of “scare stories of looming man-made catastrophe.”

Neither Ehrlich nor Simon was in the room when population or energy policy was being made. And only rarely do you see politicians attributing specific policy positions to authors and thinkers. But ideas shape policy formulation, as well as the way people communicate—or, in this case, don't communicate—with each other.

Keith emphasizes that the categories of liberal and conservative, and pessimist and optimist, do not map easily onto each other, and that environmentalists were not consistently or uniformly left or right politically. I agree, and I tried to incorporate some of these tensions and contradictions, but my commitment to Ehrlich and Simon as a narrative vehicle also imposed constraints. For the purposes of my story, I raised Ehrlich up to represent a complex environmental movement, and Simon to stand for the critics. Keeping the book clear and concise for classroom use, which I hope works for Patrick, brought additional hard choices.

I do not think, however, that we can simply substitute optimist and pessimist as alternate categories for conservative and liberal. The usual alignment would pit pessimistic environmentalists against their optimistic antagonists. Yet people like Ehrlich often were optimistic that Americans would share their vision for the future; that the economy could be reorganized in fundamental ways with little social cost; and that improvements in health and wealth could continue without a variety of technological and scientific inputs. People like Simon held some pessimistic views—for instance, they predicted excessively dire economic consequences due to environmental regulation. Their faith in innovation faltered when it came to responding to regulatory mandates. More generally, they were pessimistic about the idea that society could pursue collective goals without suppressing individual freedom and economic prosperity. In short, Ehrlich and Simon were both optimistic and pessimistic, just about different things.

Patrick argues that historians should know that it is “impossible to predict the future,” and that the history of forecasting is one of “uninterrupted failure.” The future is full of surprises, but that doesn't mean that some predictions aren't better than others. Some commentators said that the recent financial crisis couldn't have been predicted, but Michael Lewis wrote an entertaining account (*The Big Short*) about people who made billions shorting the housing market. History can teach us about the future by suggesting what questions to ask, revealing patterns, and suggesting trends that might continue. The story of the Ehrlich-Simon bet, as I detail in the book as well as other [forums](#), contains cautionary lessons for both environmentalists and their critics, which I think could help guide thinking about future policy in the face of uncertainty.

Patrick also offers some sweeping comments on the trajectory of environmental history, to which I can respond only briefly here. Patrick is surely right that many early environmental historians were influenced by their sense of imminent environmental crisis. Following the Santa Barbara oil spill, for instance, Roderick Nash drafted the Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights, which

described “an environment which is rising in revolt against us.” Donald Worster, whom Patrick mentions, shared with Ehrlich an understanding of fundamental limits placed by nature on human society. Worster warned that the world faced a “future of dust bowls” if it didn’t change direction. Patrick then suggests that later scholars, such as William Cronon, sided more with Julian Simon. That seems like a large stretch, even a misreading. Cronon does show clearly in *Nature’s Metropolis* how markets and technology helped transform the land and generate material abundance. But I don’t see any of Simon’s “cheery optimism,” or a Simon-like certitude that humans will overcome environmental constraints. Rather, Cronon conveys a sense of loss as well as gain in the transformation of the West and an appreciation for the interdependence of humans and nature. Cronon’s emphasis on our collective moral responsibility to care for the planet is not a theme that Julian Simon favored.

Peter questions whether the warnings of crisis were a necessary precondition for the passage of environmental legislation in the early 1970s. By contrast, he notes, sober, measured reports by climate scientists have produced little action. Going further, Peter asks, “why don’t moderate, defensible claims draw American politics back towards consensus?” Keith also questions the viability of a middle path.

These are difficult questions about the function of extreme rhetoric in the past, and the potential for reasoned dialogue in the future. Radical and moderate politics depended on each other in the early 1970s. Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, and others rallied and persuaded the public, for example, while Congressional negotiators in Washington made pragmatic choices about legislative compromises.

Where does that leave the historian? Effective politics often do involve simplistic claims, and sweeping rhetoric can mobilize people. But the historian can play a different part than the political advocate or media strategist. Historians can recognize that the media environment is unreceptive to nuance, and still fight to assert complexity and balance. Historians, with their understanding of context and perspective, can help build bridges and enhance understanding.

The middle, however, can be a surprisingly lonely place. In my experience publicizing *The Bet* over the past year, I have found that readers invested in one side or the other of this argument express frustration with the balance of the book’s narrative. Ehrlich himself said that he enjoyed *The Bet*— except for its “even-handedness” toward Simon. Others complain that I let Ehrlich off easy. There are readers, including Patrick in his comments here, who see my book as a simple validation of Simon. As he puts it, by the end of the book, my “head is telling him that Simon got the better of this confrontation, but Ehrlich still tugs at his heartstrings.”

For too many Simon fans, it seems, Ehrlich is just a fool with little to his credit— and the reverse is true for Ehrlich’s sympathizers. I sought to persuade readers to listen better to each other across the ideological divide. Both Simon and Ehrlich have important insights to offer. Sometimes I wished I could have written one book for

environmentalists, and another for their critics— trying to address both sides at the same time was a daunting challenge.

But that complexity also is part of what made writing the book personally rewarding. We need to find ways to address competing truths in our books and in our classes— how things are improving, how they are deteriorating, and how our values, and not just our interests, lead us to have very different understandings of improvement and deterioration. Historians, and humanists in general, I think, are well positioned to help frame the social choices we are making as we lay our bets on the future.

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