Scarcity, 'polite society' and activism

Nicholas Hildyard

The Corner House, 4 Retsel House, Bridge Street, Sturminster Newton, Dorset DT10 1AW, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Scarcity has a stranglehold grip on much of the discourse of polite society, to the point where it is simply taken for granted that just about every social "problem" is, at root, a problem that arises from scarcity. Numerous conflicts result. And the dominant perspective is constantly being challenged by unpolite society. But the stranglehold remains. Does the problem lie in a failure of activist to shout loudly enough? Or to expose the ways in which scarcity is generated by unequal power relations? Or does the continuing appeal of scarcity reflect a more fundamental problem, rooted as much in the ways that progressive activists are themselves organising as in the well-documented power of today's elites?

1. Introduction

'The power of capital lies not so much in its repressive apparatus (immense though it is), but rather in its ability to terrorise us with our lack of capacity to organise the reproduction of our lives outside of its structures.'

Caffentzis, 2012

'The future of humanity depends now on our being able to bring to life within the old, rotten and increasingly violent capitalism, flashes, intimations, anticipations, fragments of the world of dignity that we want to create'

Holloway, 2009

Why is it that scarcity remains so entrenched in so many quarters as a "common sense" explanation for resource conflicts, environmental degradation, food and water shortages, poverty, inequality and just about any other social problem that one might care to name? Why does the "explanation" persist even though it is daily challenged in numerous ways by those at the sharp end of its consequences – workers; migrants; the racially oppressed; the landless, homeless and unemployed; those who hunger, and those who thirst; those displaced by war or infrastructure projects; those who face land grabs; those whose lives are being torn apart by austerity?

Is it because not enough has been done by academics, social movements and others to debunk scarcity as *the* explanation that trumps all other explanations? Is it because the power of those who challenge scarcity can never be matched by the power of those who benefit from it? Does the problem lie is a failure of activists to shout loudly enough? Or does the continuing appeal of scarcity reflect a more fundamental problem, rooted as much in the ways that progressive activists are themselves organising as in the well-documented power of today's elites?

This article begins by exploring how the everyday discourse on scarcity is best approached as a political strategy to divert attention from (and obscure) other explanations that root the causes of poverty and deprivation in imbalances of political and economic power, and that better explain why some go without and others do not. It then places the problems of evolving an effective political response to scarcity-as-political strategy within the broader erosion of many of the networks of solidarity that have served as vehicles for building mutuality and challenging accumulation. It concludes that activists seeking new strategies and loci for organising are most likely to find them outside of "polite society".

2. Scarcity as elite strategy

"Things could be otherwise. That is what the contingency of scarcity is all about."

Luks, 2011

Fears of scarcity (demand outstripping supply) and promises of abundance (supply outstripping demand) form the twin pillars of neo-classical economics: *scarcity* because it is taken as read that needs, wants and desires are unlimited but the means to meet them are limited (Mehta, 2011; Luks, 2011); *abundance* because whatever scarcities arise it is assumed that markets, technological innovation and substitution processes will resolve them (Taylor, 1993).

When scarcity is "naturalised" – by making it something that is part of the human condition – what needs to be explained (scarcity) becomes the explanation (scarcity). Awkward questions are conveniently pushed aside.

Growing demand, for example, is simply assumed to be, and understood as, a force that is inexorable, a function both of rising numbers of people and of their innately expanding desires, wants and needs.

The many and varied ways in which demand for specific products – whether through advertising or through state-led imposition or through corporate monopolies – has been deliberately manufactured is simply swept under the carpet. The adoption of oil- and gas-based fertilizers, for example, did not arise spontaneously out of an innate "need" for industrially manufactured forms of soil fertilisation. Subsidies, land amalgamation schemes, taxation, and, in many cases, violence were all enlisted to force farmers North and South into abandoning organic forms of farming, which rely on rotations and other techniques to maintain fertility, and into adopting chemical alternatives (Clunies-Ross and Hildyard, 1994). Likewise, in the transport sector, demand for cars has been carefully nurtured through suburbanisation, highway construction programmes, advertising (with cars being made an object of desire) and policies that have favoured the car over mass transport systems. Infamously, tram systems in a number of US cities were deliberately run down or replaced after they were bought by a consortium of manufacturers including Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, Phillips Petroleum Co., Mack Truck and General Motors (Black, 2006; Snell, undated). The consequent manufactured scarcity of public transport means that cars are a necessity, not a luxury, for many US urban dwellers.

