

The Imagination of Limits

Exploring Scarcity and Abundance

Edited by

FREDERIKE FELCHT

KATIE RITSON



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Contents

- 5 **Foreword**
Frederike Felcht and Katie Ritson
- 7 **The Aesthetics and Politics of Scarcity—A Swedish Example**
Frederike Felcht

Spaces of Scarcity

- 17 **British Views on the Indian and Ottoman Famines: Politics, Culture, and Morality**
Özge Ertem
- 29 **Scarcity in the Arctic: A Colonial Construct?**
Karen Oslund
- 37 **Environmental Scarcity and Abundance in Medieval Icelandic Literature**
Reinhard Hennig
- 45 **“Main Objective: Don’t Starve”:** Representations of Scarcity in Virtual Worlds
Robert Baumgartner

Stories of Lack and Abundance

- 55 **Anthropocene Blues: Abundance, Energy, Limits**
Fredrik Albritton Jonsson
- 65 **Curb Your Enthusiasm: On Scarcity and Replenishment in Literature**
Klaus Benesch
- 75 **“Hang on to the words”:** The Scarcity of Language in McCarthy’s *The Road* and Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*
Oliver Völker
- 83 **From Anti-Abundance to Anti-Anti-Abundance: Scarcity, Abundance, and Utopia in Two Science Fiction Writers**
J. Jesse Ramírez

Frederike Felcht and Katie Ritson

Foreword

What is scarcity and how has it been represented in historical and aesthetic contexts? This was the leading question in the workshop held at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich in September 2014. The workshop brought together a number of scholars, including doctoral students and early-career researchers, to explore the political and aesthetical implications of scarcity from various perspectives.

The initial response to the workshop covered a great range of topics—from scholars working on historical famines, computer games, medieval literature, hunger in literary figures, and morality in agricultural politics—indicating the relevance of the concept of scarcity for many different approaches. Any worry that it would be difficult to reduce these very different approaches to a common denominator for discussions was swiftly dispelled, as was any criticism of the humanities as confined to the ivory tower. The contemporary relevance of ideas about scarcity and abundance was evident throughout the workshop and lent discussions both a sense of cohesion and a political charge.

The essays collected here show how productive ideas about scarcity can be in gaining fresh insight into many different places and stories. The contributions by Özge Ertem and Karen Oslund provide two different accounts of the role of scarcity in colonial enterprise, and are given an interesting echo in Reinhard Hennig's exploration of scarcity (and lack of it!) in the settlement of Iceland during the medieval period. Robert Baumgartner's analysis of the virtual worlds of computer games bear striking similarities with literary narratives of scarcity, and provide the link between spaces of scarcity and the "specter of scarcity" that haunts our social and cultural imaginations. Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's contribution provokes us to see the history of fossil fuel use in the new light of the Anthropocene, and Klaus Benesch considers the historic relationship between artistic asceticism and the culture of abundance. Finally, Oliver Völker and J. Jesse Ramírez show us how North American writers have used literary texts to challenge contemporary ideas about abundance and prosperity. The question of scarcity's constructed nature runs through all of these papers. The politics of scarcity can be

instrumentalized and aestheticized in manifold ways, in colonial and nation-building projects and in historical and fictional narratives; our understanding of scarcity and abundance has a strong and enduring influence on political decisions and worldviews.

We would like to express our gratitude to LMUexcellent and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, who provided funds and logistical support for this workshop and the resulting publication. This was the first cooperation between the Rachel Carson Center, the Institute for Nordic Philology at LMU Munich, and the Institute for Scandinavian Studies at the Goethe University Frankfurt, and the links forged here promise to be fruitful in the future too. We would like to extend warmest thanks to Annegret Heitmann and Christof Mauch for the encouragement and support that made this project possible. Our thanks also go to Susanne Bär and Lisa Spindler for their assistance, and to the RCC editing team, in particular Brenda Black and Laurianne Posch, for their tireless hard work in producing this publication within a matter of months. Finally, thank you to all of the workshop participants who came to Munich in September and made the discussions so rich and memorable. It was a pleasure to bring together a new community of scholars in which there was an abundance of insight, and no scarcity of enthusiasm.

Frederike Felcht

The Aesthetics and Politics of Scarcity—A Swedish Example

In my introduction to this volume, I will highlight some variations in representations of scarcity using the example of writings by Erik Gustaf Geijer that combine literature and history and thus the two types of discourse that are in the focus of this collection. Geijer's texts reveal some connections between the politics and aesthetics of scarcity: his poems contributed to the formation of Swedish national romanticism after 1810, and Geijer himself started teaching history at the University of Uppsala that same year. I will briefly discuss Geijer's early poem "Manhem" from 1811 and his essays on "The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society" from 1840. Geijer's writing allows us to distinguish between two modes of thought in representations of scarcity: the idealization of scarcity as the "simple life" and its problematization in discourses on poverty. It will also give us the opportunity to explore the links between space and scarcity.

Tales of Simplicity: Representing Scarcity

In *Scarcity and Modernity*, Nicholas Xenos develops the idea that

Scarcity in the general sense is a modern invention. . . . Before there was scarcity there were scarcities. Very few conclusions of a general nature followed from the experience of episodes of insufficiency.¹

Xenos contrasts the former "*period[s]* of insufficiency"² with the *general* condition of scarcity in modernity. According to Xenos, the modern understanding of scarcity is characterized by reflections on the modern dynamics of desire, as outlined, for example, by Adam Smith and David Hume: needs are no longer interpreted as naturally fixed; instead, consumer society produces a constant desire that cannot be satisfied. Needs become social rather than natural—thus, aesthetic theory reflects on the structure of social relations in order to understand human sentiments.

1 Nicholas Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 3. Here and subsequently, italics in original.

2 Ibid.

Xenos locates the invention of scarcity in London, which he conceives as the capital of the eighteenth century and the center of the so-called consumer revolution.³ Geijer traveled to England in 1809–10 and was impressed by London and its abundant trade.⁴ However, the English model was not applicable to Sweden, as John Landquist writes in his biography of Geijer: the ideal of the gentleman required wealth, and England was a military power; whereas Sweden was economically depressed and had lost large parts of its kingdom to Russia. According to Landquist, Geijer, as a Swedish moralist, had to proclaim the moral advantages of poverty, since he addressed himself to the poor. After returning to Sweden, Geijer published “Manhem,” one of his most popular poems. Landquist reads this poem as a reaction to the Swedish situation, contrasting with Geijer’s impressions of Britain.⁵ Praising the simple lifestyle of the venerable Nordic peasant—the independent “odalbonde”—, “Manhem” criticizes the comforts of modern life. The text complains that the days of our fathers are gone—we find a national “we” in this poem that indicates its function in nation-building—and with those days a time of virtue and power has disappeared. Nowadays, the poem states, German learnedness (“lärdom”), Gallic clothes, and Indian spices please the Northern son and thus bind him with chains to new desires. Finally, the poem calls for the purification of the time-honored temple of virtues in order to re-establish the ancient “Manhem,” the legendary home of men.⁶

As Anton Blanck has noticed, the poem bears a striking similarity to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s criticism of modern civilization.⁷ “Manhem” develops a counter-economy of desire in its condemnation of luxury and its idealization of the harsh conditions of life in ancient Sweden and ascribes these positive effects on the human character. However, even though the text praises the simple-minded, strong, masculine peasant and emphasizes its hero’s lack of formal education and practice in delicate speech (“att sirligt tala”), the form of the text itself is highly elaborate; it is written in a strict rhyme scheme and uses recurring motifs, such as the contrast between masculine resilience and the

3 See *ibid.*, 7f.

4 See for example Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Samlade Skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, vol. 13, *Brev* (Stockholm: Norstedt & Söner, 1931), 92–95. For a general introduction to Geijer’s trip to England, see Roger Pilkington, “Geijer in England,” in *Att följa sin genius: Tio studier om Erik Gustaf Geijer sammanställda av Geijersamfundet*, Geijerstudier 6 (Karlstad: Press förlag, 1982), 41–56 and John Landquist, *Geijer: En Levnadsteckning* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1954), 53–67.

5 See Landquist, *Geijer*, 65.

6 Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Samlade skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, vol. 2, *Skaldestycken, Tal och avhandlingar 1817–1819* (Stockholm: Norstedt & Söner, 1924), 21–23.

7 See Anton Blanck, *Geijers Götiska Diktning* (Stockholm: A. Bonnier, 1918), 243–45.

detested effeminacy. Thus, the idealization of a simple life is realized by means of highly artificial poetic language. In this poem, scarcity forms the basis of the idealized national character and is associated with strength and simplicity. Luxury, in contrast, is the product of foreign influences. These observations point to two aspects that are relevant for the aesthetics of scarcity.

Firstly, representations of scarcity can be idealized. In “Manhem,” the imagination of a former way of life that was closer to nature—the poem emphasizes the peasant’s connection to the soil—serves as a contrast to new and foreign influences. The purpose of this idealization is the construction of a national identity. Scarcity is the precondition for the protagonist’s heroism and a driving force behind his actions; it leads to masculine strength. We can also imagine other positive narrative functions of scarcity: it might intensify sensual perceptions, contribute to the victory of the mind over the body, or emphasize the power of nature, for example.

Secondly, as the elaborate form of the poem shows, the representation of scarcity can occur in different, even opulent, forms. In “Manhem,” the critique of learnedness signals that the social structure of reading had changed, a fact that was important for nation-building, as scholars such as Benedict Anderson have suggested.⁸ The poem’s complicated idealization of simplicity reveals in its critique of learnedness an insecurity concerning the development of literacy and education for all, but also a growing interest in a new type of historical protagonist: the people. This is one of the main political elements in the imagination of scarcity: it is often linked to the representation of the lower classes. However, the forms of this representation vary according to their political goals.

The contrast between form and content in “Manhem” indicates that literature was going through a transition period around 1800: the ideal of the heroic peasant had not yet found its literary form—literature still had to develop a language for the austere lives of ordinary people. Later, realism and modernism would offer more appropriate aesthetic strategies for the representation of scarcity.

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

The Nature and Economy of Scarcity

Almost thirty years later, Geijer wrote in his essays on “The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society”: “It has often occurred to me that one ought to think about writing the history of the poor (to which as yet only fragmentary contributions exist); since ordinary history is chiefly of the rich and powerful.”⁹ Obviously, Geijer’s interest in a history of the entire people remained, but it had changed from the idealization of simplicity to a problematization of poverty. Geijer’s interest in poverty is characterized by the attempt to understand society as a whole:

No true insight can be obtained in the parts, without a general view of the whole, . . . and the more complicated a subject is, the sooner one is confused by the multitude of its particularities. . . . Such a subject is pauperism, complicated in the highest degree, in our time especially. . . . Nothing merely negative can be comprehended except through the positive whose converse and opposite it is. . . . On the other hand, it might be the case that the positive can not rightly be understood without its negation. Thus the physician studies in *disease* the laws of *health*. It is possible that in order to understand the right nature of *wealth*, it may also be necessary that we study *poverty* [sic].¹⁰

We notice how the imagination of scarcity informs the imagination of a complete and abstract unity, such as the market, society, or the global. Sandra Sherman has shown that the imagination of poverty changed with the development of the statistical imagination.¹¹ Geijer refers at some points to statistical data, but he develops a historical narrative in particular. Geijer’s comparison of his own approach to a physician who “studies in *disease* the laws of *health*” underlines that nineteenth-century economic thought was heavily influenced by conceptions of natural science—and that the rhetoric, the metaphors, and comparisons in concepts of scarcity deserve our attention. The connection between modern concepts of nature and economic models is typical of liberal thought. Michel Foucault even declares in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* that investigate the rise of liberalism: “If we take things up . . . at their origin, you can

9 Erik Gustaf Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society: A Series of Political and Historical Essays*, trans. B. Hale Lewin (Stockholm: L. J. Hjerta, 1840), 4.

10 Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 3–4.

11 Sandra Sherman, *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 2–5, 10, 27–28, 35–39, 83–85, 100–23.

see that what characterizes this new art of government I have spoken about would be much more a naturalism than a liberalism.”¹²

Geijer’s series of essays stands in a long tradition of academic reflections on poverty—one of its most prominent examples was Thomas Robert Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798. In his reflections on scarcity and abundance, Nicholas Xenos states of this period: “Amid the light of hope and shadows of fear cast by the [French] Revolution, the simultaneous existence of poverty and affluence began to be perceived as an anomalous situation.”¹³ However, the reactions to this perception and the suggestions for the normalization of the anomalous situation differed. One could accept scarcity amidst abundance as a natural and necessary part of the entire system, but it was also possible to see it as a development that required regulation or political interventions—if only for the prevention of revolutions. Malthus and Geijer represent these two approaches.

Like Malthus, Geijer considers environmental factors as important for an understanding of poverty. But in contrast, Geijer does not suppose that there is a natural law that leads to the miserable condition of the poor, a “power of population” that exceeds “the power in the earth to provide subsistence for man”¹⁴—and thus normalizes poverty: based on his understanding of the environment, Malthus developed the idea of a perpetual scarcity that cannot be overcome. Geijer, on the other hand, described the specific environmental conditions of Sweden in order to explain Swedish history. According to Geijer, the good Swedish soil and its favorable climate—at least compared to other Nordic regions—led to the early agricultural development of Sweden, and he states:

It is the winter that determines the character of northern housekeeping. They [i.e., our forefathers] cannot live from day to day, but must live with respect to the whole year, and during the far longest portion of it, upon that store which has been laid up during the shorter.¹⁵

12 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 61.

13 Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity*, 36.

14 Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 61.

15 Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 67.

In this passage, natural conditions, i.e., the periods of scarcity resulting from a long winter, become the foundation for economic practices such as storage and planning. Geijer distinguishes this “chief natural feature of Northern life” from “*an allodial right acquired by labour, for Swedish soil was never won by conquest.*”¹⁶ In his essays, Geijer binds the ownership of soil and the accompanying rights to labor. However, according to Geijer, the economy of scarcity, careful storage, and planning, and the link between fixed property, labor, and rights were weakened through the Swedish history of warfare, the inheritance of extraordinary rights and privileges, the development of war-related industries like mining, and the increase of moveable capital. Thus, his approach combines his understanding of the environmental conditions with a historiographical account in order to understand poverty, or, broadly speaking, the social structures that give rise to poverty.

Geijer thinks that labor “has in common with health its natural laws which are not to be infringed with impunity, and one of these laws is, that *production* is regulated by *demand.*”¹⁷ His belief in laws of the market is typical of liberal thought, and Geijer is famous in Swedish historiography for his turn from conservative to liberal.¹⁸ However, he states, “at a period of emergency, if society itself must come forward as an extraordinary labour-contractor, the application of this labour is therefore most usefully directed to such undertakings as promote the future demand for labour, by removing the obstructions which have hitherto affected it,” and he suggests investing in “*increased facilities of communication*” since they increase the “*Common Capital*”¹⁹ in Sweden. Geijer is liberal in his will to understand and follow the laws of the market, but he holds no laissez-faire position, since the functioning of the market can sometimes require state intervention.

Geijer’s approach to the nature of scarcity is regional in its relation to environmental conditions and historical in its perspective on labor. Geijer considers an environment with scarce resources as a factor that encourages more economical behavior. The historical development of labor leads him to an optimistic perspective:

16 *Ibid.*, 68f.

17 *Ibid.*, 143.

18 For a short critical discussion see Elsa Norberg, “Erik Gustaf Geijer,” in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, accessible online: <http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=12976> (24 August 2014).

19 Geijer *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 144.

The main article of agricultural produce, grain, has upon the whole fallen in price while both population has increased and the value of agricultural labour has risen. The experience derived from the two most civilized states in Europe [i.e., France and England] may serve as that properly belonging to the advance of civilization, and shews that an increasing population, with industry may easily surmount the dreaded difficulties of insufficient means of subsistence.²⁰

Geijer's perspective includes the "advance of civilization," the division of labor and industrialized production that also changes agriculture. This perspective reminds us of Ester Boserup's influential criticism of Malthus's pessimism in the twentieth century.²¹

Spaces of Scarcity

In his reflections on *Scarcity and Modernity*, Xenos states: "There is good reason to believe that the perception of scarcity as a universal condition of the human species . . . is peculiar to the modern Anglo-European eye,"²² and he contrasts this modern perception of scarcity to Marshall Sahlins's description of the hunter-gatherer society as "the original affluent society," a society with abundant leisure time and few needs.²³ Sahlins took part in the so-called formalist-substantivist debate in economic anthropology that discussed whether the neoclassical concept of the economic man can be applied universally or whether human needs result from the structure of social organization—simply put, do all people have to economize, or is the economic man an effect of the market economy?²⁴ This debate questions whether the scarcity of means for potentially unlimited ends that twentieth-century liberal economics presupposes really exists, or whether it is an effect of modern capitalism.²⁵ Sahlins's methods were strongly criticized, and David Kaplan states that "the original affluent society thesis . . . may be as much a commentary on our own society as it is a depiction of the life of

20 Ibid., 166.

21 See for example Ester Boserup, "The Impact of Scarcity and Plenty on Development," in "Hunger and History: The Impact of Changing Food Production and Consumption Patterns on Society," thematic issue, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 2 (1983): 383–407, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/203712>.

