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Frederik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind, *Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis*

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Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis is a survey of views around the notion of scarcity from the 1600s to the 21st century, with the clear intent to explain its different appropriations and uses over time. Such views would either coalesce into hegemonic discourses or rise as resistance against the *zeitgeist* of the period. However, more than an intellectual history, the book is also provocative in terms of how the concept of scarcity might or should be reinterpreted in the face of the impending collapse of biophysical structures that support human life on Earth. In the words of the authors, "the goal is to put historical knowledge at the service of a better future" (3), a purpose that calls for nothing less than an overhaul of the currently dominant mode of "nature-economy nexus" (3). They set out from the premise that the concept of scarcity can be used as a lever to think about human-nature relations anew. The assumption sounds not only reasonable but also quite pertinent if we think about how such a politically charged term might lend itself to fresh conceptualisations about the links between economic welfare and environmental conservation. The historicisation of the notion of scarcity is particularly useful for challenging what I deem to be a rather lazy portrayal of our current predicament as inexorably bound to a given and immutable human nature. According to its advocates, all we have left is salvation through technology and the unwarranted hypothesis of perfect substitutability between capital and natural wealth.

The main thread of the book hinges upon two broad categories offering opposing perspectives on two key questions that lie at the heart of discourses on scarcity: (i) the (im)possibility and (limits of) human

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ability to increasingly draw resources from the surrounding environment from a technical standpoint; and (ii) (in)finite human wants. In other words, scarcity necessarily arises out of a joint understanding of issues related to production and consumption. This is certainly in line with the vast literature grappling with the concept. Nevertheless, quite surprisingly, the book does not delve into common qualifications and distinctions such as "absolute" and "relative" scarcity, or "produced scarcity" (*e.g.* Baumgärtner *et al.*, 2006; Dale, 2012; Daoud, 2011). There is also no clear overarching definition of the term that would systematise and classify all the different subtypes discussed therein. On the plus side, this absence allows for a higher degree of contextualisation and historical specificity in the intended genealogy. The two main ideological categories serving as guideposts for the reader are "Cornucopian Scarcity", characterised by endless human desires and the faithful will to master nature, and "Finitarian Scarcity", based on some level of constraint over such appetites and the acknowledgment of pre-existing biophysical limits. Each chapter of the book is then written with this broader classification in mind, making use of a rich set of primary sources and exceptional scholarship to show how intellectual currents belonging to either of these two categories have influenced economic, social, and political thought in a given period.

In the first chapter, Albritton Jonsson and Wennerlind describe the period before the 17th century as dominated by "Neo-Aristotelian Scarcity" and its Christian worldview in which emphasis lay on harmony within the body politic with strict social norms that kept human desires at bay, also regarding nature as powerful but fixed and not subject to our every whim. With the ascent of the merchant class and the perception of land as "alienable pieces of property" (40) emerges "Enclosure Scarcity", with its legitimisation of unending capital accumulation by means of dispossession and the social acceptance of inescapable poverty. The opposing intellectual trend would be "Utopian Scarcity", spearheaded by Thomas More and his well-known egalitarian vision tied to the pleasures of a moderate life.

Chapters 2, 3 and 7 depict instances of "Cornucopian Scarcity", which is also the title given to the second chapter. It refers to the rise of a particular set of ideas shared in the late 17th and early 18th centuries by figures such as Giovanni Botero, Francis Bacon, Samuel Hartlib, Nicholas Barbon and Bernard Mandeville. Unyielding faith in technical progress and human ingenuity at the dawn of modern science translated into the instrumentalisation of a supposedly inexhaustible nature able to tend to not only boundless but also proudly wasteful desires,

even if at the price of inequality and colonial oppression. In the following chapter, such an outlook assumes, according to the authors, a more balanced narrative under the banner of "Enlightened Scarcity" with a shift toward the gradual and systematic character of human progress and a more parsimonious stance on growth that did not preclude versions of a stationary state. A less hedonistic bias, overtly compensated by a more prominent role assigned to ideals of conviviality and social cohesion, is drawn from the works of David Hume, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and Adam Smith.

