*“Freedom to breed will bring ruin to all.” What considerations drive Garrett Hardin to this conclusion, and are they defensible?*



**Introduction**

In 1968, the journal *Science* published an article by American ecologist Garrett Hardin entitled “The tragedy of the commons”. The main theory in this paper is based on the allegory of herdsmen sharing a common ground for their cattle. Motivated by making profit, one of the herdsmen will sooner or later come to make the following calculation: by adding an extra animal to his stock, although he will invariably cause a slight negative impact on the common ground (loss in space and soil quality), he will gain a greater profit by the sale of that extra animal. As far as he is concerned, adding the extra cattle is worth the impediment to the commons. However, seen as all the herdsmen, acting in their own self-interest, can be expected to reason similarly, they will all increase the size of their cattle, resulting in a complete and irreversible destruction of the common ground. The herdsmen will then be left in a highly precarious situation they wouldn’t have been in had they consulted each-other beforehand and decided together on the best course of action.

The moral to this story isn’t hard to understand: acting in one’s own self-interest in matters of common goods and objectives is at best counter-productive and at worse suicidal. The reason Garrett Hardin refers to this hypothetical case is to show that the common ground of the herdsmen is no different than the air we breathe, the food we eat or the water we drink. His argument is therefore that the balance between humanity’s needs and the Earth’s finite number of resources is jeopardized by our own self-interested conception of procreation. At some point the number of people living at once on the planet will necessarily exceed its capabilities – hence Hardin’s famous expression: “freedom to breed will bring ruin to all”. As a result, he calls for the imminent necessity to curtail our demographic expansion by population control. The question at hand then becomes: should population control be generalized in order to save the future of mankind?

**I – Legitimate reasons for concern: self-jeopardizing principles of survival**

The first rule of survival for any species is to ensure its progeny. Evolutionary fact proves that when a species is unable to reproduce, whether by lack of number or infertility, it faces extinction. As human beings, we are mammals who need to copulate in order to reproduce, so in this sense breeding is embedded in our instinct. However, unchallenged over time, reproduction has come to be viewed as more than this: it has become an individual right. This is what Hardin calls “the freedom to breed”. To this day there is still a widespread and generalized sentiment that limiting reproduction would be an exaggerated, if not unthinkable, assault on one’s individual liberty. Hardin points out that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by describing the “family as the natural and fundamental unit of society”, upholds that “any choice and decision with regard to the size of the family must irrevocably rest with the family itself”[[1]](#footnote-1). It is precisely in accordance to this common conception that our modern Welfare State system was established, so that everyone would have equal opportunity to have children. By getting each individual to contribute to the common pot of social goods, no prospective parents are to be afraid of their inability to provide, by their sole means, for a family they have a right to start. In this sense, procreation has taken on a distinct form of individual “human right”: it has become a “social right”.

Be that as it may, there is another fact of reality that cannot be ignored: our planet Earth, however grandiose and magnificent and mysterious it may be in many ways, remains nonetheless a finite world. It has physical limits beyond which Space continues and its content, although sometimes renewable, can be quantified and exhausted. This inevitably leads to a clash between the first rule of survival exposed above and a second, which is the necessity for a viable environment. It is no fallacy that however prolific in its multiplication a species may be, the ability to live precedes the necessity to survive. This is precisely why human breeding poses a problem, because as a result of their limitless multiplication, they are at risk of outnumbering the resources at their disposal.

The terrifying truth we face today is that “nothing threatens the future of our species more than overpopulation”[[2]](#footnote-2). Already at the end of the 18th century, political economist Thomas Malthus observed in *An essay on the principle of population* that “the power of population [to grow] is indefinitely greater than the power in the Earth to produce subsistence for man”. Today, demographic experts have shown that population increases exponentially, that is that if reproduction remains at the same rate, a population that doubles over fifty years will quadruple within a century. The current world population of approximately 7 billion people is already seven times what it was in 1800, having doubled since the 1960’s and expected to reach 9 billion by 2050. This growth is so unfathomable that it should serve as a clear warning that we are navigating completely unchartered waters in terms of sustainability.

The danger that Hardin is pointing at is not the high population in itself, but without a doubt the outnumbering of resources. This means firstly “running out” of resources: on the one hand, lacking food, water and livable space, which would result in be malnutrition, impoverishment, starvation, and ultimately widespread death; on the other hand, running out of materials such as wood, gas, petrol, which would cause the standstill and eventual collapse of modern civilization. Secondly, it means “overbearing” our planet through our activity, and particularly through pollution. This would cause the hindering of agriculture (to which also contributes erosion and urbanization), the loss of biodiversity (Hardin explicitly cites as examples the sea and national parks) and global warming (causing, or at least worsening, natural disasters, with the direct consequence of serious humanitarian catastrophes, spreading of diseases and forcing many into mass emigration). All in all, overpopulation carries with it the impending threat of reaching what some specialists call the “tipping point”, that irreversible moment where our presence exceeds the carrying capacity of the Planet and where we go “off a cliff into oblivion”[[3]](#footnote-3). Like an elastic-band that snaps when being stretched too far, our planet’s capacity to sustain us will be overwhelmed, resulting in the collapse of civilization and ultimately the end of the human race. The frightening truth about this prospect is that our current generation is leading down that path because of the “petty squabbles and short term perspective”3 that constitute our reproductive desires. By progressively erecting reproduction into a “social right”, we’ve turned reproduction on its head as it now acts against its original purpose (ensuring the continuity of our species). Therefore, in order to refocus on our survival, Hardin concludes that we must shatter the “rights-based” conception of reproduction.