22 Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity*, 2.

23 See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972), 1–39.

24 See Karsten Kumoll, *Kultur, Geschichte und Indigenisierung der Moderne: Eine Analyse des Gesamtwerks von Marshall Sahlins* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), 92f.

25 Cf. Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932).

hunter-gatherers.”²⁶ However, Xenos’s reference to Sahlins helps to keep in mind that economic concepts, such as the modern and liberal idea of scarcity, are bound up with specific historical and geopolitical constellations.

What were those spaces of scarcity in Malthus and Geijer? Malthus imagined scarcity not only after a period of bad harvests and the French Revolution, but also after the British loss of the American colonies—and the postcolonial fears of former colonizers are an important factor in debates about scarcity right up to today. Obviously, the loss of land stimulates reflections about scarcity. Furthermore, spatial models of thought can influence how scarcity is envisioned. Malthus introduces the explanation of his thesis with the words: “Let us now take any spot of earth, this island for example.”²⁷ Fredrik Albritton Jonsson has shown how the model of the island has influenced Malthus’s and other political economists’ vision of limits to growth.²⁸ Geijer developed his vision of a simple and restricted Swedish life that preserved the people’s independence and strength after the loss of Finland to Russia. The difference between Malthus’s concept of natural scarcity and Geijer’s belief in overcoming scarcity through progressive politics is related to the two men’s differing ideas of nature—and to the divergent positions of peasants in society. Their understandings of the interaction between human beings and their environment informed their visions of scarcity.

26 David Kaplan, “The Darker Side of the ‘Original Affluent Society,’” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 56, no. 3 (2000), 318, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3631086>.

27 Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 16.

28 Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 188–231, esp. 188–201.

Spaces of Scarcity

Özge Ertem

British Views on the Indian and Ottoman Famines: Politics, Culture, and Morality

In 1874, the same disaster befell the people of two lands far distant from the British Isles: famines hit both India and the Ottoman Empire, with a severe impact on the lives of Bengalese and Anatolian peasants. However, compared with the high number of deaths in the Anatolian famine—according to contemporary sources, between 100,000 and 250,000 people¹—few deaths were reported during the famine in Bengal. Unlike the subsequent Indian famine in 1876–79, when millions died because of a new British relief policy of non-intervention, extensive relief and the availability of government-priced rice saved India from mass starvation in 1874. According to Mike Davis, “it was the only truly successful British relief effort in the nineteenth century.”²

The Ottoman Anatolia and India had another feature in common: they were both objects of discourses that defined them as spaces of absence, scarcity, wilderness, or empty land in desperate need of colonial investment and opportunity. These discourses were usually produced in the lands of plenty by powerful statesmen, merchants, consuls, diplomats, and philanthropists who, by underlining the wilderness of nature and the weaknesses of state and culture in those lands of scarcity, expressed their superiority, benevolence, and much needed expertise. The famines helped such discourses gain more power, especially in Britain, the rising land of plenty and abundance in the nineteenth century. During meetings about the famine in Anatolia, British politicians, journalists, and the British Relief Committee—composed of US protestant missionaries, several European diplomats, and British merchants, businessmen, and diplomats—highly praised the British famine relief policies during the Bengali famine a few months prior. They put it forward as a model for the Ottoman Empire in their meetings, reports, letters, and commentaries and suggested that the British government in Bengal had showed the Ottoman government how famine could be handled in the most efficient and responsible way.

Yet famine was not the only theme that connected the Ottoman Empire with India in these accounts. The parallels drawn between Asia Minor and India stemmed from

1 Donald Quataert. “Famine in Turkey, 1873–1875.” *Regional Studies* 201 (March 1968): 1–54.

2 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001), 36.

broader political and cultural opinions about these lands and their inhabitants. Underpinning it all was the perception of the political management, economic institutions, and customs of India and the Ottoman Empire as inferior and backward, and hence obstacles to development. Simple droughts easily became disasters in these lands due to this “endemic” backwardness, the British gentlemen deemed.

Comparing news coverage and images of the Indian famine in the *Illustrated London News* between January and March 1874 with the records of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund meeting held on 24 June 1875,³ I examine common discourses and ideas about the nature and culture in these lands. My aim is not to presuppose the existence of an all-encompassing colonial perspective. The Ottoman Empire was not a colonized state, as India was; plus, even in India, a colonized country, the multifaceted experiences of locals cannot be reduced to crude narratives of colonialism that deny their agency or portray them as mere passive victims. Instead, my aim is to explore how famines in India and the Ottoman Empire crystallized similar external political and cultural perceptions of these lands, and to demonstrate the common discourse that made these perceptions evident.

The Indian Famine in the *Illustrated London News*

In 1873, a severe drought struck the Indian provinces of Bihar and Bengal and caused significant losses in the rice crop, the staple food in the peasants’ diet. During the course of the famine, the popular British newspaper the *Illustrated London News* published many illustrations and special editorials informing its readers about British aid to India. Between January and September 1874, these editorials served as an advertising campaign for British famine relief and the more general “civilizing mission” in the colony.

Two illustrations published on 24 January 1874 (figs. 1 and 2) showed “the poor husbandmen of India, and likewise those of China” who “from time immemorial” irrigated their lands in traditional ways. In contrast, thanks to the “great public works of irrigation,” on a visit to the Soane Works at Dehree the Viceroy found “100,000 acres irrigated in a few weeks by the new works in their present unfinished state, not a quarter of the

3 Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting in Aid of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund Held at Willis’s Rooms June 24th 1875* (London: Woodfall & Kinder, 1875).



Figures 1 and 2:
 "The Famine in
 Bengal: The Indian
 Mode of Irrigation,"
*The Illustrated
 London News*, no.
 1796, 24 January
 1874. © The British
 Library Board.

project being yet completed."⁴ The newspaper condemned local methods of survival and at the same time advertised the Viceroy's trip to the disaster area and the modern infrastructure built by the British. Contempt for these local Indian practices became a significant part of the political imagery of British governance and modernity.

4 "The Famine in Bengal," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1796, 24 January 1874, 74.



Figure 3:
"Famine in India,"
*The Illustrated
London News*, no.
1800, 21 February
1874. © The British
Library Board.

Another engraving (fig. 3) showed a Hindu ritual in which several Indian men and women in miserable states asked for aid from deities. The deity in the illustration was named as "Bull Nandi" (the Cow's Mouth), the idol to whom people turned in seasons of drought and famine, praying for rain. The newspaper described the scene thus:

We see people, young and old, before this idol in agonies of prayer. The mother, in despair, holds up her *bucha* or child to Nandi, and begs for *kana*—that is, food. She exclaims, "Hum burrabhookhahai! (We are very hungry!) Humarabuchaburrabhookhahai! (My child is very hungry!) Hum log morghiahai! (Our people are dead!)"⁵

Culture can offer people ways to deal with catastrophic events, as well as reinforcing bonds of solidarity during crises. The editorial, while describing the event in detail, was not interested in the ritual's actual social, cultural, and psychological meaning for the native population. Rather, the editorial presented the ritual as an indicator of premodern irrational habits. The sarcastic language used to point out the remedy to Hindu superstition, however, invoked another deity: "Such are the cries of lamentation that may too soon be heard in India. The Bull Nandi may be deaf to them, but not the English John Bull."⁶

The last engraving (fig. 4) I want to mention was published a couple of weeks later. It showed several native grain-boats with damaged sails sailing on the river Ganges: "Our Illustration of native boats with grain on the Ganges has a certain interest connected with the present deplorable state of that populous country. . . . What strikes one on first going up the Hooghly or the Ganges is the torn condition of the sails of the native boats, and 'Why don't they mend them?' is the natural question."⁷

5 "The Famine in India," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1800, 21 February 1874, 167.

6 Ibid.

7 "The Famine in Bengal," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1804, 21 March 1874, 282.

The author thought the answer to this question was the “custom” of the country that was the reason behind all evils there. However, the author saw the famine as an opportunity to “get quit of some ridiculous habit or caste usage”: “One may often hear the English Government officials, after a calamity of this kind, congratulating themselves



Figure 4:
“The Famine in Bengal: Grain-Boats on the Ganges,” *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1804, 21 March 1874. © The British Library Board.

that some wretched ‘dustoor,’ or custom, which had long stood in the way, has been at length got rid of.”⁸ Casting the blame on the “culture” of their colony, the newspaper authors ignored the political and economic realities of the famine and the responsibility of the British Empire as a colonizer in “the present deplorable state of that populous country.” The language in its editorials and engravings served to underline the geographical, political, and cultural gulf between the native population and the British public.

Talking about Anatolia

Meanwhile, thousands of people, marooned in villages isolated from each other during the famine in winter 1874, had died of starvation in central Anatolia. The first warning of the famine was the severe drought in the summer of 1873. Then came the winter: heavy snow that cut off routes between individual villages and the town centers for months on end and aggravated the problem severely. This was a great shock to villagers who (unlike the more advantaged town-dwellers) had no food reserves, but only the seed they had saved for the next sowing season. Those villagers who survived the severe winter had no food left by the spring. Despite several customary measures, such as tax remissions, grain transfer from abundant to scarce regions, and controls on grain and bread prices, organization of state-wide famine relief as a priority was absent. Financial crisis, indebtedness, and weak infrastructure and transportation networks, combined with ignorance, hindered the effective organization of relief by the central state. Instead, it was several Ottoman local governors, private charity initiatives, and foreign charity actors

8 Ibid.

who organized local relief networks. Their efforts remained inadequate. At least 100,000 people had died across the whole area by summer 1875.

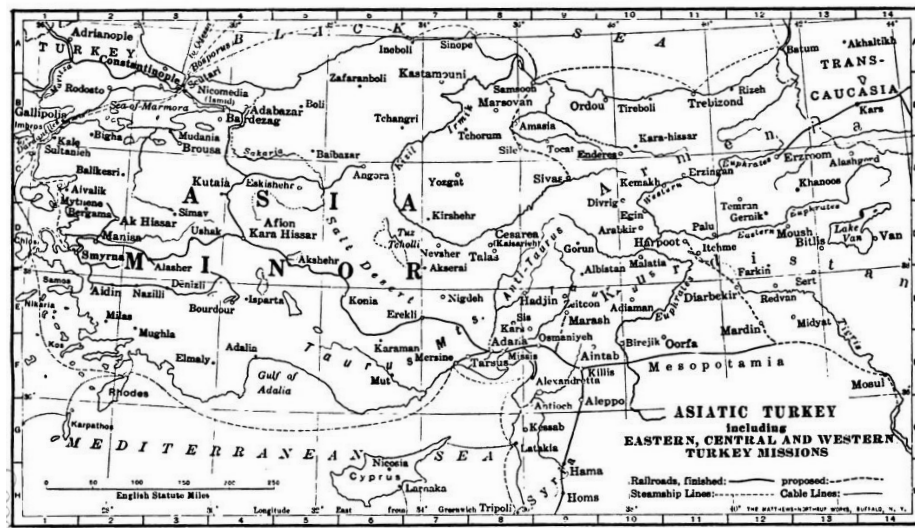


Figure 5:
Map of Asia
Minor, ca. 1917.
From: Clarence D.
Ussher and Grace
H. Knapp. *An
American Physician
in Turkey: A Narrative
of Adventures
in Peace and War*
(Boston: Houghton
Mifflin Company,
1917), 333.

On 24 June 1875, the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund Committee, composed of honorable and influential members of British society, held a meeting in London to discuss the current situation in Anatolia and to collect further subscriptions for the famine-stricken population. Even if the meeting had the intention that “all party spirit must be hushed, that all political sympathy and all political discussion is entirely out of place, and that the one feeling which we have, and which we can appeal to, is that of our common humanity,”⁹ the speeches made were mostly built on political and cultural stereotypes about the region and the people living there.

The meeting was opened by the chairman, Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, who described Anatolia as “a garden of happiness” turned into “a howling wilderness”:

If you landed on the sea coast you found miles of country fringed with evergreens, with the oleander and the arbutus festooned with the wild hop, and flourishing with the wildest luxuriance of verdure. In other places there were rich plains waving with

9 Henry Alexander Munro Butler-Johnstone, in *Asia Minor Relief Fund, Report of the Public Meeting*, 41.

crops of corn, and everywhere you saw smiling villages embosomed in orchards, vineyards, olive groves, and gardens. . . . Well, ladies and gentlemen, this garden of happiness has now become almost a howling wilderness.¹⁰

While the chairman presented an idealized vision of traditional rural life, another speaker, Dr. Scherzer, the Austro-Hungarian Consul-General in the Ottoman Empire in the years 1872–75 and “English by sympathy” and “foreign by birth and education” talked about the tormented life of the peasantry in Turkey because of taxation. He entertained the audience with an analogy drawn between the Chinese and Ottoman Empires. The reaction to his words was laughter, which was unsurprising: Scherzer’s opinion was in accordance with many of the British administrators, who perceived both the Chinese and Ottoman Empires as “Oriental Despots”:

I need only mention one fact, that the taxes are not collected by Government officers, but by contractors and those contractors use, I dare say, the Chinese squeezing system. It is the Chinese squeezing system translated into Turkish; and we know that every translation is worse than the original. (Laughter)¹¹

Two MPs, Henry Alexander Munro Butler-Johnstone and J. Reginald Yorke, continued comparing England and western continental Europe with the Ottoman Empire. Butler-Johnstone underlined England’s lack of awareness of the problems abroad, as well as its moral duty to provide aid, by comparing its abundance with the scarcity in the Ottoman Empire: “With our accumulated and accumulating wealth; with ease and luxury at almost every door in England; with pestilence, and famine, and misery so far removed from us . . . that when we hear of their recital, we can scarcely realize them.”¹² According to Butler-Johnstone, the real garden of happiness was England and western continental Europe, which he described as places “immune to misery.”

Yorke agreed, but reminded the audience that this had not always been the case. Once it was England upon which the Ottoman Empire looked “as nothing more than a storm-beaten and remote island somewhere in the Northern Ocean.” However, it was now from that island that “we are collecting gold to send to the country of Croesus, to those who

¹⁰ Rawlinson, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 7.

¹¹ Scherzer, the Austro-Hungarian Deputy Consul-General, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 27, 109.

¹² Butler-Johnstone, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 42.

dwell on the banks of the Pactolus, and to what was once one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor,” he continued. Time, he noted, had brought about strange contrasts:

It may be indeed said of England, and the west of Europe generally, that we enjoy a happy immunity from the major calamities of human life. We have our railway accidents and our colliery explosions, and other misfortunes about which we are not slow to grumble, but we have, happily, for some centuries in England, been without any experience of earthquakes, war, plague or famine, and I conceive that our immunity from such great calamities ought to teach us to pity those who are not so favourably circumstanced.¹³

Yorke’s speech recalled British perceptions of the Irish famine of 1845 to 1852, which was seen as a shadow on the ideal of progress and advancement. While England enjoyed prosperity, the neighboring backwater of famine-period Ireland appeared to British citizens as “a land of mass graves, dirt, and destitution; it constituted an affront to their deeply held belief that progress was universal.”¹⁴ By categorizing the misfortunes and calamities as endemic to other lands only, the British narrative of progress in the nineteenth century inserted a temporal and spatial distance between Britain and destitute lands of scarcity and disaster, and also the political and cultural spaces wherein these horrors belonged. This language was abundantly evident in this meeting, as well.

Some did not agree. Scott Russell, for instance, called Anatolia “the veritable garden of Eden in which our original ancestors were placed.” Nevertheless, his emphasis on the beauty and fruitfulness of Anatolia was embedded in a colonial perspective, which envisaged Anatolia as an empty land waiting for economic opportunity and investment:

And I said to myself, Why are all our Englishmen going seeking farms in Australia, and engaging in work on the other side of the world, when here is one of the richest places on the face of the globe, full of excellent agriculturalists, and only waiting [for] intelligence, capital, and modern science, to develop it into one of the richest portions of the Continent.¹⁵

13 J. Reginald Yorke, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 30.

14 Kathryn Edgerton Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 123; she is discussing Chris Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13–16.