Relatively moderate in light of preceding discourses, "Enlightened Scarcity" would remain as the prevailing mode of Cornucopian thought until the appearance of "Neoclassical Scarcity" (Chapter 7) in late 19th century, whose tenets resemble the hubris of Barbon and Mandeville. Marginalism had firmly turned back to the possibility of infinite improvement of material conditions through technological advancement and substitutability as well as to the insatiable wants of sovereign consumers, thus warranting a "perennial condition of scarcity" (184) despite abundant production. Criticism of wasteful consumerism (*e.g.* from Veblen, Marshall, and Keynes; home economists could also have been mentioned in this regard) and concerns with negative externalities did not hinder the hegemonic consolidation of "Neoclassical Scarcity" to the point that, today, its marginalist approach to the relations between nature, technology, and human behaviour is regarded by many as a universal law. "Neoclassical Scarcity" has grown unabatedly stronger during the period dubbed as the Great Acceleration, reinvigorated by welfare theorems, growth theories, and more recently William Nordhaus's DICE model as the epitome of an intellectual tradition oblivious to the threats posed by imminent ecological collapse on a global level.

In contrast, "Finitarian Scarcity" is discussed in Chapter 4, 5, 6, and 8. It begins with "Romantic Scarcity" and the takes of the Wordsworth siblings, John Clare, John Ruskin and others on the vices of commercial society and the ideals of material simplicity, connection with nature, concrete needs, the commons, and a sense of community. The fifth chapter presents the emergence of increasing concerns with shortages and the turn to overpopulation as the crux of the matter in its well-known representation as "Malthusian Scarcity". Motivated by bad harvests, war, and political instability—but also by preconceived views on the behaviour of the poor—this strand of Finitarian thought stood out for its conservative vein, ranging from the works of Edmund Burke and

Malthus himself to its subsequent social Darwinist versions and resurgence in 20th-century Neo-Malthusian calls for population control.

Chapter 6 turns to "Socialist Scarcity" as a mixture of Cornucopian and Finitarian elements in the writings of Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Marx, generally perceived as productivist outlooks intertwined with a focus on the satisfaction of basic human needs. Private property and exploitative social relations take centre stage as underlying reasons for scarcity and poverty. Overall, arguments for Finitarian elements in socialist thought seem to outweigh those depicting it as a pro-industrial growth movement, even though the authors stick to its representation as a hybrid between "Finitarian" and "Cornucopian Scarcity". The socialist viewpoint emphasised needs and leisure, the notion of social metabolism, and nature as a source of value in Marx, notwithstanding protracted and still open debates within eco-Marxist scholarship. In the case of Lenin, the authors point to a much clearer Cornucopian perspective, although acknowledgement for his interest in ecology and support given to conservation projects in the early years of post-revolutionary Russia might have yielded a more nuanced account. Moreover, while "Socialist Scarcity" is presented in opposition to "Capitalist Scarcity", the latter is not clearly defined, remaining allegedly as a composite of "Cornucopian" and "Neoclassical Scarcities".

In the last chapter before the concluding section, Albritton Jonsson and Wennerlind introduce "Planetary Scarcity", which is potentially an innovative and useful framing for contemporary debates on environmental challenges. Grounded on developments in Earth system science and the search for new epistemologies capable of dealing with interconnected phenomena and coping with unintended consequences, this new approach to scarcity carries the burden of moving beyond the age-old imperative to harness natural bounty ad infinitum. In light of the complexity associated with different types of pollution, their feedback loops, and issues of scale—scarcity as "a dearth of sinks" (228)—there is, as argued by the authors, a need for a much deeper understanding of the nature-economy nexus. In order to illustrate previous attempts to forge such a worldview, the authors gather a rather diverse team: from Hannah Arendt's notions of human degradation, alienation, and "endless obsolescence" (209) to Herbert Marcuse's freedom from infinite wants and Martin Heidegger's mystical stance against modern technology. A biophysical approach to economic thinking is also mobilised, although a more adequate differentiation between its different subfields would have been beneficial, especially not to risk reducing all of them to varieties of Neo-Malthusianism. There is a