The framing of demand in terms of faceless unmet needs also obscures *who* is responsible for the demand and *who* is not. Impending future "energy scarcity", for example, is frequently framed not as a dynamic created by the political and economic infrastructure that underpins the endless creation of consumer "desires" and their transformation into "needs", but as a problem born out of the inherent future aspirations of countries in the global South. But while such countries might be importing and consuming more energy than ever before, energy consumption per head of population in the US and Canada is still roughly twice as high as in Europe or Japan, more than ten times as high as in China, nearly 20 times as high as in India, and about 50 times as high as in the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa (Smil, 2009).

Even these figures do not reveal who or what uses energy within a country and for what purposes. In China, for instance, heavy industries consumes more than 70 per cent of the country's total energy use in 2011 (Bo Kong, 2011), while in South Africa, more than 70 per cent of the country's energy was consumed by industrial, mining, agricultural and commercial interests – and just 16 per cent by the country's residents (Peek, 2011). Moreover, much of the growth in demand for energy in China has not been to supply goods for Chinese customers but to manufacture consumer products for export to Europe and North America, the direct result of energy-intensive US and European manufacturing being "off-shored" to China (and to India and other Asian countries) (Bo Kong, 2011). In effect, higher imports of oil into China are driven as much by US and European consumption as by growing affluence in the country itself (Peters et al., 2011). It is thus questionable whether all the carbon dioxide molecules emanating from smokestacks in China are really "Chinese", or should in part be attributed to the Western countries consuming the goods that China produces.

Mainstream interpretations of "scarcity" also tend to render invisible the way poorer sections of societies are denied access to the resources upon which they rely for survival, not because the means to meet their needs are limited but because meeting those needs is unprofitable, offers few opportunities for corrupt enrichment or empire-building, or is bureaucratically cumbersome to administer. Nepal is a case in point. With 6000 or so rivers cascading down the Himalayas, the hydroelectric potential of the country is one the richest in the world (Gyawali and Dixit, 2011) But hydroelectric development has, until recently, consisted primarily of building large dams, leading to short periods of excess capacity followed by several years of brownouts as shortages ensued from the increased demand for electrical goods stimulated by electricity producers – until the next mega project was constructed. The "choice" of large dams over other hydroelectric technologies, however, results not from a rational assessment of what would best ensure access to energy for all, but from the entrenched power within government circles of what Dipak Gyawali, a former Minister for Water Resources in the country, and Ajaya Dixit of the Nepal Water Conservation Foundation term "hydrocracies" – government departments and international financial institutions whose economic, bureaucratic and political interests are intimately bound up with the large dam industry or whose technocratic approach to development leans towards "larger, expertise-dependent technologies, such as one large power project implemented by their in-house expertise" (Gyawali and Dixit, 2011).

The problem is compounded by the bureaucratic "needs" of international development agencies, such as the World Bank, which find it more "cost-effective to make one large sovereign loan to a single large dam than to many smaller projects" (Gyawali, and Dixit, 2011). In contrast, when popular opposition to one of the largest dams proposed for Nepal, Arun III, coupled with the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, led to the energy sector being opened up to small producers, numerous villages introduced their own mini-hydro schemes, some run collectively, some privately. The outcome was to produce almost one-third more electricity at close to half the cost and half the time of the proposed Arun III project. Other reforms, such as the introduction of a "right to energy", led to a major redistribution in access to the grid: local electricity user groups, often run collectively, have flourished, with the electricity company required by law to connect them once they have been formally established. In effect, Nepal's energy scarcity, rather than reflecting a lack of means to meet needs, has been socially constructed from a politics of exclusion – exclusion not only from access to the energy that is available, but also from decision-making power over how it should be produced.

To delve into the many and varied ways in which socially-generated scarcity (insufficient necessities for some people and not others) arises and is reproduced is not to deny that, in some circumstances, scarcity is absolute (insufficient necessities, no matter how equitably they are distributed) (Ross, 1996). Once extinct, the Dodo could never return: and the finite in "finite planet" means finite. But an activism that seeks appropriate responses to such finiteness surely demands that the distinctions between one type of scarcity and the other are teased out, and that the ways in which they relate to each other are explored and better understood.