15 Scott Russell, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Meeting*, 37–8.

Members of the committee did not always blame the Ottoman government for the famine. Some criticized British unawareness of the situation in Anatolia, suggesting two reasons why citizens should take action: the duties of religion (charity) and the interests of trade. The speakers criticized several British towns for neglecting to collect relief subscriptions; however, they were not only highlighting the importance of charitable acts in these arguments. They were stressing the importance of British trade relations with Asia Minor.

Butler-Johnstone mainly addressed the “large towns and centers of industry and trade in England,” especially Manchester, Hull, and Bristol, asking whether they would “turn away from calamity as if it was no business of [theirs]” while they continued “deriving their riches and wealth from the East and from trading with Asia Minor.”¹⁶ The most striking example was that of Sheffield, a town that produced and exported cutlery both around England and to foreign countries. According to Hanbury’s data, Sheffield had not contributed to the relief fund. However, Hanbury did not “much blame Sheffield.” His explanation of this point elicited the audience’s laughter once more:

Well, I do not much blame Sheffield, because I do not know exactly what interest Sheffield has in Asia Minor. My idea of Sheffield specially is that of a town which supplies us, and foreign countries, with knives and forks. Now if there is one thing which is wanting in the whole of Turkey, it is knives and forks. Every one who has been there knows that a Turk hardly ever touches a knife or a fork for his food—he prefers to use his fingers. (Laughter)¹⁷

The laughter reflected the enduring nature of prejudices regarding Anatolia in the minds of the British gentlemen. Through the example of “knives and forks,” one of the meeting’s final speeches conjured up an uncivilized image of Asia Minor. As the committee members had also underlined frequently in their speeches, however, what was desperately needed in Asia Minor was actual food, not cutlery. Thus, just like in India, helping Anatolia did not prevent these gentlemen from looking down on the region and its people, or putting an insurmountable distance between Anatolia and themselves.

¹⁶ Butler-Johnstone, in *Asia Minor Relief Fund, Report of the Meeting*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Things are not so different today either. The language of pity and mercy employed in most of the visual footage and press commentaries regarding malnutrition and famines in Africa and aid campaigns, for instance, has fixed Africa as a distant, unfortunate land of disaster and Africans as victims of this land.¹⁸ In this imagination, usually it has been the land or nature which are imagined as guilty, not the political-economic dynamics that have created global social inequalities and poverty in particular places in the world. Humanitarian aid was and is needed, and mercy was and continues to be a value, but only when the importance of politics and the economy, and the dignity of the needy, is recognized with it.

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¹⁸ David Campbell, "The Iconography of Famine," in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser (London: Reaktion Books, 2012): 79–92

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Karen Oslund

Scarcity in the Arctic: A Colonial Construct?

The globe's peripheral regions have often historically been seen by Europeans as places of extremes—of climate, of customs, of flora and fauna—and, along with the South Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, this category has included the North Atlantic islands of Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands.¹ The extremes which marked the North Atlantic were not only the literary tropes of utopia/dystopia which have often marked distant lands in European imagination but also the contrasts of scarcity and plenty. Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands were places of privation, hardship, and “doing without.” Seeing northern regions as places of scarcity is unsurprising, but there is historically a particular flavor to scarcity there. Arctic scarcity was not simply scarcity of fresh vegetables or fruit, although it was that as well. In Iceland, as Nanna Rógnvaldardóttir notes in her historical cookbook, salt could not be used for preserving fish or meat after the earliest settlement period because it was impossible to produce enough of it for this purpose. This seems peculiar: Iceland is surrounded by salt water, and Norway, from where most of the Icelandic settlers came, had a long practice of fish-salting. But the scarcity of this basic foodstuff in Iceland was linked to a scarcity in nature and landscape. Iceland quickly became deforested by the early settlers (starting already around 870, and probably becoming critical by about 1350)² and the wood which they needed to boil saltwater to extract the crystals was in short supply. A scarcity of landscape was a food scarcity: even when the foodstuff was actually abundant, the land itself did not allow it to be used.³

Scarcity in the north was a predictable scarcity of a limited growing season for which one could prepare by pickling vegetables and preserving fruit, but at the same time it was also a scarcity that caught populations unawares. In some cases, this was because of rapid environmental change, as during the medieval settlement period in Iceland. Other travelers, such as the nineteenth-century Arctic whalers whom I discuss later

- 1 It is a trope which still exists to some degree: as an interesting example, see Judith Schalansky, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* [“Atlas of Remote Islands”] (Hamburg: marevelag, 2009), whose introduction is titled, “Paradise is an island. So is hell.”
- 2 According to Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin, 2001), Icelandic birch forests had disappeared by the mid-1300s (58–59).
- 3 Nanna Rógnvaldardóttir, “A Short History of Icelandic Food and Cooking,” in *Icelandic Food and Cookery* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2002), 2. I have addressed the question of the “landscape deficiencies” of Iceland in more detail in my book *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

in this article, could be surprised by a remarkably cold winter during which even the Inuit could not catch fox and caribou.

Adapting, Substituting, Economizing

Especially during and after the eighteenth century, when discussions of improvement of a country's resources began to play an important role in the discourse of the state bureaucracy in northern Europe, ideas of how to prepare for or to prevent scarcity circulated widely, often concluding with remarks about the causes of hunger and want: did the responsibility for conditions lie with the government or with individuals? Danish officials often blamed Icelandic farmers for not undertaking repairs of their fences, which led to erosion of pastures by sheep grazing, while the housewives were urged to avoid waste in the kitchen and collect seaweed to use in cooking.

When scarcity was discussed within individual households, officials often referenced the key role of women as household managers in conserving resources and finding enterprising new ways to reduce hunger. In this, these ordinary housewives were certainly challenged by the circumstances of the North: what there is not is a constant refrain in travelers' accounts of the North Atlantic, regardless of whether the writers came from the United States, Germany, England, or even from continental Scandinavia. While the Icelanders surely had some things in common with the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, there was still nothing in those countries that was going to prepare you for the shock of North Atlantic food and nature. Here, one was forced to live on sheep heads and rotten shark, and no other vegetables besides cabbage. As Henry Holland, a British medical student who accompanied the Scottish mineralogist George Steuart Mackenzie on his expedition to Iceland in 1810, wrote: "They have little good turf and no good potatoes—they live amidst all the asperities of soil and climate—the face of nature is everywhere to them dreary and desolate."⁴

But at the same time that the North Atlantic dictated a particular scarcity, it offered a particular abundance. If the traveler were to remain in this distant colonial province for a bit longer than the average European gentleman on Sir Joseph Banks's version of

4 Henry Holland, *The Icelandic Journal of Henry Holland*, ed. Andrew Wawn (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1987), 32.

the “Grand Tour,” one could find something to compensate for what was missing, as illustrated in the notes of Gytha Thorlacius, the wife of Theodorus Thorlacius, a Danish sheriff in Iceland, in the years between 1801 and 1815. She missed “Danish bread,” i.e., wheat bread (wheat was imported to Iceland at this time and was quite expensive), and had to make do with “Icelandic bread” made from rye or barley. In fact, the staple more usually eaten in Icelandic households at the time was not bread, but dried fish spread with butter.⁵ On the other hand, she remarked that “all Icelandic root vegetables are much higher quality than those in Denmark. Kohlrabi weigh here 4–5 pounds; when you cut them, the juice runs out freely.”⁶ In fact, Gytha admires “Icelandic food” enough that she resolves to compose her and the children’s diet entirely from it, although she reserves “Danish food” for her husband’s meals. In doing so, she reverts to the perhaps more common nineteenth-century Danish impression of Iceland as a place of scarcity, with the household divided between women and children who can survive this scarcity, and the husband whose status entitles him to whatever abundance can be found. She also points out how economical it is to run a household on local rather than imported food. While the North Atlantic is marked by scarcity of most fundamental basics of life—bread and salt—it offers some exotic foodstuffs to compensate. A twentieth-century American housewife in Iceland, Amalia Línal, remarked that it was difficult in her first years in the country to learn to think of horse and whale meat as ordinary foods.⁷ Even after she has accepted horsemeat herself as a substitute for beef, she passes it off as corned beef to her visiting mother in order to make it more palatable.

Starving amidst Plenty

This theme of contrasting scarcity and plenty persists further north, with even more dramatic consequences. For European and American whalers, Greenland is a land without trees and without bread, yet rich in exotic and profitable goods such as polar bear furs, sealskins, and whale oil. Emphasizing the plentitude of the Arctic, the Canadian polar

5 There was, however, an Icelandic upper class at this time who could afford special order luxury goods such as almonds, lemons and other fruits, and flour for baking from Copenhagen, as Hrefna Róbertsdóttir demonstrates in her “Munaðarvara og matarmening: Pöntunarvara árið 1784,” *Saga: Tímarit Sögufélags* 50, no. 2 (2012): 70–111.

6 *Fru Gytha Thorlacius’ Erindringer fra Island*, ed. Harald Prytz (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1930), 28–29. My translation. History has not been very kind to Mrs. Thorlacius’s memoirs. The original manuscript was destroyed in a fire in 1881, and the only copy of it that survives is a summary interspersed with comments made by her son-in-law, Victor Bloch, from the original in 1845. Since Victor places the text which I have cited above in one of his many sets of quotation marks, we can feel confident enough in understanding it as the author’s own words, but obviously many more of her observations did not survive.

7 Amalia Línal, *Ripples from Iceland* (Akureyri: Bókaförlag Odds Björnssonar, 1988), 45.

explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson looked back with contempt from the perspective of the past one hundred years of polar discovery on the mid-nineteenth-century explorer Sir John Franklin and his party of more than a hundred, which had “contrived to die to the last man, apparently from hunger and malnutrition” in a place of such abundance of animal life, where the Inuit had “been living for generations, bringing up their children, taking care of their aged.”⁸ Franklin and other British gentlemen explorers had failed to use dogsleds, taken canned goods instead of killing seals and their own dogs for meat, and dressed in European rather than Inuit clothing. It was the explorers, rather than the environment itself, who had created the scarcity. Vilhjalmur re-imagined the Arctic environment as a “friendly” one that only kills travelers who are too stupid to take advantage of the cornucopia around them.

As he so often did, Stefansson was provocatively overstating his case about the abundance of the Arctic. The Arctic was only fruitful when it was not desolate, and both Inuit and foreign explorers often starved and died there. The Arctic journals of nineteenth-century whaling captains in northern Canada like George Joseph Parker from the *Orray Taft* often report meeting Inuit who were on the verge of starvation when they came to the American whaling boats looking for food and work. On 10 March 1873, nearing the end of a very long winter, Parker wrote in the ship’s logbook that the natives had come, but only to say that they were starving, five of them had died, and they could not do any hunting to help the ship’s crew: “our wants are great for meat, meat, meat.”⁹ Their arrival in this condition was a grave disappointment, as Parker had waited all winter long hoping for the Inuit come and help him feed his men, who were sick, dying, and on the verge of mutiny. Parker survived the ordeal with skill, courage, and extraordinary luck, but hunger and death were conditions of equal opportunity in the Arctic. Other whalers in similar situations starved and died, and their deaths marked the Arctic in the popular nineteenth-century American imagination as a place of hunger and want. The disaster year of American whaling was 1871, when 40 whaling ships left San Francisco and New Bedford and 33 of them were lost. Amazingly, all the sailors were rescued that year, but five years later the Arctic claimed 12 American ships and more than 50 lives.¹⁰ Such disasters of hunger and suffer-

8 Vilhjalmur Stefansson, “The Lost Franklin Expedition,” in *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press Reprint, 1972), 36. For more of Stefansson’s views on living in polar environments, see also his *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

9 *Orray Taft*, logbook no. 400, New Bedford Whaling Museum and Library collection, New Bedford, MA, p. 31. The *Orray Taft* was in a particularly bad way, having struck rocks and filled with water only six weeks into the voyage on 14 September 1872. Parker was trying to overwinter in the Hudson Bay with hungry and mutinous men; he ultimately survived and returned to New Bedford in August 1873.

10 Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: A History of Whaling in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 350–52.

ing and the dramatic newspaper stories written about them, however, actually result from the lure of the Arctic as a place of abundance: these sailors were only in polar latitudes in the first place because they believed the Arctic to be a land of plenty where they would get rich from catching whales and selling their oil (fig. 1).

Rough Estimate

Charter of vessel for 15 months	\$1,500.
Fitting out of Men for cruise	1,500.
25,000 Gallons of Casks	1,000.
Boats and Trolling-gear	1,000.
Bread	480.
Flour	250.
Pork	600.
Oat and Indian meal	60.
Coffee	125.
Tea	52.
Sugar	48.
Molasses	150.
Butter	100.
Whiskey	120.
Coal	75.
Tobacco, out of bond.	100.
Gunns, Knives and Swords, for trade.	400.
Probable incidental expenses	400.
Total	\$8,135.

Fifteen (15) men is all that would be necessary and should be shipped on a lay "Catch nothing, get nothing".

Very Respectfully &c Geo. E. Tyson



Figure 1:
Arctic necessities:
Captain George
E. Tyson's cost
estimate for sup-
plies for an Arctic
whaling crew.
The United States
National Archives
and Records
Administration,
College Park,
Maryland, Record
Group 33, 401.
The draft is un-
dated but Tyson
sailed in the
1860s-1880s.

Regulating Scarcity

In the historical record, hunger, whether that of the whalers or the Inuit, exists and has always existed in the Arctic. Scarcity, on the other hand, has to be created. Scarcity is not what exists, but what is perceived to be missing—for example, wheat bread by the family of a Danish official in Iceland—and often in the history of the Arctic this scarcity is a part of an apparatus of colonialism and a piece of imperial dynamics. It is a type of deficiency which calls on a state administration for action. Looking at the Danish state in Greenland, Thorkild Kjærgaard has recently and provocatively made use of scarcity and plenty as part of his salvo into a contemporary political conundrum. He argues that Greenland was not a Danish colony, but rather an equal part of the kingdom.¹¹ Among other reasons, he points to the fact that in the eighteenth century, exotic foodstuffs such as coffee, tea, and sugar were imported to Greenland as well as to the rest of the kingdom, so that the Greenlandic diet was more varied under Copenhagen's rule than it had been before their arrival. Under state management in the nineteenth century, he continues, there was little food scarcity and nutrition levels generally improved because of the presence of the state monopoly trading company and the provisions which it made for the Greenlandic hunters in their employ. In addition to luxury items, wheat bread and biscuits were rationed out by the monopoly company, and hunters who performed well were permitted to buy more coffee and sugar than was included in their usual ration allowances.¹² For Kjærgaard, this counts as evidence that Greenlanders were treated fairly and equally by the paternalistic Danish state which in all parts of its kingdom sought a high degree of control and regulation over the lives of its subjects in issues ranging from marriage to land cultivation.

While we could turn this claim on its head and argue that if the Greenlandic diet became Europeanized in the nineteenth century, this is evidence for a form of Danish cultural colonialism in Greenland, not against it, it seems more useful to place the proposition itself in historical context. “Scarcity” should not be understood as a description of physical or environmental conditions per se. It was a word that would have had very different meanings for Stefansson and for the American arctic explorer Charles Francis Hall, who admitted that he “considered some ‘civilization food’ [i.e.,

11 Thorkild Kjærgaard, “Landsmænd,” *Politiken*, 13 January 2014, 10–11.

12 See Inge Høst Seidling, “Married to the Daughters of the Country: Inter-marriage and Intimacy in North-west Greenland, ca. 1750–1850,” unpublished PhD dissertation in History, University of Nuuk, Greenland, 2013, for a discussion of Greenlandic household arrangements.