**II – The legitimate call for population control**

In the face of such ominous predictions, Gareth Hardin calls for the urgent necessity to curtail our demographic expansion by means of population control. In settling on this conclusion, he makes two assumptions: first, that we must find a solution on Earth because we cannot get away from it. “Space”, he says, “is no escape”. Although we can assume that the colonization of other planets will, at some point in our distant future, become just as real as the science-fiction fantasies that today prophesize about it, we should rightfully realize that if we do not follow Hardin’s down-to-earth (no pun intended) instructions, the human race won’t survive long enough to ever see that day come. Secondly, Hardin justifies his call for population control by the fact that in the overpopulation equation, reproduction is the only element we have any significant control over. In other words, he assumes that we will never be able to solve the problem of overpopulation by augmenting the resources accordingly to the population’s increasing demands. As a reply to those who “think that farming the seas or developing new strains of wheat will solve the problem”, he emphatically argues that “the population problem cannot be solved in a technical way” seen as “a finite world can only support a finite population”[[4]](#footnote-4). Also, his conclusion rightfully rejects the overly optimistic idea that one new person’s existence provides the offer corresponding to another new person’s demand, and vice versa. “Maximizing population”, he points out, “does not maximize goods” 4.

For the moment, let’s assume that his argumentation is correct. After all, it corresponds quite faithfully to our current state of affairs, and truth is, if we were to reduce global population to a fraction of its present level, we would all claim the benefits of plentiful resources. So in this sense, it does seem to be the best solution, both in terms of effectiveness and of benefits. Also, it is worth pointing out that satisfyingly, his solution gives no credit to the defenders of the non-identity problem. The tragedy of the commons is a perfect embodiment of the depletion scenario and by viewing future beings, not as non-identical in the future existence, but as identical in their present potentiality, he cancels the paradox and focuses our attention on setting up the best possible future for those who will come into existence.

Yet this does not say anything of *how* his solution is to be put into place, and it is precisely on this subject that Hardin’s thesis offers its most interesting insights. Hardin claims that such a population control can only be put in place through “mutually agreed coercion”4. Strictly put, this means limiting each and every individual’s right to procreation, by, for instance, capping the number of births allowed per person. Although most people today will agree on the imminence of humanity’s common challenges, few are willing to accept the pertinence of population control as a means to face them. What Hardin aims to tackle first and foremost in his article is precisely this widespread attachment to the traditional view of reproduction which stems for the engrained amalgamation of “freedom to” and “right to”. Hardin’s opponents will claim that installing a generalized population control will necessarily be a violation of their right to reproduce, and they claim to have such a right because everyone is free to do so. This is, by no stretch of the imagination, an untenable justification. First of all, being free to do something doesn’t necessarily entail a right *to* that thing. I may be free to go and move as I please but it does not follow that I have a right to go anywhere I want. Property laws, for that matter, are necessary infringements on everyone’s freedom of movement in order to guarantee social order. Yet we do not see our neighbors’ fence as an infringement on our rights. At the same level, theft laws are necessary limitations to a wannabe-robbers’ freedom, yet we do not view bank-vaults as constraining anyone’s right to take what is not theirs to own. Similarly, speed-limits and airport checkpoints are justified because common security trumps individual freedom. In every walk of life, our freedom is curtailed because other necessities are deemed more important, and consequently the prohibited actions are no longer seen as legitimate rights *to* anything. Hardin claims that the same goes for reproduction. We should “reexamine our individual freedoms”[[5]](#footnote-5) and curtail our liberty to breed because ensuring a viable environment for our species is far more important. In truth, the only reason we have difficulty to surpass our instinctive rejection of this idea is because we’ve had the privilege of free procreation for millennia, yet it is quite predictable that within a few generations of such a policy being implemented, restricted procreation would become an uncontested norm. Accepting this, we should come to the conclusion that sooner or later, one generation is going to have to take responsibility and sacrifice their own personal interest for the common benefit.

**III – Questionable morality of population control and misconception of overpopulation**

However pertinent Hardin’s solution may be, supposing that the necessary shift in mentality occurred, its success, and therefore its pertinence, would still necessarily depend on the way in which it would be implemented. And in this regard, the solution of “population control” leaves many questions unanswered.

Let’s imagine that we start the population control policy, as is currently the case in China, on a 1-child-per-family basis. This is directly aimed at reducing population (2 parents are replaced in time only by 1 offspring). Shouldn’t we then consider it too much of a loss to humanity that brothers, sisters, aunties and uncles would necessarily cease to exist? If so, let’s suppose we loosen the policy to a 1-child-per-person basis, which would result in an equal renewing of the population and would allow parents to have two children. If this appears more acceptable, it still leaves major gaps and moral grey areas. How would we deal with surplus and unwanted pregnancies? Are we to forcefully abort them? What about women who happen to be carrying triplets? And where does such a policy leave the claim for homosexual couples to have children of their own? Shouldn’t their demands to produce their own biological offspring be viewed as exaggeratingly selfish when millions of orphans await adoption?