In reality, as historian and social critic Andrew Ross recognises, there is no easy separation of the two kinds of scarcity. The absolute scarcities that are inherent to runaway global warming – and which are already making themselves felt at a local and regional level as rivers and water sources in many arid areas dry up – are, at root, socially-generated scarcities: they are only properly understood if located in the dynamics of specific accumulation-driven activities of specific groups of humans. Our collective understanding of them – and ability to address their causes – are ill-served by explanations that blame humanity in general or some inate "human" drive for more and more goods.

Yet it is precisely this debate – about the active generation of scarcity – that the implicit framing of scarcity in terms of "unlimited wants" and "limited means" prevents. Indeed, by naturalising unlimited wants, it explicitly denies the reality of the continued existence of numerous forms of formal and informal social organisation – from co-operatives to communally-managed fishing grounds, forests, pastures and agricultural lands – where "the right to survive overshadows exclusive individual rights to possess, exchange, and accumulate" (Lohmann and Hildyard, 2013).

Increasingly referred to by many activists as "commons" – a term that has its own (often unacknowledged) controversies (D'Souza, undated; Goldtooth, 2014; Lohmann and Hildyard, 2013) – such forms of social organisation tend to generate a very different experience of scarcity from those that are governed by the principles of neo-classical economics. This is not because forms of scarcity do not exist: periodic

dearth is a recurring phenomenon, for instance, when a crop fails or when a generator breaks down. But the needs that commons regimes satisfy are not infinitely expanding and the means by which they are satisfied are framed by a politics (which has to be constantly sustained through social practice) in which no one individual or group has the ability to survive at another's expense. The survival of all is a key principle around which social relations are organised. Needs reflect less the requirements of an "economy" for "effective demand" than the evolving give-and-take of the specific commons regime itself, whose physical characteristics remain in everyone's view. Without the race between growth and the scarcity that accumulation creates, there can thus be a sense of "enoughness" – and with it an underlying sense that the default condition of life is not scarcity but contingent abundance. Such abundance is generally disrupted by the intrusion of those – particularly profiteers – who do not rely for their livelihood on the continuing existence of the commons and the active collaboration that sustains it.

By obscuring such ways of living and deflecting attention from the many and varied ways in which imbalances of political and economic power *create* scarcity – whether through the enclosure of commons or unequal gender relations, ethnic and racial discrimination, sexism, intra-household inequalities and the denial of human rights – mainstream discourses on scarcity serve a convenient political purpose: that of insulating elite interests from explanations of poverty and want that would finger the responsibility of current patterns of political and economic power. In that respect, 'scarcity' as used in modern economic and political thought is surely best approached as *political strategy* (an endlessly malleable means of legitimizing a particular set of social and political relations, institutions and policies and of blocking inquiry) rather than as theory (a testable hypothesis that stands or falls on its ability not only to explain but also to predict).

3. Organising against "scarcity"

A huge amount of work has been undertaken by activists – not least by the authors of this volume and its predecessor, *The Limits to Scarcity* (Mehta, 2011) – to understand and expose how elites construct and maintain the scarcity discourse. This is undoubtedly an essential element of any political resistance to scarcity-as-elite-strategy. But exposing the successful activism of elites surely also requires an understanding of the unsuccessful activism of those who would resist elite power: for the current and future trajectory of society is ultimately an outcome of such resistance. What forms of resistance are failing? What ways of social and political organising are proving more promising in building or strengthening ways of living that respect the collective right of all (not just the few) to decent livelihoods? What oppositional strategies assist elite power? And what strategies unsettle it?

These are questions that I believe bear urgent inquiry. My own encounters with scarcity-as-elite-strategy have come through solidarity work around migration (and the claims that migrants are causing scarcities of housing, services and the like), energy security (where claims of scarcity are used to justify new infrastructure, from dams to oil pipelines) and water management (with "too many people" being used as a throwaway explanation for water shortages that are more properly explained by restrictions on access to water, notably through privatisation and water pricing). And it clear to me that no amount of empirical evidence or counter theory is likely *in and of itself* to undermine the enduring hegemony of the "scarcity" as means of closing down debate and enforcing policies that encourage accumulation at the expense of the commons. Necessary and vital as it is to expose constantly the imbalances of economic and political power that lie behind given scarcities, such exposés are not enough. To confront scarcity as a political strategy also requires confronting the relative organising power of different social movements, *including* capital, that determines the outcomes of the struggles among them and, hence, their direction of travel. Indeed, those struggles – including struggles over "scarcity" – are

as much struggles over organising itself, over strategy and tactics, as they are about specific grievances.