Figure 2: After the end of the monopoly trade: capitalism and abundance in Nuuk, Greenland, May 2013. The first shopping mall in Greenland is Nuuk Center. Built in 2012, it has a grocery store which sells pineapples, oranges, and whale blubber in addition to gift shops and clothing and toy stores.

supplies from a home port] as almost a necessity.”¹³ That certain foods were scarce did not mean that others were not abundant, just as a landscape that lacked trees might feature volcanoes and icebergs. Arctic scarcity, unlike Arctic hunger, did not exclude an abundance of oil and whales found there. Deficiency and scarcity are conditions of dependencies; they require improvement and action on the part of central authorities. James Vernon argues in his *Hunger: A Modern History* that in nineteenth-century Ireland and India, “famine came to represent the inhumanity and incompetence of British rule: the British had promised free trade, prosperity, and civilization; they had delivered famine and pestilence.”¹⁴ The Royal Danish Monopoly Trade in Greenland had promised to bring economic stability and it by and large did so, as Kjærgaard argues. The reduction of starvation and the presence of “civilization” was the reason why the company, with all of its attendant regulations on marriage, church attendance, family life, and so on, remained there and continued to exercise profound control over Inuit social and economic life until the end of its monopoly privileges in 1950 (fig. 2).

To say that food scarcities are part of an apparatus of colonialism is not to imply that they do not really exist, of course. They have existed to large degrees in the Arctic, and not exclusively in modern times either. They can, however, easily be employed in arguments for or against certain types of political power. When those in power are

13 *Narrative of the Second Arctic Expedition Made by Charles F. Hall*, ed. by J. E. Nourse (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1879), 142.

14 James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 42.

not blaming the farmers and peasants directly or indirectly for their incompetence in repairing fences or growing potatoes, they are crediting themselves for any improvements or abundance in these areas, which can then be used as an argument for the continuance of the administration which has brought these improvements. Those without power, on the other hand, are likely to view the abundance of potatoes or fences with distrust and skepticism, and fault the authorities for not providing enough bullets or fishing equipment (all of these items were actually sources for these discussions in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Atlantic). Scarcity and abundance only exist in relationship with each other, and, in seemingly contradictory ways, both can exist in the same place at the same time.

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Reinhard Hennig

Environmental Scarcity and Abundance in Medieval Icelandic Literature

Can medieval literary texts tell us anything about the environmental conditions and the availability of natural resources in premodern times? In the case of archaeological finds or written laws and charters, it is quite clear that these deliver insights into past societies' relationships to their natural environments, their strategies for using and conserving natural resources, and how they dealt with environmental risks and sudden or longer-term environmental change. Yet medieval literature is not an obvious source material when it comes to environmental questions. Literary texts from medieval Europe are not usually interested in describing the natural environment as such. Also, they normally follow genre conventions that heavily influence the narratives presented and tend to make overabundant use of literary devices such as symbolism, metaphor, and allegory.

It may therefore not be surprising that the most copied book about nature during the Middle Ages was the *Physiologus*. This work, dating back to the second century CE and translated into many vernacular languages, describes a huge variety of animals, plants, stones, and mythical creatures such as sirens and centaurs. The typically rather short descriptions all follow the same model: they first report on each creature's characteristics and behavior, and then give an allegorical, Christian interpretation. The description of the whale can serve as an example. According to the *Physiologus*, the whale's back rising of the water looks like an island. When seamen discover it, they disembark onto it and light a fire in order to prepare food. Yet the whale feels the heat, submerges into the sea, and thus drowns all the seamen. As the *Physiologus* explains, this demonstrates how all men who build their hopes on the devil and take pleasure in his doings are betrayed: they are drowned in the eternal torments of Hell. The description of the whale thus exemplifies how nature is of interest because it can teach humans religious truths. The much-used metaphor of the "book of nature" refers precisely to this view that, like the Bible, nature has to be "read" so that humans can discern God's messages contained in creation. What really counts is the spiritual and moral dimension, and not that descriptions of nature conform to actual natural phenomena.



Whale illustration from a twelfth-century Icelandic translation of *Physiologus*. Image courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

While descriptions such as those from the *Physiologus* may be entertaining to read, they certainly do not tell us much about environmental conditions in the past. And this holds true for representations of nature in most medieval literature. Yet there are a few exceptions, such as a body of texts known as the Sagas of Icelanders. These texts were written in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland, but focus on the time between Iceland's first settlement and the country's Christianization, and thus the period from the middle of the ninth to the middle of the eleventh century. In doing so, they describe not only the society of the Viking age, but also the environmental conditions encountered in Iceland by the first settlers, who came mainly from Norway and the British Isles.

The Island of Plenty

According to many of the sagas, these conditions were extremely favorable. The *Saga of Egil Skalla-Grímsson*, for example, tells in detail how a migrant called Skalla-Grímr took into possession a huge area in the Borgarfjörður region in western Iceland. Skalla-Grímr's livestock grazed freely every winter in the then-abundant woodlands. There was no lack of driftwood, which could be used for ships and house-building, and there were plenty of food resources to make use of, such as fish, seals, and birds' eggs. Whales came often there and were easy to hunt since, like all other animals in Iceland, they were not used to humans. The saga also mentions that Skalla-Grímr set up not only one, but three farms in the area and that at one of them he had fields for crops.

These large woodlands and arable fields may seem surprising considering Iceland's present appearance, but pollen analysis has confirmed that indeed about a quarter of

the island's surface (mainly in the low-lying parts where people settled) was covered by birch woods before the arrival of humans. In addition, a favorable climate during the first centuries of settlement allowed the cultivation of barley, which, however, diminished from the twelfth century on and had stopped altogether by the sixteenth century. At any rate, the description of Viking-age Iceland in this saga shows the country as a place of abundant natural resources that could be exploited without much effort and enabled the settlers to amass considerable wealth within a very short time.

Similar descriptions can be found in other sagas, such as *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, which is about Ingimundr, the first settler in the valley Vatnsdalur in northern Iceland. After his arrival in the new country, some of his sheep ran away; they were found well-nourished in the woods in the following year. According to the saga, Ingimundr also lost some pigs, and when they were discovered again in the autumn of the following year, there were one hundred of them altogether. When Ingimundr gathered men to catch the pigs, he realized that they had “two heads”—by which is meant that each one of them was fat enough to yield as much pork as two pigs.

That the pigs brought by the settlers multiplied and fattened enormously within a short time is also emphasized in other texts. This may be no coincidence, since pork was the favored meat of medieval European nobility. Pig husbandry relied heavily on woodlands, in which the pigs were fattened during autumn by feeding on acorns and beechnuts from the trees. Slaughtering usually took place in late autumn or early winter, when the pigs were fattest—as is also indicated in the passage from the saga. What the Sagas of Icelanders “forget” to tell us, however, are the sorts of trees that the abundant Icelandic woodlands consisted of: only birch and some dwarf willows, both not nearly as good for fattening pigs as oaks and beeches. Another detail not explicitly mentioned in these sagas is that these primeval woodlands had largely disappeared within the two hundred years since settlement. Correspondingly, excavations of middens at Viking-age farm sites have shown that, while pigs made up an important part of the species mix brought to Iceland by the settlers, pig bones had already become extremely seldom by the eleventh century. This means that by the thirteenth century, when the sagas cited above were written, pork was probably a very scarce foodstuff in Iceland. From the saga writers' perspective, a herd of a hundred fat pigs must have seemed even more paradisiacal than it did to the original settlers.

Oral Tradition or Literary Influences?

This raises questions concerning the accuracy of the medieval sagas' descriptions of Viking-age environmental conditions. It is possible that there was indeed an oral tradition reaching several hundred years back to the time of settlement. That certain environmental details, for example concerning the primeval woodlands, have turned out to be true, might be an indication of such a tradition. Yet archaeologists today doubt that the general picture of settlement given in the sagas conforms to what actually happened. The colonization of Iceland was, according to our current state of knowledge, a far more difficult, troublesome, and protracted process than what the sagas try to make us believe. It took probably several decades before a working economy was established, and even then, Icelanders had a considerably lower standard of living than comparable social groups in Norway.

Another likely influence on descriptions of nature in the sagas comes from other literary texts. After the country's Christianization around the year 1000, religious texts such as the Bible and lives of the saints were the first literary works that became available in Iceland. And while there was certainly a lively tradition of oral storytelling in the country, it was this kind of literature that taught Icelanders how to compose narratives in written form. In these texts they found a very frequent literary motif that in ancient rhetoric was called the *locus amoenus*, or "pleasant place." It means a place characterized by natural beauty and typical elements such as trees, meadows, and springs or creeks. Medieval writers often added attractive resources to these places, while at the same time connecting them to Christian concepts of holiness. Therefore the *locus amoenus* is frequently found in saints' lives, especially in descriptions of the places where holy men or women establish themselves. These places are usually characterized both by natural beauty and by an abundance of natural resources, and both elements indicate God's benevolence towards these saints: it is His will that they should settle precisely there. And while most of the migrants coming to Iceland were pagan, the natural abundance described in the Sagas of Icelanders seems to perform the same function as the motif of the *locus amoenus* in saints' lives, i.e., upgrading the image of both the place itself and of those who came to settle there.

This points to a third likely influence on the environmental descriptions in these sagas, for there was a reason why Icelandic chieftains in the thirteenth century started financ-

ing the writing of texts about the Viking age. Both parchment and scribes were expensive. Entertainment was likely one of the purposes the sagas served, but certainly not the only one. Considerable evidence indicates that the past was portrayed in the sagas in ways that served the interests of distinct social groups at the time of writing. For example, material claims of people in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may be a reason for the divergent information in different written sources about the size of the land some of the first settlers took into possession. It is also clear from the sources that privileged segments of Icelandic society during the Middle Ages tried to construct as noble an ancestry for themselves as possible. Like other “civilized” peoples, they tried to trace back their ancestry to the ancient Trojans. It was probably for this same reason that they attempted to euphemize environmental conditions in their accounts of historic Iceland.

A Place Like Hell

Foreigners, on the other hand, had a rather negative view of these conditions. According to the eleventh-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen, there were no crops and very little wood in Iceland, and people lived in caves underground that they shared with their animals. The Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus wrote around the year 1200 that Icelanders lacked all that could foster luxury, since their soil was so naturally barren. And the Norwegian *King’s Mirror* from around 1260 even equated Iceland with Hell because of its volcanoes, glaciers, boiling springs, and ice-cold streams. From an external perspective, Iceland appeared as a place of extreme resource scarcity and environmental conditions hostile to human life. This may be one reason why privileged Icelanders tried to create a different picture of their past: one in which the settlers were not poor people migrating into an environment of even worse material conditions, but instead wealthy chieftains who came to a place of abundant natural resources. By constructing a noble and wealthy ancestry, one’s own social status could also be enhanced.

This becomes even clearer when descriptions of the environment in the Sagas of Icelanders are compared to those in other texts written in Iceland during the same period. Some of the so-called Bishops’ Sagas are especially revealing in this respect. Three medieval Icelandic bishops were considered saints, and several versions of their lives

were composed during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These texts contain a surprising number of environmental details, concerning for example weather conditions and the availability of natural resources. The most extensive medieval description of Iceland's environment stems from the youngest version of a saga about Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), which was written around 1350. With Guðmundr's canonization its goal, and thus originally intended for a foreign audience, this text describes Iceland as a place surrounded by sea ice and covered by enormous glaciers. Volcanic gases endanger the lives of both humans and animals. The saga emphasizes that there are no trees other than small birches, no grain except for some barley, and that people mostly live off saltwater fish and dairy products. In contradistinction to the Sagas of Icelanders, the island appears here as a place of extremely scarce resources, providing only low-status food, and with an environment actually hostile to all life.

Even this view may be rooted to some extent in an environmental reality. In the middle of the fourteenth century—when this version of the saga was written—a climatic anomaly caused a series of extraordinarily cold years, bringing huge amounts of sea ice and expanding glaciers. Yet in the saga about Guðmundr, the description of nature also fulfills a certain narrative function; the extremely unfavorable conditions highlight the achievements of the holy bishop, who during his lifetime not only suffered conflicts with stubborn worldly chieftains, but also had to deal with a harsh natural environment. Moreover, such an environment gave the Icelandic saints plenty of opportunity to prove their sainthood through helping people in crisis situations. A considerable proportion of the hundreds of miracle stories narrated in the Bishops' Sagas take nature as their point of departure: people who are starving for want of food, at danger of shipwreck in stormy seas, or freezing to death in terrible snowstorms call upon one of the saints and receive immediate help. The holy bishops send stranded whales and seals as provisions, cause waters to recede, and improve the weather. Unfavorable environmental conditions thus serve in these texts to demonstrate the bishops' sanctity.

Environmental scarcity and abundance play thus an important role in both the Sagas of Icelanders and the Bishops' Sagas. They are described in a way which is neither purely fictional nor historically trustworthy. Yet these descriptions are connected to Viking-age and medieval environmental reality in complex and creative ways and strongly influenced by social functions of the literary works in the time they were composed. When these many-faceted relations between works of literature and the extra-literary

world are taken into consideration, texts such as the sagas can indeed provide valuable insights into how humans in the premodern past perceived their natural environments and how they dealt with issues such as resource scarcity and environmental change.

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Robert Baumgartner

“Main Objective: Don’t Starve”: Representations of Scarcity in Virtual Worlds

At first glance, video games and scarcity seem to have little to do with one another: the medium is intrinsically dependent on the economic abundance of twenty-first-century capitalism, and has become a symbol of the contemporary affluent middle-class lifestyle. This inseparable connection to material abundance is evident in every aspect of its production and consumption, be it the massively globalized and resource-consuming production process of its hardware and software, the energy required to maintain the individual devices, servers, and data centers, the massive cost of developing and marketing modern AAA (or “blockbuster”) games,¹ or the cost of consoles and games for private consumers.

But at the same time, video games are also inherently attracted to the concept of scarcity. We have to remember that, as a digital structure, the video game is built on a dichotomy of quantified (binary) states. As a consequence, everything that is processed is primarily treated in strictly arithmetic terms, no matter its appearance on the screen. But the processing of various sums is meaningless if these sums have no discernible relevance. Fortunately, the so-called ludic model of gameplay² synergizes very well with this characteristic: in contrast to improvised free play (*paidia*), ludically organized games base themselves on strict sets of rules and define verifiable conditions for victory and defeat. Through the merging of sums and rules, the previously “neutral” sums at the base of the medium become parts of meaningful interactive challenges—they are converted to resources that can be gained, lost, and, when organized in the right way, mean victory or defeat. Consequently, video games tend to portray their interactive challenges through a lack—or scarcity—of resources or options for players. This is most apparent in early video games, which ended in a “loss” scenario when players ran out of limited resources, such as allotted play time or retries.

1 An example: the AAA game *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2012) cost US\$200 million (including the development budget, marketing costs, and other expenditures). Cf. Ben Fritz and Alex Pham, “Star Wars: The Old Republic—The Story behind a Galactic Gamble,” *LA Times*, 20 January 2012. Online at <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/games/star-wars-the-old-republic-the-story-behind-a-galactic-gamble/#/0> (last accessed 4 January 2014).

2 A term established by Roger Caillois in 1958 for various forms of pre-digital games. Cf. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 13.

Although the artificial creation and mastery of scarcity never stopped being the primary way of creating rule-based challenges, the actual representation of these mechanics has seen drastic change. During the 1990s and early 2000s, video games were slowly transformed from arcade-like exercises in hand-eye coordination to high-quality home entertainment with a higher grade of complexity, both in gameplay and narrative. With a greater focus on storytelling and a more “casual” target demographic, more and more games established less rigorous conditions for victory and defeat in order to allow more players to experience the whole story of the game. An example: the first-person shooter *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) replaced the strict time and resource limitations of its predecessors not just by establishing a much more lenient resource policy, but also by providing the avatar with a regenerating health pool that only required players who had taken a hostile hit to take cover behind a wall for several seconds in order to recover and continue the fight—scarcity was transformed from a constant threat to a short-term issue. This strategy of scarcity reduction also tended to create discrepancies between gameplay and narrative: even if levels or storyworlds such as small islands or abandoned space stations were depicted in narrative terms as places of scarcity, they were rarely designed and experienced as such. This easily created situations where players were showered with useful items while being told that their characters were experiencing dire material hardship.

However, during the last decade, we can observe significant changes in this practice. Instead of hiding the scarcity at their core, more and more games exhibit it by not only placing representations of economic and ecological scarcity in the center of their fictional world and story, but also at the core of their gameplay. Consequently, these games not only try to depict their worlds as “authentic” spaces of scarcity, similar to those in passively consumed media such as films and novels; they also utilize the specific mediality of the video game to let players experience emotional and intellectual states associated (by the developers) with scarcity.³

3 The medial process that potentially leads to players being affected by intradiegetic events to a degree that is usually only experienced when one is actually physically involved in events is complex, but has been well described by the German game studies scholars Jochen Venus and Stephan Günzel. Cf. Venus, “Erlebtes Handeln im Computerspiel,” in *Theorien des Computerspiels: Zur Einführung*, ed. GamesCoop, 104–27 (Hamburg: Junius, 2012).