plethora of more promising—and necessarily more radical than green forms of business-as-usual—propositions which could have been further explored in the chapter (*e.g.* ecofeminism and social ecological economics; see, for instance, Spash, 2017). They build upon Karl Polanyi's description of economies as "a provisioning system embedded in social institutions and normative discourses" (223), which the authors highlight as a push back against "Neoclassical Scarcity".

The concluding chapter calls for an "ethos of ecological repair" (247), yet not without a certain level of tension or ambiguity in terms of the future roles of "Cornucopian" and "Finitarian Scarcities". While there is a general stance in the book in favour of the latter, some proposed solutions seem more aligned with the former: *e.g.* carbon capture, a technological fix that fits well within a scenario of perpetuation of "Neoclassical Scarcity" and its "ideology of maximum efficiency, infinite substitutability, and infinite growth [that] threaten the very processes that keep the planet habitable" (233). While the authors argue for the limits of market-based solutions that rely on price mechanisms, substitutability, and cost-shifting, the discussion falls back on initiatives that apply the same premises and tools of the above-mentioned ideology of "Neoclassical Scarcity" (*e.g.* Partha Dasgupta's work on biodiversity). In any case, as "Neo-Aristotelian Scarcity" is the only Finitarian approach to have achieved hegemony in the West—despite the recurrent influence of "Romantic", "Malthusian", and "Socialist Scarcities"—the hope now lies in "Planetary Scarcity". Giving it a fighting chance entails the ability to openly challenge "Neoclassical Scarcity" at a fundamental level, assessing in which ways and to whom "it has been *far too* successful" (16, italics in the original).

The classification according to ideational regimes of scarcity, however malleable and not always straightforward, shows itself throughout the book to be very helpful in the task of contextualising specific topics in their relation to the nature-economy nexus (*e.g.* science, labour, markets, money, credit, and land). Important but usually neglected economic issues unavoidably stand out, as in the case of the differentiation between basic needs and luxuries. The tensions and overlaps between discourses belonging to different kinds of scarcity also lay bare unequal power relations and the material force of social imaginaries. For all these reasons and many others, the authors have definitely succeeded in their efforts to put intellectual history at the service of the future, showcasing yet again that "the reconstruction of the economic imagination will require historical detective work" (20).

Furthermore, there are at least a few forgotten thinkers included in the book who are revealed as inspiring sources for the question at hand, some of them deserving even further historiographical work in this context: Gerard Winstanley, François Fénelon, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Harriet Martineau are good examples. Then again, many others—Hume, Smith, and Malthus are amongst the clearest examples—seem to have already been the object of thorough investigation. This is also due to an overreliance on English-speaking sources in the book to the detriment of a more general and, in turn, powerful account. If we are truly to start understanding human beings and their surrounding environments with an eye on planetary habitability, there is certainly a need to move beyond internal critiques of Western thought. While these are necessary to take stock of the effects of modernity and capitalism, a next step would be a new global history of scarcity, as the authors themselves seem to suggest.

In sum, *Scarcity* shows the historical contingency associated with the emergence of diverse forms of nature-economy nexus, and unveils a more hopeful aspect of our condition, namely that we are not permanently stuck in our current views, mentalities, and imaginaries. Although history has been plagued with more extreme views on scarcity, we are not bound to modes of production and consumption that are incompatible with the planet we inhabit in the long term. There is, however, not a lot of time to dwell on the matter. For intellectual historians, it means to follow the footsteps of the authors and not shy away from contributing to a better future.

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