One point of entry that I and other colleagues have been exploring, hesitantly and in the certain knowledge that it is all much more complex that we might like to think, is to look critically at how the organising power of progressive social movements has been undermined by the hollowing out of many of the cross-cutting, community-embedded networks of solidarity – from trade unions, to faith groups and political parties – that have served as vehicles for building mutuality and challenging accumulation.

In many Northern countries, for example, trade unions are a vastly diminished political, social and economic force. To be clear, this is not to say that worker activism is diminished: the offshoring of European and US jobs to the global South may have weakened unions in Europe and the US, but it has simultaneously created new working-class movements in Asia, Latin America, China and elsewhere as labour militancy has erupted in response to oppressive factory conditions and the wider intrusions of capital (Silver, 2003). And in Europe and the US, unions and union-led struggles continue.

But notwithstanding such activism, the role that unions now play in society, particularly in the global North, has undoubtedly been weakened by neoliberal anti-union legislation; by the increased ability of capital to move around the world in search of cheaper labour; by changing patterns of production that make union organising more difficult; by the casualisation of labour; and by 'sectionalism' as unions have themselves shed some of their wider role in society to focus on bargaining over wages and conditions. Indeed, it is an open question whether unions as they now exist are 'capable of adequately responding to the scale of the problems working classes face – whether the arena of struggle is the workplace, the bargaining table, the community, electoral politics or ideological debate' (Gindin, 2013).

But, as social science academic and activist McDermott (2007) of the State University of New York argues, the hollowing out of labour's power may lie in a deeper historical shift that has seen "the absorption, subordination and modification of virtually all of the more important general social relations into capitalist relations of production".

McDermott (2007) suggests that part of what made labour powerful was its roots in social institutions, built by the working class themselves, that lay outside of what he terms "polite society" – a concept that McDermott (wisely) does not seek to pin down through a discrete definition but uses instead as a suggestive phrase to encompass all those institutional forms and practices that favour the status quo and, in particular, capital accumulation. In the 18th and early 19th century, when working class culture was being constructed through myriad relations that brought an expanded awareness of oppression, working-class life went on "more or less entirely outside society": unions, dissenting church groups, workers clubs, reading groups, worker-run crèches, mutual societies, and other cornerstones of working class communities arose partly because wider society ignored working class needs for schooling, health and child care. Rich and poor often occupied different, mutually hostile territories, with few shared political institutions or shared cultural activities or shared social infrastructure. To survive, workers were reliant on their own institutions and support networks. These were not only a response to the deprivations suffered: they were also a conscious attempt to build an "alternate social and moral order". Critically, this evolving working class culture stood outside of "Society".

But between 1870 and 1970, working class agitation for education, health care, liveable housing and social security converged dialectically with capital's emerging needs for better educated, healthier workers. As more was invested in education and other social goods, so denser relationships developed between the classes, albeit with workers remaining subordinated. The working class have undoubtedly gained much from this in terms of improved standards of living but, argues McDermott, the development "has not come about without important loss". Many of the institutions of older working-class life have been

undermined, weakened or eradicated; and those that survive are often now controlled by capitalist institutions. This, says McDermott, may help to explain the weakening of labour's influence on society, since it was to a large degree the "once semi-autonomous sources of working-class culture and cohesion" that provided labour with "the base and fulcrum of its power".

4. Organising outside of 'polite' society

It may be anachronistic, however, to respond by simply rebuilding the past institutions of working class culture. Originally built "outside of 'polite' society", they may not be fit as responses to the "different, denser social terrain of the present". Instead, now that the "infrastructure" of labour power production built up between 1870 and 1970 is itself being dismantled and transformed under post-1970 neoliberalism, a more fruitful strategy may be to look to new, emerging forms and kinds of class conflict for clues to a transformative politics. McDermott is confident that workers will do precisely this. And, indeed, in many instances they are, whether in new (or revitalised) forms of community-based solidarity with the struggles of unorganised labour (McAlevey, 2015; Silver, 2003), or in the many and varied forms of resistance pioneered by feminists to capitalist work (Federici, 2012, 2013).