The Digital Post-Apocalypse

The last decade has seen a significant trend towards the depiction of post-apocalyptic settings and worlds in all forms of popular media. Be it in the form of a nuclear war, a regular or “zombie” pandemic, or an unexplained cataclysm, many of these scenarios have resulted in the elimination of most of the human population and the partial or complete collapse of economic and political structures. The situation of the scattered survivors, who have to scavenge for basic resources in barren environments, destroyed ecosystems, and the ruins of the past, often puts emphasis on the presentation of scarcity, thus (at least potentially) confronting middle-class consumers with the ephemeral nature of their current lifestyle. This new-found obsession with scarcity and the consequences of environmental collapse is elaborated in many of the most popular contemporary games such as *Fallout 3* and *Fallout New Vegas*, *The Last of Us*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Metro 2033*, *Metro Last Light*, or *The Walking Dead*. All of these games place their protagonists in ruined post-apocalyptic worlds where they have to struggle with the constant lack of resources such as food, ammunition, functional equipment, and currency—if it still exists. Their surroundings, civilization (especially urban environments), and even nature itself can no longer offer resources in the ways established by the imagination and practices of modernity.

Civilization

The collapse of civilization has destroyed the complex industrial and economic structures that are necessary to produce and distribute refined goods on any but the most rudimentary level. Most of the mentioned games emphasize this fact by turning the abandoned husks of factories, shopping malls, and warehouses into explorable game spaces. However, they are no longer spaces of abundance, but almost empty: the few objects that have survived the onslaught of time and other desperate survivors are either strewn among the unusable wreckage of the past or hidden behind locks and dangerous traps. The destitute emptiness of locations strongly associated with affluence is a striking symbol of scarcity, while the difficulty in obtaining the few precious resources that ensure the avatar’s survival—once-commonplace items, like potato chips, instant meals, and soft drinks—gives players a new appreciation for material comforts usually taken for granted.

Nature

What about nature? In romanticist paintings (e.g., Thomas Cole's cycle *The Course of Empire*, 1833–1836) or early speculative fiction of the nineteenth century (such as Richard Jefferies's post-apocalyptic novel *After London*, 1885), the collapse of civilization and the end of human meddling also meant that nature had a chance to reclaim lost territory and regenerate. However, in most contemporary post-apocalyptic video games this is not the case. Often protagonists will walk through a barren wasteland among ashes and burnt trees that no longer bear fruit. Even worse, the fantastic settings of these games turn the environment—or what remains of it—into active threats to the player: the water is irradiated and slowly kills the avatar that drinks it to survive, the plants are toxic, and most of the surviving wildlife has mutated into aggressive abominations that actively attack and pursue humans. Even if the environment has survived the global catastrophe, as in *The Last of Us* or *The Walking Dead*, it can no longer provide for the survivors—because they lack the skills to harvest its remaining bounty.

Dealing with Scarcity

Using their entire arsenal of media and features, the aforementioned video games invite players to experience this post-apocalyptic world of scarcity for themselves: they not only confront players with a constant lack of resources and thus gameplay options, but also reflect and elaborate this deficit on a narrative level by creating spaces and situations that can only be understood and navigated from a perspective of scarcity. An example for the ethical dimension that gameplay decisions can gain by combining these aspects is the adventure game *The Walking Dead* (2012–2014). The game puts players in the shoes of a survivor in a global zombie pandemic and forces them to decide the fate of a half-starved group of survivors: who among the men, women, and children receive some of the precious remaining food rations? If given the chance, should the group loot a car full of supplies belonging to other survivors, thus damning them to starvation? Unlike more conventional games that provide players with enough information to be adequately sure about the mechanical and narrative consequences of their actions, *The Walking Dead* never becomes predictable: good deeds might have negative consequences, wrongs might go unpunished—under conditions

of constant scarcity, a clear conscience is just another unaffordable luxury. However, players perceiving this scarcity-based scenario as an invitation to follow behaviors based on rational choice theory are soon disappointed: the game not only systematically obscures the potential costs and benefits of choices by limiting information and mixing in unpredictable social dynamics between group members, it also prolongs its causality over hours of gameplay, thus turning any “rational” decision into a gamble with an uncertain future. The self-interested decision to loot the “abandoned” car at the end of episode two costs the protagonist dearly when the car’s owner returns in episode five to take revenge on those that damned his family to starvation and death. The explicit omission of optimal choices can feel unsettling for players who are used to seeing games as a sandbox for informed decisions and optimal (narrative and mechanical) outcomes, or, as pointed out by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Games of Empire* (2009), as a training ground for modern economic thought and practice.⁴ But for the same reasons it also holds subversive potential, because it forces players outside the box of economically optimized decision-making and helps them to imagine alternative modes of thought.

As a consequence, games posing these difficult questions, such as *The Walking Dead*, *The Void*, and *Pathologic* (the latter two developed by the Russian studio Icepick Lodge), often tend to be much less relaxing than expected. This would also explain why they are so few in number compared to those games that turn scarcity in a source of manageable “fun.” This is most apparent in the subgenre known as sandbox-survival simulation. This genre is relatively young and has not yet garnered much scholarly attention, except for its progenitor, *Minecraft*, which was released in 2011. Since then, many games with the same gameplay structure have been published or put into development, among them *DayZ*, *Eidolon*, *The Long Dark*, *The Forrester*, *Rust*, *7 Days To Die*, *Salt*, and *Don’t Starve*.

The basic structure of the genre, here illustrated by *Don’t Starve*, is easily explained: without much ado, the player character is put in the middle of a randomly generated landscape that appears to be mostly untouched by civilization. As in all games of the genre, players start out without tools, food, shelter from the elements, or a map. They soon become painfully aware of this fact, because while they inspect their character and surroundings, the saturation symbol starts emptying and continues to do so.

4 Cf. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

Nutrition can be found by gathering berries or turnips, but these can only stave off hunger for a short time. And with the passing of time and the arrival of night or bad weather, temperatures fall and threaten the player character's health—even a campfire goes out without constant refueling. Without decisive action, they will soon starve, or die from exposure: they are threatened by constant scarcity from all sides.

However, survival games have their name for a reason: by picking up basic resources like rocks and sticks from the ground and combining them, player characters can build crude stone tools, such as axes, pickaxes, or hammers. These can be used on the surrounding trees and boulders to produce logs, flint, rocks, and ore—which in turn are combined to create better tools, simple shelter from the elements, fire, and most notably, weapons such as bows and spears. Hunting provides more food but brings the risk of injury or death—but death comes easily enough, as only very few games of the genre are content to threaten with just death from starvation, thirst, exposure, wounds, intoxication, or even sleeplessness. Most also feature supernatural monsters (such as zombies, mutants, or giant animals) that are most active at night. They kill unprepared avatars in a short time and negate hours of work. However, the creation of more and more elaborate weapons and armor is slowly leveling the playing field: after a few hours, players routinely hunt wildlife, strengthen and expand their shelter, and gather more resources in order to create refined devices or tools that optimize the efficiency of their economic output by automating many activities or providing easily accessible resources. Optimal planning and execution of available actions for hours of playtime pay massive dividends: a fortified camp, a never-ending stream of food and crafting resources, even luxury items and domination of the island's beasts. The specter of scarcity has been exorcised, only to be superseded by abundance.

But why are these games so fascinating for contemporary players, especially considering the fact that they do not feature an elaborate story? Why would players expose themselves to the stress and anxiety of simulated scarcity? And why does this genre appear to be so familiar even while it is considered barely established? This question leads us back to the eighteenth century and the “invention” of scarcity in its modern form. I exclude the early origins of this development and focus on the writings of Adam Smith, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who imagined the human condition

as a constant struggle with both natural and self-imposed scarcity. The details⁵ are less important than the effects of this cultural transformation: during subsequent decades (and under the influence of early capitalist and enlightened rationalist thought), scarcity was not only transformed into an imagined constant, but together with its twin concept of abundance, it became the basis of a new teleology. Now scarcity, the Malthusian specter that threatened civilization, could be overcome. And by the application of rational enlightened thought and economic action, it could even be turned into everlasting abundance. One of the most striking fictional illustrations of this trend is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The well-known story has been read as a prototype narrative of early modern economic thought: a white male finds himself isolated from civilization and experiences scarcity on all levels—until he uses his educated mind and perseverance to unlock the hidden plenty of his island environment. All of this happens in a re-creation of the course of civilization, from hunting and gathering to crafting, simple agriculture, and finally economic autarky and plenty.

We can read these survival games as interactive re-enactments of this process, digital robinsonades that establish scarcity as the big existential threat—only to turn it into abundance. The survival simulation allows players to realize this phantasma of modernity in a safe arena, the “magic circle”⁶ of the game, where the odds are designed to be in their favor. The anxiety or insecurity that players might feel when facing the simulated scarcity is willingly endured, because it makes the almost guaranteed payback all the sweeter. Games like *The Walking Dead*, *Pathologic*, or *The Void* deconstruct this mode of gratification by breaking these artificial shackles and confronting players with an unmitigated dose of scarcity and unpredictability that not only casts doubt on their expectations of games, but also on their perspective on scarcity and abundance in general. In this way, scarcity in the virtual world appears not only as a barely containable liminal concept that challenges the social and economic values held dear by late capitalist consumer societies, but also as a tool of self-reflection for the video game as a medium that struggles with its heritage as a producer of escapist gratification.

5 Hume and Adams supported the consumption of more resources in the name of taste and culture, while Rousseau proposed human self-control and discipline. Cf. Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London: Routledge 1989), 4ff.

6 Cf. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 10.

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Stories of Lack and Abundance

Fredrik Albritton Jonsson

Anthropocene Blues: Abundance, Energy, Limits

The ability of the human species to transform the planetary environment has reached an unprecedented scale and magnitude in the past few decades. We have collectively become a “geological agent” capable of changing the global climate through our carbon emissions. The atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen traces this growing crisis back to the invention of the double-condensing steam engine by James Watt and the mineral energy economy ushered in by Britain’s Industrial Revolution. For Crutzen, Watt’s invention in 1784 marked the beginning of a new epoch of geological time—the Anthropocene.¹

The concept of the Anthropocene has been gaining public and scholarly recognition in recent years, although both its scientific legitimacy and broader social meaning are still being discussed. As a physical concept it describes the new scale of anthropogenic changes in the geology and ecology of the planetary system, including the mass extinction of species, the melting of the polar ice caps, the rise of the oceans, and shifts in precipitation patterns. One influential definition of the Anthropocene sees climate change as part of a much wider pattern of overshoot caused by the ecological footprint of consumer society, a process that threatens nine “planetary boundaries” that maintain humanity in “a safe operating space.”² The concept of the Anthropocene thus has an explicitly ethical and historical dimension. Crutzen’s term invites us to reevaluate deeply held ideas about the character of modern society and the place of humanity in the natural world. The old story of the Industrial Revolution as a technological triumph here meets a far less flattering narrative of far-reaching unintended environmental consequences from fossil fuel use.

Scholars are only beginning to investigate the implications of the Anthropocene for the social sciences and the humanities. Stephen Gardiner calls climate change a “perfect

- 1 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene,” *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May 2000): 17–18. Cf. Colin N. Waters, Jan A. Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Michael A. Ellis, and Andrea M. Snelling, eds., *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene* (London: Geological Society, 2014), 1–21.
- 2 Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 842–67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0327>; Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/>.

moral storm” because agency is dispersed both spatially and temporally. Poor countries and distant generations pay the consequences for the consumption pattern of affluent countries in the present. How do we balance the wants of consumer society against the needs of developing nations in the present and the rights of future generations?³

The unintended consequences of energy consumption have given rise to a wide-ranging debate about possible remedies. Techno-optimists look to economic growth and a transition to renewables as complementary paths out of the crisis. With sustained growth, future generations will have greater means to handle a deepening crisis. Yet such arguments often minimize the environmental impact of growth and overlook the possibility that climate change will seriously reduce growth rates over time. The transition to renewables raises other problems of cost and implementation. How quickly can we change our infrastructure and consumer behavior? What political tools or cultural forces are most suited to the task? Some critics insist that only far-reaching social, economic, and technological transformation will solve the problem in the long term. They promote a post-carbon economy in a steady state. They see human flourishing as a cultural and political project incompatible with ever-increasing economic growth. However, these critics have reached little clarity on how such a social transition to *sufficiency* might actually be achieved.⁴

Historians and other scholars in the humanities have a great deal to contribute to these debates. Virtually all the key questions we face—planning for the long term, coping with climate change, ensuring intergenerational equity, reducing our ecological footprint, and facilitating an energy transition—have long, tangled histories. By exploring the diverse repertoire of responses of human societies to such issues in the past, we gain a wider sense of possibility in the present. Scientists cannot define the risks to the planet without assistance from the humanities and social sciences. As Julia Adeney Thomas observes, the very idea of endangerment at the heart of the climate change crisis raises a question of values and valuation, as a subject of inquiry not just in ethics and economics, but also anthropology, sociology, history, art, and literature. To their credit, many scientists recognize their debt to the realm of culture and art for guiding principles and metaphors: think

3 Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Juliet Schor, *Plenitude: New Economics of Wealth* (New York: Penguin, 2010); Thomas Princen, *The Logic of Sufficiency* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

of James Lovelock's idea of Gaia, Edward Wilson's notion of biophilia, or Jim Hansen's portrayal of the "storms of our grandchildren."⁵

The concept of stewardship is another good case in point. Johan Rockström and his co-authors argue that the human species must become a steward of the earth system to maintain it in a safe and stable state, as close to the Holocene norm as possible.⁶ Stewardship is of course an ancient idea, with roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as in Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. We can track the practice of stewardship in many places and periods. States have pursued policies of resource management as a means to economic and military power. Local communities have sought to manage common pool resources by regulating access to them. Frequently, successful forms of stewardship and conservation have propped up strongly hierarchical and inequitable social systems. Geoffrey Parker examines a striking case of authoritarian stewardship in his study of how the Tokugawa state in seventeenth-century Japan coped with the Little Ice Age. The regime weathered the cold spell by imposing a system of military rule, censorship, infanticide, and paternalism. Stewardship by necessity involves a politics of natural limits. Efforts to calculate and regulate the optimal use of scarce resources cannot be separated from broader social and political controversies about the nature of property, justice, and the public good.⁷

Consumption and Inequality

For some observers, this question of social interest is a reason to jettison the concept of the Anthropocene wholesale. Two historians of capitalism, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, have expressed grave misgivings about seeing the human species as the

5 Julia Adeney Thomas, "History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value," *American Historical Review* 119 (2014): 1588; James Lovelock, *Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2007); E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); James Hansen, *The Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe Change and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010); Hansen's book ends with a short work of science fiction.

6 Rockström et al., "Planetary Boundaries."

7 Dale Jamieson, *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001); Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 505–6; on the politics of natural limits, see Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

causes of climate change. Rather than the “Anthropocene,” they prefer the term “capitalocene,” or maybe the “econocene.” It is a fundamental mistake, they argue, to attribute carbon emissions to humanity as a collective when only one segment of the world population has been responsible for most of the fossil fuel consumption. Indeed, Malm and Hornborg attribute the original cause of climate change to the coercive power of a small group of factory owners who ushered in the use of steam machines in English textile production. Talk of the human species as a geological force merely distracts us from the task of analyzing the social structure of capitalism. The Anthropocene, on this count, is the brainchild of a well-intentioned but misguided understanding of historical development.⁸

This critique, however, is one-sided, for the science of the Anthropocene is hardly indifferent to matters of inequality. Crutzen observed in his 2002 piece “Geology of Mankind” that “only 25 percent of the world population” was responsible for the degradation of the global environment. Recent writers on the Anthropocene have also adopted the concept of the Great Acceleration—the postwar boom in resource use and pollution—to understand the nature of the Anthropocene boundary. Crucially, this is not just a diagnosis of unequal consumption but also a forecast about the growing emissions of developing countries. The Great Acceleration began in North America and western Europe but has spread far afield and is likely to become an even more pervasive force if fossil fuel use persists.⁹

Malm and Hornborg also fail to deal adequately with the geological aspect of the Anthropocene concept. Paul Crutzen and his allies choose to speak of humanity rather than nations or classes because they wish to stress the external impact of humanity on other species and the earth system itself. This is a scientist’s view of humanity as a physical phenomenon, on an aggregate scale beyond individual and social experience. (It is well worth keeping in mind that the anthropogenic climate change began as an unintended and unnoticed consequence of industrialization.) In the distant future, the rupture caused by humanity’s sudden entry as a driving force in the earth system will be

8 Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind: A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1 (2014): 62; cf. Richard B. Norgaard, “The Econocene and the Delta,” *San Francisco Estuary and Watershed Science* 11, no. 3 (2013).