Also, Hardin’s view fails to take into account the ever increasing life-expectancy which majorly factors into overpopulation. It is estimated that every second there are four births for two deaths in the World. This staggering statistic illustrates the fact that there are both too many births and not enough deaths. Should we expect to put a limit on ageing, too? More reasonably, it may be that having a ratio of children-per-person is less viable than, for instance, having a quota of children-per-group of people per-period. In such an instance, then, we’d face horrendous social mechanisms whereby some people would end up having to apply for the right to foster a child, then sit on a waiting-list for their plan to procreate to be green-lit by authorities. Or what if, instead, we challenged the Welfare State system by opting for a capacities-based approach to procreation, whereby parents would only be allowed to have children so long as they can provide for them? Again, however sensible this may sound, it carries with it an inescapable potential for injustice. Where does it leave the more unfortunate people in society? Are we to say that the rich can breed and the poor can die? Finally, whichever way we think about implementing his solution, we cannot escape the fact that Hardin’s goal is still a human-centered interest. If he calls for less population, it is not inherently for the sake of the resources he’s looking to save. Hardin’s theory in fact has little regards for biocentrism or deep-ecology that essentially would pursue the same end but with different means, proposing the protection and sustainable exploitation of natural resources in virtue of their inherent moral worth and not in regards to human needs.

In bringing the situation of population back to the allegory of the commons, another weakness in Hardin’s logic should be brought up. If the herdsmen represent humans at large, then we are to understand that they reproduce in their own self-interest. Above and beyond the issue of the “right to reproduce”, in pursuit of which interest are people driven to reproduce? If we were to ask most people why they choose to have children, almost none would answer their animal urge to ensure the continuity of the species. Despite the plethora of particular desires and justifications, there seem to be two general trends depending directly on parents’ access to resources. The “rich” people of this world, those who do not suffer from scarcity in resources, tend to reproduce for psychological reasons (they want the satisfaction of existing through time, engaging in the social activates of parenthood, etc…) and generally have no more than two or three children. As far as this personal interest is concerned, Hardin’s solution can to a certain extent be an effective solution. However, the “poor” people of this world, those who already suffer from a lack of resources, usually reproduce for economic reasons (children work and bring more money to the household than they consume) and tend to do so profusely. This contributes to the local overpopulation which in turns heaps more pressure on society, causing the children to end up in the same predicament as their parents.

In this case, it could be argued that Hardin’s argument misses some fundamental aspects of overpopulation. First of all, if overpopulation is undoubtedly a cause of misery, misery must be recognized as one of the main causes of overpopulation. There is a vicious circle here that population control *per se* does little to alleviate. Malthus’s main contradictor in his time was Condorcet who argued that the best way to curtail human fertility was to improve circumstances of life. Secondly, the scarcity of any good is not only incumbent on the number of people exploiting it, but also on the intensity of that exploitation. This is essential as it redefines responsibility for overpopulation in terms of quality (importance) of demand, not quantity. In other words, who is more responsible for overpopulation, those who *are* more than they can be, or those who *consume* more than they need? In the light of such an interrogation, it becomes hard to entertain that the ten Ethiopian brothers and sisters who make due with a bucket of water between them every day are a greater threat to humanity than the single American child who showers off before and after bathing in his swimming-pool.

In addressing the problem of overpopulation, I would like to offer a slightly different approach. As we have said, overpopulation is a situation in which the demands of the existing population exceed the offer provided by the world. We must understand it as a strictly *quantitative* problem, no more, no less. In consequence, global warming, for instance, is actually *not* a result of overpopulation, it is a result of over-activity. Granted, the more the people, the more the activity; but this does not necessarily imply the more the pollution. The activity of five men running a factory can be a countless times more polluting than the activity of a whole country living off the product of its land. Simply put, the problem at hand with overpopulation is a lack of offer to satisfy human demands, both natural (ex: water to drink) and artificial (ex: wood for paper). Yet, the fact of the matter is, when comparing the quantitative stock of each offer-demand relationship currently at play, the inescapable and astounding truth is that overpopulation today, in the world, does *not* exist. As far as natural demands are concerned, there *is* enough water for everyone, there *is* enough food for everyone and there *is* enough space for everyone. As far as artificial demands are concerned, we can by definition modify them seen as we created them in the first place. At the end of the day, we must come to terms with the fact then that the main evil leading us to overpopulation is not our “freedom to breed”, but our current system of resource exploitation, distribution and creation.

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2. Anthony Cassils, “*Overpopulation, Sustainable Development and Security* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anthony Cassils, “*Overpopulation, Sustainable Development and Security* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Garrett Hardin, *“The tragedy of the commons”* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Garrett Hardin, *“The tragedy of the commons”* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)