Other movements are also active in developing new (or reworked) forms of organising in the lattices created by the exclusion of working people from 'polite society', where 'the denser social terrain of the present' (McDermott, 2007) that has been woven over the past century is unravelling and fracturing. For it is in these lattices that 'impolite society' (a phrase that is not used by McDermott but which might be appropriate as a portmanteau for new institutional forms and practices that seek to challenge the status quo through what Gorz (1968) called "non-reformist reforms") is re-emerging to forge new cultures of provisioning, nurturing and mutual support to weather the destruction that neoliberalism is inflicting. Although never entirely 'outside' of capital as a social order – it is doubtful that such a space exists – many of the experiments through which 'impolite' society is seeking to organise its own social reproduction are nonetheless outside some of the structures of capital (Caffentzis, 2012); and, in an age where the interests of the state and capital are more closely aligned than at many times in the recent past, of the state itself. Such initiatives include community-supported agriculture, where farmers and consumers form partnerships in which the responsibilities, risks and rewards of farming are shared (CSA, 2017); land and factory occupations; credit unions – member-owned financial cooperatives which are operated for the purpose of encouraging savings and providing financial services to their members rather than profits to shareholders (New Economics Foundation, 2014); the discussions within unions, such the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa, as to how their workers' own money – their pension funds – can be invested to build socially-owned renewable energy schemes (Abramsky, 2014); and the setting-up of citizen-run health clinics, food centres, kitchens and legal aid hubs in Greece (Henley, 2015; Greece Solidarity, 2017) and other countries in response the slashing of public budgets under creditor-imposed austerity measures. Another example is the region-wide experiment in 'stateless democracy' by the Kurds of war-torn Syria and southeast Turkey to put their demands for autonomy into practice by setting up a web of village and municipal councils through which they can govern themselves – legislating their own laws, building their own universities, creating their own parliaments – regardless of the parallel existence of the Turkish and Syrian States that have for so long brutally repressed their aspirations (TATORT Kurdistan, 2013; New World Academy, 2015; Knapp et al., 2016). Critically, the struggle to build what the Kurds call "democratic confederalism" is not a top-down, imposed programme but one that relies on the everyday struggle to ensure direct grassroots democracy, to build a needs-based economy that dismantles the oppressions of patriarchy and class and that resets the current exploitative

relationship between human and non-human nature. Many other historical and contemporary examples of such efforts to reinvigorate what Sears (2014) has called "infrastructures of dissent" and to build "solidarities from below" (Featherstone, 2012) are described in, among others, Featherstone (2012), Ramnath (2012, 2011) and Panayotakis (2011).

Each of these experiments in creating 'impolite' polities is unique. They cannot be packaged into a modular form that can be reproduced and assembled anywhere, for the friendships on which they are built are not mechanically-replicable Meccano pieces. They are built by commoning born of place, historical context and specific experiences. To treat them as 'models' is to miss the essence of what makes them work. But they can act as inspirations – as what writer and activist Holloway (2009) calls 'flashes, intimations, anticipations, fragments of the world of dignity that we want to create'. They can be supported through the cross-fertilisation of ideas, the exchange of experiences and respectful solidarity. These 'societies in movement' (Zibechi, 2010) are where the most promising vectors for transformative change will be found. Rather than looking for a 'to do' list that will be implemented by someone else, they are building their own power 'to do', a process that involves 'modify[ing] the relationship of forces, the redistribution of functions and powers, [while introducing] new centers of democratic decision-making' (Gorz, 1968).

That struggle is no longer primarily within polite society: rather it is increasingly once again outside of society. It in these spaces that new class formations are arising from the old, as diverse movements begin to recognise something of themselves in the struggles of others; and it partly in thus mutual recognition that new forms of activism will most effectively be created to challenge elite power and its narratives of scarcity. It is surely here, and only here, that the elements of another world can best be built, relationship by patiently nurtured relationship. And those relationships may well not start not with conversations about "scarcity" in the abstract, but with the often incoherent, always painful, gropings for an explanation of crisis, loss and injustice. But it surely from such efforts to expand awareness of oppression that the new forms of organising necessary to pose an effective challenge to scarcity-as-elite-strategy are most likely to emerge.

5. Conflict of interest

I have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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