9 Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (January 2002); Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig, “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: the Great Acceleration,” *Anthropocene Review* 2 (2015): 1–18.

apparent to geologists by means of its golden spike—a specific sediment layer marking the beginning of the industrial era of mankind—probably accompanied by fossil traces of a mass extinction among other species. Geologically speaking, it will not be possible to distinguish separate human cultures, let alone social classes, in this Anthropocene sediment—only an undifferentiated human impact on the strata of the world.¹⁰

Such a planetary perspective on the condition of human life is not entirely foreign to economic and social theory. Already in the late Enlightenment, we find T. R. Malthus contemplating the idea of humanity as a physical force pressing on the limits of the planet. After Malthus, the normative universalism of the Enlightenment became interwoven with the cornucopian promise of the industrial economy. Competing ideologies of individual liberty and free trade, welfare and social justice gained much of their technological and social credence thanks to the cheap and abundant energy content of coal, gas, and oil. But economic expansion also produced forecasts of environmental crisis and permanent limits to growth. In the postwar era, neo-Malthusian observers developed a calculus of ghost acres and ecological footprints. They attacked the Western standard of living by asking how many planets it would take to universalize this form of consumption. The more recent idea of the carbon footprint applies the same logic to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. In this way, environmental critics want to demonstrate the biophysical side of Enlightenment project, that is, they seek to show the per capita weight of fossil fuel economies on the earth system. Malm and Hornborg themselves appear to employ this argument when they insist that “the affluence of high-tech modernity cannot possibly be universalized—become an asset of the species.”¹¹

The question of how we might link together the histories of capital and climate is at the heart of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s seminal essay “The Climate of History.” Since the Enlightenment, Chakrabarty argues, the work of historians has focused on problems of liberty and progress, ignoring the biophysical context of life on the planet. Civil history has been divorced from the deep time of natural history. Now, the crisis of climate change challenges us to bring the two forms of history together. We have unintentionally “slid into” a new condition, which “forces on us a recognition of some of the parametric . . .

10 Waters et al., *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene*.

11 Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Björn-Ola Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-War Popular-Resource Crises* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2003); Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1996); Malm and Hornborg, “Geology of Mankind,” 64.

conditions” for human life. These boundaries are “independent of capitalism or socialism.” They “have been stable for much longer than the histories of these institutions and have allowed human beings to become the dominant species on earth.” Chakrabarty gives as an example of one of these boundary conditions, the “long summer” of the Holocene, a sustained period of relatively moderate climate which coincided with the Neolithic Revolution and the rise of complex societies. To understand our new situation, we need to put the “global histories of capital” in “conversation” with “the species history of humans.” We need to “scale up our imagination of the human” to understand our new capacity as a collective geological force. But this is no easy proposition, Chakrabarty warns. The history of species and the history of capitalism operate with starkly different chronologies and scales. Moreover, there can be no human “self-understanding” at the level of the species: “We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such.” We are left with a paradox: we need to incorporate a planetary perspective into our historical understanding, but at the same time we must guard against naïve talk that we can act rationally and politically at the level of the species.¹²

The Rise of Fossil Fuel Economies

Energy history may offer one way forward. In an important move, Chakrabarty insists that fossil fuel consumption has been integral to the project of modernity. We could extend this argument further by exploring how the energy content of coal and oil lent legitimacy and practical force to the ambitions of reformers and revolutionaries across the political spectrum from socialism to laissez faire. In this sense, energy history might reveal an unexamined basis for ideology, politics, and culture after the Enlightenment. Yet we still know quite little about the past and present of fossil fuel consumption. Only relatively recently have there been serious attempts among economic historians to gather a continuous record of energy use from the eighteenth century to the present. There are also significant gaps in our understanding of the politics and culture of energy consumption.¹³

12 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 217–18, 220.

13 Astrid Kander, Paolo Malanima, and Paul Warde, *Power to the People: Energy in Europe over the Last Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); David Nye, “Consumption of Energy” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 307–25; Nye, *Consuming Powers: A Social History of American Energies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). An important exception here is the large literature on the political economy of oil, see for example Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011).

The neglect of energy in the scholarship is in itself a historical problem worth our attention. It is something of a commonplace for critics in the climate change debates to describe the social cause of climate change and the lack of political action to mitigate emissions in terms of a “fossil fuel addiction.” But the metaphor of addiction glosses over many questions. How do fossil fuels differ from other commodities? What social, technological, and political forces paved the way for the transition to coal, oil, and gas? How can we track distinct patterns of energy use in different political regimes and cultures? How have markets and technology shaped our knowledge as well as our ignorance of such matters?¹⁴

Industrial Britain—the first fossil fuel economy—is not a bad place to start looking for some preliminary answers. We can explore the significance of coal to Victorian society at a number of levels. For colliers, coal porters, housewives, maidservants, and numerous other people, handling coal was a basic feature of everyday life. But as an object of political concern, it merited only intermittent attention, triggered by government investigations into mining accidents, collier strikes, and forecasts about resource exhaustion. Fears about the diminution of British coal reserves surfaced in the 1830s and again in the 1860s. Coal also occupied a peculiar place in the religious life of the era. Geologists praised it as a providential gift and a vital resource to be husbanded with skill and prudence. The conservative politician Sir Robert Peel promoted a national policy of stewardship to save coal for the benefit of future generations. Household manuals amplified the religious injunction to economize fuel. The providential politics of coal was also linked to the discovery of deep time and climate change. Images of prehistory circulated widely in Victorian popular culture. Coal was identified as the product of prehistoric tropical vegetation, common before the age of the Saurian reptiles (dinosaurs). Geology thus offered a new frame for national history. Over eons of time, a generous providence had improved the climate of Britain to a more temperate and sober norm fit for rational improvement, while at the same time turning its tropical plant life into a marvelous source of fuel.¹⁵

14 One prominent public figure who makes use of the language of addiction is James Hansen; see *Storms of My Grandchildren*, 97, 220.

15 Martin Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Rudwick, *Words before Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Rolf Sieferle, *The Subterranean Forest* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2010).

Fossil fern from a coal deposit. Source: John Lindley and William Hutton, *The Fossil Flora of Great Britain: Or Figures and Descriptions of the Vegetable Remains Found in a Fossil State in This Country* (London: James Ridgway and Sons, 1833–35), vol. 2, plate 156.



By pursuing the history of energy in this broad sense, we are able to situate Victorian Britain at the intersection between the histories of capital and climate, along the lines suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Nineteenth-century consumers learned to think of coal on multiple scales, as a product of deep time, a finite national stock, and a household good to be managed economically. Fears of exhaustion helped create a cycle of political interest. Finally, geologists invented a new climate norm, which contrasted the stability and moderation of the present age with the heat of the Carboniferous period. In this way, Victorians began to think of their own society as the product of benign climate change. That dichotomy between deep time and civilization set the stage for one of the central claims of Anthropocene science: the recognition that human civilization has thrived only in the long summer of the Holocene.

Suggested Reading

Albritton Jonsson, Fredrik. "Cornucopianism: A Preliminary Genealogy," *Critical Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 151–68.

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Klaus Benesch

Curb Your Enthusiasm: On Scarcity and Replenishment in Literature

Scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying importance is an almost ubiquitous condition of human behaviour. Here, then, is the unity of subject of Economic Science, the forms assumed by human behaviour in disposing of scarce means.

Lionel Robbins,
An Essay On the Nature and Significance of Economic Science (1932)

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.

Henry David Thoreau,
Walden (1854)

Curb Your Enthusiasm, the title of comedian Larry David's highly praised comedy television series, strikes me as an almost perfect motto to frame the following remarks on scarcity and literature.¹ As David repeatedly suggested, the title was to evoke restraint on more than one level: because of its enormously successful predecessor, *Seinfeld*, it warned against overblown expectations regarding the new show even though some of *Seinfeld*'s cast had guest appearances in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It also meant to deflate exaggerated emotional identification with the fictional characters, an obvious disclaimer given the dry comical style of the series. What is more, it criticizes what David repeatedly called his fellow Americans' false enthusiasm, an exaggerated cheerfulness which, when projected towards other people, has the potential of being offensive. And, finally, it evokes David's own restraint in embracing commercial, albeit in his case belated, success as a comedian and writer. Put another way, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* takes issue with a typically American display of exuberance, an excess of excitement that has turned stale and trite because it is ubiquitous. What's lacking in contemporary American media culture (and beyond), thus seems to be the message of the series' iconic title, is a notion of emotional (self-)restraint, an understanding of the positive effects of scarcity of emotions rather than their abundance and ubiquitousness.

¹ The series, starring comedian Larry David as, basically, himself, aired on HBO from 2000 through 2011. It won several major awards and was acclaimed best television series of 2003.

It is this positive aspect of scarcity that I find interesting and instructive. Literature and the arts are a good case in point. Here scarcity appears in the form of asceticism, to be cherished not shunned, actively endorsed and idealized rather than dismissed as an obstacle to artistic success. In what follows I'll take a closer look at the role of scarcity in literature or, more broadly, the applicability of concepts such as scarcity and its opposite, abundance and replenishment, in academic fields that are not primarily concerned with material value but rather with words and ideas. While by most people's standards the shortage of means to achieve ends that are valuable and cherished is judged negatively, in literature—and by extension in the arts at large—it is often the reverse. When used with regard to rhetoric and the style of literary texts, for example, scarcity frequently evokes the shedding of the superfluous, merely decorative components of speech. It is a conscious choice, carefully made by an author or orator, not an indelible fact of the human condition.² Authors deliberately embrace the scarcity of words because they believe that clarity and precision are superior to the verbosity of long-winded, ceremonial prose. The “literary” understanding of scarcity may thus help us to question some of the assumptions implied in its economic meaning; more specifically, the ill-fated idea that limited resources are an existential juggernaut, a universal ill that drives much of human history.

The Artist in the Garret

That economists or social scientists define concepts such as scarcity and abundance differently than, say, an artist or a literary critic is hardly surprising. While to the former the lack of resources and material goods represents a social deficiency that needs to be remedied and changed, for the latter poverty and destitution may be less threatening. Just consider Franz Kafka's short story “The Hunger Artist.” In this dark parable, scarcity—that is, the scarcity of food—translates into a figure for art in general; more importantly, it also serves as the artist's (perhaps only) means of rebellion against an encompassing capitalist system, a system glutted with material things to the point where an understanding and appreciation of any true artistic endeavor have become virtually impossible. If the “scarcity of means to satisfy ends of varying im-

2 Christine Weder, “Literatur und Ökonomie: Replik auf Monika Dommann,” in “Knappheit,” ed. Maren Möhring, Erhard Schüttelpelz, and Martin Zillinger, thematic issue, *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 2011, no. 1, 137.

portance,” as economist Lionel Robbins points out,³ prompts us to make choices as to what means produce greater ends—that is, ends that are of greater value to us than others—, in the sphere of art scarcity itself carries value. Here the lack of abundance is not to be feared because it is what distinguishes both the artist and his art from the rest of society.

True, scarcity—when referring to the artist’s precarious social position—is rarely sought but often inflicted; in other words, it is an effect rather than the explicit goal



Carl Spitzweg,
Der arme Poet.
© Bildarchiv
Foto Marburg /
Julius Bard.

of choosing creative work. What is more, the meaning of scarcity in art has changed significantly over time. Prior to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when artistic work had been to a large degree commissioned and funded by either king or church, its practitioners were frequently well-endowed and, more often than not, had

³ Lionel Robbins, *An Essay On the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932), 15.

been members of the most privileged classes. The modern version of the “hunger artist” thus is an invention of the nineteenth century, when artists embraced an increasingly grim social reality in order to maintain their independence, and the profession’s blight was turned into a romantic myth that turned on the opposition between the spirituality of art and the materiality of the larger capitalist society.⁴ From that time on art came to figure as the realm where the utilitarianism rampant in modern capitalist society is being sublated, either by way of the artist’s social isolation and monastic lifestyle (as in Carl Spitzweg’s famous representation of “The Poor Poet”) or by way of the spiritual aloofness of the work of art itself. Hence the role of the artist as rebel and prophet; and hence the ambiguous status of artwork as being simultaneously outside and inside the economic sphere.

The Rare Object

From yet a different angle, Walter Benjamin also emphasizes the role of scarcity and abundance in the field of art, here: the visual arts. In his oft-quoted essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin discusses the invention of mechanized means of visual reproduction such as photography, claiming that the ensuing abundance of images jeopardizes the authority of the technically reproduced artwork and, ultimately, makes its “aura,” or authenticity, disappear.⁵ Rather than merely criticizing the loss of an artwork’s singularity, Benjamin identifies the late nineteenth century as ushering in an important paradigm shift regarding the status of art in society: namely, its transformation from ceremonial practices rooted in ritual, religion, and tradition to modern forms that considerably distanced the object from the observer by way of multiplying it and putting it on display in a museum. In other words, as long as art objects remain scarce and unique they tend to have cult value, when reproduced and made available in abundance, however, they gain in exhibition value. Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the increase in exhibition value—which, according to Benjamin, equals an increase in the numbers of art objects available—has led both art-

4 Cf. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “The Prestige of the Artist under Conditions of Modernity,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 83–100; Donald E. Pease, “Author,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 105–20; Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

5 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 218–19.

ists and critics to resuscitate the earlier notion of authenticity. Under conditions of technical reproduction, in order to separate true art from the burgeoning forms of popular art, craftsmanship, and kitsch, it had to be original and authentic, that is, a manifestation of the artist's ongoing attempt to be groundbreaking, audacious, and new.⁶ As Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing at the outset of the modern era of technical reproduction, reminds us "all men stand in need of expression," but "adequate expression is rare." It is this scarcity of authentic expression that elevates the poet and turns him into interpreter and representative of all men: "he stands among partial men for the complete man, and appraises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth."⁷

If authors have for long been associated with the absence of material well-being, of being outside of the marketplace and its promises of economic success, the same has been true for the artwork itself. Even though the ideal of scarcity (or uniqueness) as guarantor of originality and newness has proved to be utterly illusive, it lingers on as an artistic gold standard, a foil against which success in the arts is measured.⁸ Because of the improved means of technical reproduction and its corollary, an as yet unknown onslaught of images and ideas, to create an original artwork has, however, become increasingly difficult.

From Scarcity to Replenishment

After the second World War, literary authors who tried to live up to the earlier, modernist ideal of newness and originality often experienced a form of exhaustion, a feeling of being drained of their creativity by an overwhelming plentifulness and abundance of art forms: everything has been said and written, any conceivable literary style already proposed, any new path or direction already trodden and explored. It is against this backdrop of impending artistic impotence that US author John Barth published in 1967 his controversial essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," which was followed in 1980 by a companion piece, titled "The Literature of Replenishment." Both essays were expressly written with the notion of scarcity in mind: here, the scarcity of literary originality and

6 Cf. Klaus Benesch, "From Franklin to Emerson: Contestations of Professional Authorship in Early National America," in *Contestations of American Culture(s)*, ed. Udo Hebel (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999), 77–96.

7 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 3, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1972), 347–65.

8 Cf. Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," in *English Critical Essays*, ed. Edmund D. Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

innovation; there, the capacity of literature to overcome its own modernist “exhaustion” by projecting an alternative aesthetics based on repetition and renovation (i.e., of previous art forms). Put otherwise: late-modernist literary replenishment, according to Barth’s analysis, tended to avoid the fallacies of authenticity and originality by providing new experiences through hybrid, recycled, mixed-means art forms, which ultimately produced an abundance of available styles.⁹

Yet it also tended towards an ever more radical version of scarcity and restraint, what Susan Sontag has called an “aesthetics of silence.” If the former (repetition/renovation) represents a multiplying of means, the latter ushered in an extreme artistic asceticism that would eventually verge on the annihilation of form altogether. While art can never be totally silent (because it always remains within the limits of its own discursiveness), some artists clearly have taken the ideal of scarce means and formal restraint to its limits. Think of John Cage’s *4’33’’* (1952), a musical composition that consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of total silence, i.e., non-music. Cage may be seen as the ultimate master of artistic scarcity: by forsaking any form of music altogether he provided us with a musical masterpiece, a composition made of nothing and everything, containing no music and, simultaneously, all the music that has ever been composed and played. “Genuine emptiness, pure silence,” as Sontag explains, “are not feasible—either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical. . . . Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.”¹⁰ Cage’s *4’33’’* powerfully attests to the power of scarcity in the arts: to say something not by choosing among scarce means but by reducing them even further to (almost) nothing.

The late-modernist turn towards silence can be seen as an extension of the Romantic ideal of economic scarcity into the realm of form. Mimicking the social isolation of destitute artists, the aesthetics of silence posits emptiness or “non-art” as a genuine art form. In so doing it resists the encroachment of form by the surrounding materialist culture. “Silence,” Sontag argues, “is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, consumer, antagonist,

9 See Wayne C. Booth, “Renewing the Medium of Renewal: Some Notes on the Anxiety of Innovation,” and Ihab Hassan, “Ideas of Cultural Change,” both in *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, ed. Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

10 Susan Sontag, “Aesthetics of Silence,” *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), 11.

arbiter, and distorter of his work.”¹¹ The aesthetics of silence are thus always also a gesture of rebellion. “When the language of words fails,” as critic Richard Blackmur reminds us, “we resort to the language of gesture.”¹² While this may be true for ordinary speech, in literature (as in all art) silence, the seeming absence of any means of expression, evokes not so much the failure of words but their absolute power. When Emily Dickinson, one of the major American writers of the nineteenth century who famously refused to be published during her lifetime, in a poem titled “Publication – is the Auction” compared the publication of her works to a slave auction, she might have sensed the power of silence or better: self-silencing in literature. As did Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*, the inscrutable scrivener who “preferred not to” speak and write anymore, thereby resisting his cooptation into America’s capitalist culture. From this perspective, then, *Bartleby* or the equally muted sailor in Melville’s dark novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz (“The horror! The horror!”), Eugene O’Neill’s *Hairy Ape*, the often stammering characters of Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee—all speak, by various forms of not-speaking, to the power and beauty of the ultimate scarcity of words, that is, silence.

This modern aesthetics of silence is also what drives Kafka’s hunger artist. If his artistic project consists in the negation of any means of expression other than his own emaciated body, the ultimate vanishing and disappearance of that body turns into a figure of the paradox underlying all art, namely, a representation of absence through the absence of representation, an endorsement of artistic expression by not-speaking. As I hope to have shown, in literature and in the arts in general the scarcity of means to produce desirable ends has been vital in establishing artistic labor as exempt from the influence of modern capitalist society. It has also led artists to frequently depend on an aesthetics of scarcity rather than an aesthetics of plenty and abundance.

Finally, in literature and the arts the absence or lack of meaning itself carries meaning. Contrary to the realm of economics, here the absence of speech, marble, paint, etc. can become a powerful signifier for the thing—art—itself. It is because of this paradox, of having or getting something by not having it, that literature and the arts do (or should) matter regarding issues of scarcity and abundance. Not only do they reach beyond the bleak facticity of the economic realm, they also open up new avenues for

11 *Ibid.*, 6.

12 Richard Blackmur, *Language As Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (London: George Allan, 1954), 3.

reconnecting human sensibility to the environment and the real. In doing so they valorize a more positive understanding of scarcity as an important resource and a form of replenishment. The lesson to learn here, evidently, is not to further prompt economic development and growth but to rein it in, to curb our enthusiasm vis-à-vis a culture predicated on plenty and abundance.

Suggested Reading

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment." In: *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. New York: Putnam, 1984.

Benesch, Klaus. "From Franklin to Emerson: Contestations of Professional Authorship in Early National America." In *Contestations of American Culture(s)*, edited by Udo Hebel, 77–96. Heidelberg: Winter, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection*, 217–52. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Blackmur, Richard. *Language As Gesture: Essays in Poetry*. London: George Allan, 1954.

Gilmore, Michael T. *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Kafka, Franz. "A Hunger Artist." Translated by Ian Johnston. <https://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/kafka/hungerartist.htm>

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11231> (last modified April 2005).

Schulte-Sasse, Jochen. "The Prestige of the Artist under Conditions of Modernity." *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 83–100.

Sontag, Susan. "Aesthetics of Silence." In *Styles of Radical Will*, 3–34. London: Secker and Warburg, 1969.

Young, Edward. "Conjectures on Original Composition." In *English Critical Essays*, edited by Edmund D. Jones. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.

Suggested Listening

Cage, John. *4'33''*. As performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra on 6 January 2004 at the Barbican Center, London. Conducted by Lawrence Foster. Broadcast by Radio 3, introduction by Tommy Pearson. http://www.ubu.com/film/cage_433.html.

Oliver Völker

“Hang on to the words”: The Scarcity of Language in McCarthy’s *The Road* and Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*

A large portion of the world’s population still faces problems of scarcity in everyday situations, as they do not have secure access to basic goods such as food and water. Thomas Homer-Dixon, for instance, reminded his readers in *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* that “the well-being of about half of the world’s population remains directly tied to local natural resources.”¹ As these societies are directly affected by the ongoing destruction of cropland, soil, fishing grounds, and water resources, it might seem trivial to point out that scarcity is understood mainly as the shortage of material goods.

Here, however, I intend to ask to what extent scarcity can also be understood as a concept that refers to cultural phenomena. I argue that the consideration of scarcity as it is represented in literary texts can show us that the distinction of world and language is less stable than it might appear at first sight. Analyzing two recent novels, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*² and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,³ I’d like to show first how scarcity could be understood as a far more comprehensive issue, which can include language and memory. The second goal will be to examine how scarcity is aesthetically represented in both texts: What are the different rhetorical and narrative techniques used to deal with the phenomenon of scarcity?

“Coarse and dry and dusty”

The Road depicts an unnamed father and son, struggling through a charred and lifeless post-apocalyptic America in which hardly any life-sustaining resources can be found anymore. After they finally make it to the coastline, the initial goal of their journey, the father dies and the son joins another family. Even though this might appear as a sort of hopeful ending, the text offers little or no evidence that any living creature

1 Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 13.

2 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

3 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Virago Press, 2003).

would be able to survive on planet Earth in the long run. The resulting hopelessness is a rather peculiar feature of *The Road*. When we take a look at popular culture and science, one can easily be surprised by the huge number of apocalyptic scenarios that represent the disappearance of humanity as the event that ushers in the return of a lush Garden of Eden.⁴ In contrast to this pattern, the scope of the unexplained catastrophe in *The Road* concerns not only civilization and its various artifacts, but also nature. The complete absence of both living animals and plants is one of the most disconcerting experiences when reading the novel.

Against this background, I argue that the devastation of the natural world is not only one of the main subjects of the novel, but that it is also reflected by the formal linguistic qualities of the narrative itself. *The Road*, I suggest, develops an *aesthetics of scarcity*.

In its many descriptions of landscapes, the novel creates a gray, empty, and lifeless world that seems to offer no visual orientation. As a consequence, the father remarks in several passages on his diminishing capacity to speak and remember. When he watches one of the huge fires steadily crawling across the globe, he seems to force himself to a work of preservation of his own memory: “The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember.”⁵ It is important to stress that this loss of memory and the consequent imperative to create “lists” is not merely stated by the father, but represents a poetic principle of the novel. This can be illustrated by a close look at two mainly descriptive passages:

The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the streets caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather.⁶

The five sentences are comparatively short and monotone. Apart from the first one, all of them are incomplete, lacking a proper verb. Furthermore, the single sentences are only loosely and paratactically related to each other, whereby the effect of an enumeration is created. The narrator is not capable, so it seems, of connecting the

4 For this type of narrative see, for instance, Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: Picador, 2007).

5 McCarthy, *The Road*, 31.

6 McCarthy, *The Road*, 11.

different sense impressions and ascribing any meaning to them. The landscape and the surroundings are noticed but not understood. Furthermore, the use of the past participle (“burned,” “caked,” “dried,” “dried”) gives the impression of a dead world in which all processes and activities ceased a long time ago. As another example may show, this stylistic attribute of linguistic reduction is not an exception, but the dominant tone of the novel:

He came upon the barn from the hill above it, stopping to watch and to listen. He made his way down through the ruins of an old apple orchard, black and gnarly stumps, dead grass to his knees. He stood in the door of the barn and listened. Pale slatted light. He walked along the dusty stalls. He stood in the center of the barn bay and listened but there was nothing. He climbed the ladder to the loft and he was so weak he wasn't sure he was going to make it to the top. He walked down to the end of the loft and looked out the high gable window at the country below, the pierced land dead and gray, the fence, the road.

There were bales of hay in the loft floor and he squatted and sorted a handful of seeds from them and sat chewing. Coarse and dry and dusty. They had to contain some nutrition.⁷

When we consider the history of Western art and literature, orchards and gardens can be understood as well-established symbols not only of natural beauty and richness but also of artistic abundance. Even though Henry Peacham's classic rhetoric handbook *The Garden of Eloquence*⁸ appeared in the sixteenth century, the inherent metaphorical connection between garden and literary ingenuity is still very much present. In the case of *The Road*, however, this traditional meaning is disturbingly inverted.

The cited passage consists basically of a monotone series of short and repetitive sentences that describe the man's actions. Seven of the first eight sentences start with the pronoun “He.” Again, the sentences lack almost any connecting words, thereby creating the impression of a list: “He came upon,” “He made his way,” “He stood,” “He walked,” “He stood,” “He climbed,” and then again “He walked.” As it happens,

⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 125.

⁸ Beata-Maria Koll, ed., *Henry Peachams "The Garden of Eloquence" (1593), historisch-kritische Einleitung, Text und Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1996).

this procedure of stoic repetition marks the beginning of a passage of four pages in which one can find 39 sentences that all begin with “he” and follow the same simple grammatical structure as the quoted passage. This rather peculiar writing style has at least three effects.

Firstly, the sheer emptiness of the landscape and the absence of food are represented in a language that lacks any grammatical diversity. Thereby a strong connection between medium and content is established that is also perceptible for the reader, since the weakness of the father is echoed in the dull, unchanging rhythm of the sentences.

Secondly, the interrelation between language and content is further emphasized through the style of the description, which confines itself to the visible surfaces and objects of the immediate surroundings. Thus, a strong similarity between narrator and literary character is generated. The narrative style seems to imitate the purely pragmatic perceptions of a slowly starving man who is scanning his surroundings for anything resembling food. The narrator seems to be as exhausted and close to breakdown as the figure he is describing.

Thirdly, although the father is performing a series of different actions, its verbal and grammatical representation reaches such a level of monotony that the language itself becomes more remarkable than the acts it describes. The repetition of the single sentence-form creates the impression of a litany, and thereby reflects the intention of the father to “Make a list. Recite a litany.” The content of these lists, however, are words.

Taken together, one sees how closely the form of the novel is tied to its content, and thereby realizes an aesthetics of scarcity: the language and syntactic structure appears as thin and famished as the literary characters it depicts, and as empty and scarce as the landscape through which father and boy are traveling. Seen in this light, the empty barn, the ruined orchard, and the hollow grains the father is chewing can also be seen as a cluster of meta-poetic symbols for the fragmentary and barren language of the text itself.

Gardening Books

It is a difficult task to summarize the no less than epic plot of *Oryx and Crake*. The novel offers a complex picture of the near future in which both nature and society have developed in a way that comes very close to many of our worst fears and predictions. Any political institution that even vaguely resembles a democratic state governed by the rule of law seems to have completely vanished. The situation of the global environment is similarly disastrous: coastal aquifers have turned salty, the northern permafrost has melted,⁹ and the extinction of species is proceeding rapidly. This issue of the disappearance of species has a special significance throughout the novel. There is even a computer game named “Extinctathon” (a combination of the words “marathon” and “extinction”) in which the player’s task is to name and classify extinct species.

The global process of natural destruction is described by Glenn, one of the main characters in the novel, as resulting from a tragic and inherent defect of human nature:

Homo sapiens doesn’t seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources. In other words—and up to a point, of course—the less we eat, the more we fuck.¹⁰

As the story unfolds and Glenn becomes a brilliant scientist, this Malthusian theory of population leads him to a fairly radical solution. He develops a deadly and highly contagious virus that he distributes disguised as a very effective sex drug. In a twist reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man*, only Glenn’s formerly best friend Jimmy survives the ensuing carnage.

Although the environmental conditions in *Oryx and Crake* appear less severe than in McCarthy’s novel, Jimmy is still confronted with life after the ostensible extinction of humanity. But even though he is facing the constant threat of starvation, he not only tries to economize with his remaining food, but also urges himself to preserve his stock of words and memories:

9 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 27.

10 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 139.

“Hang on to the words,” he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. *Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious.* When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been.¹¹

What happens here is an interesting communication between nature and culture. The usual function of red lists, as it is brought up, for instance, by the computer game “Extinctathon,” is to register the disappearance of natural species. Instead, they now refer to a class of “rare” words. Language, it appears, has become scarce in exactly the same way as material resources have. Similar to the father’s reflections in *The Road*, Atwood’s character is pondering the imminent disappearance of his own language and memory. This act of replacement occurs several times throughout the novel. After the outbreak of Glenn’s global plague, for instance, the conceptual register of the red list cannot be reserved anymore to animals and plants:

Meanwhile, the end of a species was taken place before his very eyes. Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. How many legs does it have? *Homo sapiens sapiens*, joining the polar bear, the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long list. . . .

Sometimes he’d turn off the sound, whisper words to himself. *Succulent. Morphology. Purblind. Quarto. Frass.* It had a calming effect.¹²

Again, the act of listing refers both to the cultural and to the natural world. On the one hand, the conceptual architecture of zoology that once seemed to be reserved for the ever growing and “long, long list” of extinct species, now comes to bear on humans. Humanity is not considered a distinctive entity, but as one species among others that has now reached its end. On the other hand, the list of loss is this time not confined to living organic beings but includes cultural phenomena such as language. So even though Atwood’s novel establishes a very different style and tone, there is also an important similarity to McCarthy’s work: the main characters of both texts are confronted with a kind of environmental destruction and scarcity that appears to be deeply intertwined with the painful loss of cultural and linguistic richness. Consequently, language and the world of material things it might be supposed to denominate cannot be drawn

11 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 78.

12 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 401.

into clearly separated realms. Once we understand speech acts not merely as more or less appropriate descriptions of reality, but as a creative force that shapes the world we inhabit, the loss of language inevitably results in a loss of reality and vice versa.

Nevertheless, the actual literary representation of this connection differs: in McCarthy's case, the destroyed world cannot be separated from its representation in a barren and disturbingly fragmented language. Atwood's use of language is quite different. The richness of a vanishing world is reflected and further underlined by the huge diversity of words that in Jimmy's mind are combined into chaotic and abundant lists. Now, how can we account for this repeated use of lists in the context of the novel? I would argue that the insistence on words and a former verbal abundance is not only the nostalgic or idiosyncratic behavior of a starving man at the brink of madness. Instead, it is also to be seen as a reflection on the possibilities of writing and literature.

A couple of years after completing the first part of the trilogy, Atwood gave an account of the time when she began writing *Oryx and Crake* in 2001. Confronted with the devastating events of 9/11 while writing about the annihilation of humanity, she found herself having doubts about her work:

It's deeply unsettling when you're writing about a fictional catastrophe and then a real one happens. I thought maybe I should turn to gardening books—something more cheerful. But then I started writing again, because what use would gardening books be in a world without gardens, and without books?¹³

In my discussion of *The Road*, the ruined garden was considered a meta-poetic symbol that reflected the fragmentary and precarious condition of the novel's language. In Atwood's case, the concept of the garden is used to describe the meaning and the purpose of writing in a more hopeful vein. Evidently, Atwood attributes to the very act of writing the capacity to prevent destruction or to reconstruct what already has been lost. Again, there is no clear distinction between the world of culture, evoked by "books," and that of the environment, indicated by "garden." Her own position as a writer, therefore, can be seen as very closely connected to the situation of Jimmy in

13 Margaret Atwood, "Writing *Oryx and Crake*," *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, and Personal Prose 1983–2005* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005), 285.

the book. Although he might have been nothing but a wage-slave in the advertising industry, he still seems to hold his education in English literature very dear: “‘When any civilization is dust and ashes,’ he said, ‘art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures.’”¹⁴ Both figures therefore, Atwood and her character Jimmy, hang on to words and thereby cling to the performative and restorative capacity of human language.

To conclude, both McCarthy and Atwood understand language as a fragile material resource that can become scarce or disappear altogether. Saying this, one seemingly runs the risk of reductionism. But as we have seen in Atwood’s case, it also envisions the possibility of creating or reconstructing the world we inhabit, as both natural and social beings, by the act of writing and telling stories.

Suggested Reading:

Belknap, Robert E. *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

Connolly, William E. *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neo-Liberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.

Homer-Dixon, Thomas F. *Environment, Scarcity and Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Nettle, Daniel, and Suzanne Romaine. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Van Dooren, Thom. *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

¹⁴ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 197.

J. Jesse Ramírez

From Anti-Abundance to Anti-Anti-Abundance: Scarcity, Abundance, and Utopia in Two Science Fiction Writers

It is difficult to remember in these times of looming eco-apocalypse that the relatively recent past called itself the “age of abundance.” For roughly two and a half decades after the end of World War II, the United States appeared to have finally solved the riddle of scarcity. In the eyes of its proponents, the post-scarcity United States was a land of full production and employment, high wages, and cheap consumer goods. But not everyone was content with this “Golden Age of Capitalism,” as one prominent historian has described the period.¹ Among the discontent were two science fiction writers, Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin, who destroyed the United States in their fiction in order to rehabilitate scarcity. Dick’s and Le Guin’s visions of scarcity are both critiques of abundance and utopian gestures. They are utopian not because they are hopelessly idealistic, as a common definition of *utopia* would have it, but because they insist that the age of abundance is a false utopia, and that another, better world is still possible.

My main argument in this essay, however, is that scarcity has lost its critical power and now represents the greatest barrier to imagining better futures. The utopian imagination underwent a major transformation in the 1970s, the decade in which the US energy crisis, the country’s defeat in Vietnam, the explosion of the “population bomb,” and the alarming realization of “limits to growth” proved that the age of abundance was short-lived. If, during the previous era, scarcity provided alternative visions of the good life, in the subsequent historical situation of environmental crisis it disciplines the imagination into accepting austerity. To avoid or simply deal with eco-apocalypse, so the dominant narrative goes, we must scale back massively, learn to accept insecurity, and in effect forsake the utopian dream of an existence that is free from toil and want. Perhaps this dream is simply no longer valid; perhaps it was always just an idealistic fantasy. But maybe our task today is to begin to reinvent utopia. To this end I propose the concept of “anti-anti-abundance,” a cultural politics that seeks to build on critiques of abundance without sacrificing its utopian potential.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus Books, 1994).

Paying for the Printer in the Age of Affluence

The age of affluence: customers at a crowded New Hampshire grocery store in 1958. Photo © Nick DeWolf. Used with permission.



Between roughly 1945 and 1973 lies an era of economic optimism in US thought and culture that cannot but appear strange from our perspective today. Allow me to offer two brief examples, one from a major economist, the other from a popular magazine. John Kenneth Galbraith, perhaps the most widely read US economist of his generation, wrote in the opening paragraphs of *The Affluent Society* that “nearly all [nations] throughout all history have been very poor. . . . Poverty was the all-pervasive fact of that world. *Obviously* it is not of ours.”²

The 16 October 1964 issue of *Life* magazine struck a similar note. The title of the issue’s central article boldly declares: “Prosperity—1964: It’s Unprecedented.” The caption to a photograph of the Super Giant grocery store in Rockville, Maryland, gushes about “the customers [who] move through the \$5 million grocery store, picking from the thousands of items on the high-piled shelves until their carts become cornucopias filled with an abundance that no other country in the world has ever known.”³ These two examples encapsulate a moment in which elite opinion and popular media produced a powerful image of post-scarcity America as an achieved utopia.

The science fiction of Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin dissents from US abundance. In the 1956 story “Pay for the Printer,” one of his many visions of the aftermath of a nuclear World War III, Dick imagines an alien species called the Biltong, whose special ability is to create, or “print,” replicas of human artifacts. (Today, our Biltong are called 3D printers.) Living in a devastated world of ash, the survivors of World War III are completely dependent on the Biltong, and remain so enthralled by the old world that they use the aliens to recreate it in microcosm: “In the store windows, the television sets and mixers and toasters and autos and pianos and clothing and whiskey and frozen peaches were perfect prints of the originals.”⁴ As Dick’s list of consumer goods suggests, the Biltong

2 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 14. My emphasis.

3 “Prosperity—1964.” *Life*, 16 October 1964, 36.

4 Philip K. Dick, “Pay for the Printer,” in *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, vol. 3 (New York: Citadel, 1990), 243.

are figures for the same abundance that excited the authors of “Prosperity—1964.” They represent a production process that operates independently of human effort, automatically generating a consumer cornucopia. Dick’s critical stance toward consumerism emerges when all the Biltong replicas begin to fall apart, leaving most of the survivors in a condition of radical scarcity, without the raw materials and skills necessary to make their own objects. Not only is the US utopia a false world of brittle, mass-produced commodities, Dick suggests, it is also a world of alienated labor, in which effortless consumption has caused Americans to forfeit their creativity.

But suddenly two magical objects appear: “a wooden drinking cup, crude and ill-shaped,” and a knife “as crude as the cup—hammered, bent, tied together with wire.”⁵ The cup and the knife are not replicas; they have been made the old-fashioned way, by human hands. In this post-nuclear world in which all the Super Giant grocery stores have disappeared, the handicraft production of a “crude” cup and knife is astonishing. “Pay for the Printer” contends that the United States’ so-called plenty is cheap: it is consumed mindlessly, and produced without the skill and pride that give value to the products of labor. Dick’s cup and knife symbolize the rebirth of value, which Dick measures by neither price nor status, but by genuine usefulness and the purposiveness of manual work. The cup and knife are utopian objects—not because they exist in a perfect world (far from it), but because through them Dick refuses to accept that the age of abundance is the best of all possible worlds.

To be sure, Dick could not imagine a positive alternative to the false US utopia. Very few social dreamers could do that after George Orwell’s *1984*, a monument to the pervasive Cold War idea that all utopian projects inevitably result in totalitarianism. As we will see, the utopian literary imagination returns from exile only at the end of the age of abundance, fueled by the energies of the counterculture, New Left, and new social movements like environmentalism. “Pay for the Printer” belongs instead to the negative history of utopia. Faced with the reality of the affluent society, Dick’s most effective tool was negation, apocalypse. By destroying the United States and reintroducing scarcity, Dick created an imaginative space in which a few humble objects can gesture toward a future in which human beings once again control their own destiny.

5 Ibid., 249.

The Dispossessed in the Age of Limits

Marking the US's defeat in Vietnam, the oil crisis, the publication of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, and the onset of economic recession, the years 1972–73 promptly closed the age of abundance. Perhaps the most salient symbol of the new scarcity was identified by Donald Worster in his lunchtime colloquium talk at the Rachel Carson Center in January 2014. It is the image that appears on the cover of an early edition of *Limits to Growth*: a progressively shrinking Earth. Our planet, once thought to be so generous to the American “people of plenty,” is no longer big enough to sustain their massive appetites.

Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* was published at this juncture. Two neighboring planets take center stage in Le Guin's novel: Urras, an abundant world that is analogous to the early postwar United States, and Anarres, a harsh world that is home to an anarchist utopia. Anarres is a “barren stone,” blasted by howling wind and dust, able to support life only because of the inhabitants' tremendous labor, which still cannot forestall occasional droughts and famines. Le Guin's novel is so compelling because of her complex treatment of the relationship between scarcity and utopia. On the one hand, scarcity on Anarres is necessity, an absolute material limit on individual and collective freedom. And yet because life is possible on the planet only on the strength of rigorous cooperation, scarcity enables Le Guin to develop a remarkable depiction of solidarity. Shevek, an inhabitant of Anarres and the novel's protagonist, explains soberly that “a society can only relieve social suffering, unnecessary suffering. The rest remains.”⁶ Such a statement should put to rest the straw-man definition of utopia as a hopelessly naïve vision of perfection, for Shevek makes it clear that utopia can never transcend humanity's existential and bodily vulnerability. Instead of treating our finitude as the ultimate rebuttal to utopia, Shevek intriguingly claims that it is the foundation. He explains this position in an eloquent passage that is worth quoting at length. Anarres, Shevek explains to his hosts on Urras, is

all dust and dry hills. All meager, all dry. And the people aren't beautiful. . . . The towns are very small and dull, they are dreary. No palaces. Life is dull, and hard work. You can't always have what you want, or even what you need, because there isn't enough. You Urrasti have enough. . . . You are rich, you own. We are poor, we lack. You have, we do not have. Everything is beautiful, here. Only not the faces. On Anarres nothing

6 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2011), 60.

is beautiful, nothing but the faces. The other faces, the men and women. We have nothing but that, nothing but each other. Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free.⁷

Measured according to the riches of Urras, Anarres cannot but pale in comparison. Yet Shevek claims that in a world in which property and commodities have disappeared, the free individual and the solidarity of community shine forth. In a state of radical scarcity, Shevek says, human beings have nothing—*except each other*. Scarcity is the material condition under which the Anarresti suffer together, struggle together, and triumph together; it reminds them constantly of their world's fragility and motivates their collective labors to overcome it.

On the other hand, Shevek also understands that necessity threatens the very core of anarchism. He observes: “If we let one another down, if we don't give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only *resource*.”⁸ The economic term resource implies that solidarity is not an achieved virtue, but a sheer tool or means. In other words, if solidarity is imposed by the environment, it risks becoming a perfunctory obligation, not the achievement of the free association of individuals (the basic tenet of anarchism). Moreover, there is a fine line between motivating and deflationary scarcity. If scarcity becomes too extreme, as it nearly does during a severe drought on Anarres, it does not inspire solidarity, but instead reduces people to animalistic, selfish, and violent drives for self-preservation (the world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which I will come back to).

Anti-Anti-Abundance

Despite the powerful achievements of Dick and Le Guin, their critical uses of scarcity have reached their apotheosis in today's ideologies of austerity. We can already see the problem in Dick. While the apocalyptic return to scarcity might help keep the utopian imagination alive, it also destroys the utopian possibilities embedded in the age of abundance itself. The foremost philosopher of what might be called “critical abundance”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

was the radical German-American Herbert Marcuse. Although he was a fierce critic of postwar America, Marcuse did not reject the thesis of abundance per se. He agreed with liberal intellectuals like John Kenneth Galbraith that the US economy had created the possibility of a post-scarcity society that could finally liberate humanity from toil and want. Freedom is possible, Marcuse claimed, not under conditions of scarcity, which have historically condemned most people to drudgery and sacrifice, and have naturalized inequality in the notion that life is essentially unfair. Rather, freedom requires conditions of technological complexity. Only the most advanced economy can enable people to fulfill their basic material needs with a minimum of toil, freeing them to pursue higher forms of human flourishing. Marcuse differed from liberal intellectuals, however, in his belief that a capitalist society, a society dedicated to the exploitation of labor and the accumulation of capital, can never actualize this possibility without revolution. A major aspect of such a revolution would be the democratization of the economy and the redefinition of needs, of what *counts* as abundance and scarcity.

While Le Guin has much in common with Marcuse, she, too, overvalues scarcity. Le Guin's use of scarcity was powerful in her historical moment because it came, as I have already mentioned, just as the age of abundance ended. The utopian scarcity of Anarres derives much of its force from its being a critique, a rejection, of that prior moment in history. But today we are even deeper into the post-abundance age of ecological limits, and science fiction's critique of abundance is no longer as useful because it has become reality. The affluent society is really gone; we no longer need science fiction to imagine worlds in which it has disappeared. What we are likely to face as climate change worsens can already be seen in the responses of the advanced capitalist world to the Great Recession of 2008, in particular the domestic and international austerity programs. As in the financial crisis, the profits of destroying the environment are privatized, but the costs are socialized. In this new climate, scarcity becomes ideologically suspect. Allow me to spotlight two main issues.

First, Dick's and Le Guin's method of rolling society back to conditions of scarcity has become an exercise in consumer reconciliation. Compare Dick's "Pay for the Printer" to McCarthy's *The Road*. They share a post-nuclear setting, but while Dick uses fiction to valorize labor, McCarthy valorizes consumption. In place of Dick's crude handmade cup, McCarthy singles out a Coke can, which perceptive viewers of the film adaptation have used in spoof advertisements on YouTube. The reader or viewer can experience

the imaginary destruction of the United States, close the book or stop the movie, drink a Coke, and appreciate it anew. The effect of the scene is thus not critique, but gratitude for luxuries. This is, in fact, why McCarthy wrote the book: in a rare TV interview, he told the talk show host Oprah Winfrey that the message people should get from *The Road* is that life is good, and we should be grateful. So let us drink our Cokes and enjoy our unsustainable system while it lasts!

Second, to make a virtue of scarcity today is to endorse the austere logic of cutbacks, canceled social services, unemployment—or, if you are lucky, temporary work—and general belt-tightening. These policies are imposed on working people while benefiting the wealthy, and treated euphemistically as “cleaning house,” becoming “lean” and “efficient.” That Le Guin’s thinking was already perilously close to austerity can be seen during moments in *The Dispossessed* when scarcity functions as purification: after a drought, Shevek says that now “priorities were becoming clear again. Weaknesses, soft spots, sick spots would be scoured out, sluggish organs restored to full function, the fat would be trimmed off the body politic.”⁹ As climate change becomes more unmanageable, we will hear plenty more of this rhetoric. Expect less. Enjoy what you have. Be thankful the situation is not even worse. Be thankful that we have climate change to trim the fat and set our priorities straight.

While I certainly do not deny that climate change demands difficult modifications to our social structures, values, and daily lives, in closing I want to gesture, with admitted vagueness, to an alternative cultural politics that I call “anti-anti-abundance.” Back in the age of abundance, Jean Paul Sartre and the Students for a Democratic Society defined their positions toward communism as anti-anti-communist. They neither endorsed communism nor capitulated to anti-communist hysteria, but settled instead for a double negative. I think this should be our position toward abundance today. The double negative refuses the celebratory ideologies of postwar consumerism, which live on, zombielike, in talk of unlimited growth, *and* the austere logic of scarcity. Let us instead develop a concept of critical abundance, a position that enables us to remember the utopian kernel that Marcuse saw within the age of abundance—the possibility of a life free from toil and want—and to recognize the necessity of a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system and its definition of the good life. The age of ecological limits does not necessitate obedience to limits, at least not yet, while there is

⁹ Ibid., 262.

still time to act. It is also an opportunity to show that what are abstractly called “limits” are really the historically specific effects of a world made in the image of capitalism. It is an invitation to take a utopian leap beyond that world.

Suggested Reading

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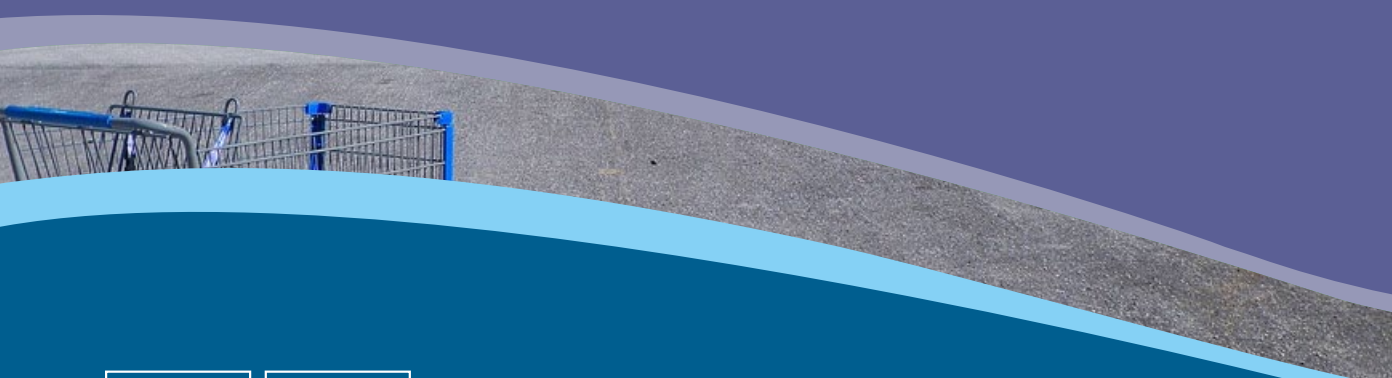
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The contributions contained in this volume address ways in which scarcity (and abundance) have been represented aesthetically and exploited politically in very different contexts, from literary texts to computer games, and from Enlightenment visions of plenty to colonial justifications for famine. The range of examples shown here give some idea of the productivity of “scarcity” as a concept, and the many forms it can take in influencing and absorbing human ideas about our ways of inhabiting the world.



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