

**“Scarcity” as Political Strategy:
Reflections on Three Hanging Children**

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Those who know Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure*, or who have seen the film of the book, may recall the gut-wrenching scene where Jude’s eldest child throttles his younger sister and brother and then hangs himself – all because of “scarcity”.

Set in the mid-19th century in England, the story revolves around Jude Fawley, a stonemason, who has been thwarted at every turn in his life: his efforts to “better himself” by seeking a place at Oxford University – a place he is intelligent enough to obtain – have run foul of Oxford’s “four centuries of gloom, bigotry, and decay”; his union with his cousin, Sue Bridehead, has made him an outcast, thrown out of job and home because they are not married; and his ambitions have been repeatedly dashed by poverty and class. With the family about to be evicted from their lodgings, and learning that another child is on the way, his eldest boy, left alone with the other children whilst Jude and Sue seeks new accommodation, takes matters into his own hands. The adults return, successful in their quest, to find all three of their children hanging from the coat pegs on the back of the bedroom door. A note lies on the floor: “Done because we are too menny”.

The reader, of course, knows better. Bigotry, the rigidities of the class system, and the poverty in which Jude has become trapped are the cause of his predicament, not too large a family. And because we know this, the child’s actions are all the more shocking. How could Young Jude – such a serious, reflective boy – have got it all so wrong? How had he come to believe that the problem lay with him and his siblings,¹

¹ “I think that whenever children be born that are not wanted they should be killed directly, before their souls come to 'em, and not allowed to grow big and walk about!”

not prejudice and inequality? For all the child's intelligence, his analysis is ultimately that of a child experienced in the ways of the world but ill-equipped to make sense of them. He has put two and two together – and made four: but the premises he was working from were wrong and his answer reflected the wrong question. We rage because, far from being the level-headed pragmatist he thinks he is, whose calculating will save Jude and Sue, his wrong-headedness sends the couple spiralling into further grief and disaster. We forgive him only because he is naïf – a child.

Presciently, Hardy portrayed Jude's son as the harbinger of a coming way of thinking.² And Hardy was right. Wherever environmental crises or Third World poverty are at issue, Young Jude stalks the commentaries of political pundits, World Bank officials and barflies alike – at least in the North. At times, his appearance is almost gratuitous;³ at others, cynical;⁴ but, for the most part, subliminal.⁵ The grammar and spelling has become more polished, but the message remains the same: “because we are too many”.

² “Such boys springing up amongst us – boys of a sort unknown in the last generation – the outcome of new views of life.”

³ A recent book on modern slavery, for example, cites increased human numbers as one of the main causes of the continuation of slavery into the modern era:

“Two factors are critical in the shift from the old slavery to the explosive spread of the new. The first is the dramatic increase in world population . . . Especially in those areas where slavery had persisted or was part of the historical culture, the population explosion radically increased the supply of potential slaves and drove down their price” (p.12)

Yet the detailed examples of modern slavery presented in the book, and the analysis of their dynamics, do not substantiate this claim and barely even raise the theme of population again. On the contrary, the causal factors that the author documents suggest that the roots of slavery lie elsewhere: in political and economic systems that allow one person to exert control over another (p.12); the sex trade (p34ff); the insecurity that has followed the implementation of modern development programmes; globalisation (p.12); criminal gangs; insecure land tenure or the lack of land tenure; the erosion of traditional “social order” (p.29 and p.65); corruption; and “chaotic” Third World governments (p.244). The population argument is so overwhelmingly refuted by the evidence presented in the book, that its mention would appear almost entirely gratuitous. *See*: Bales, K., *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

⁴ Harrison, P., *The Third Revolution: Environment, Population and a Sustainable World*, IB Tauris & Co., London, 1992.

⁵ Typically, reports on the economy and politics of Southern countries – invariably the “problem” of population is deemed a Southern problem – will begin with citing population figures, even though these may have no relevance to what follows. However, the figures once cited, frame the subsequent discussion, skewing both the identification of problems and of solutions. This subliminal framing is superbly analysed by Timothy Mitchell in his article, “America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry”, *Middle East Report 169*, 1991. Mitchell shows how Egypt is typically depicted by US AID and other development agencies as the narrow valley of the River Nile, hemmed in by desert and crowded with rapidly-multiplying millions, a picture that enables Egypt's poverty to be ascribed to demography and geography. Such an image obscures the political and social inequalities that underlie Egypt's inability to feed itself – and the part played by US AID in exacerbating such inequalities (see also footnote 13).

Some Questions . . .

I mention Young Jude because his tragic history encapsulates two of the most striking features of the notion of “scarcity” within modern economic theory: its failure to explain what it purports to explain; and its enduring appeal despite this evident failure.

Both require investigation. Why do we recognise young Jude’s disastrous misreading of his family’s circumstances – but grant the same misreading such legitimacy when it is applied by economists, demographers, planners, corporate financiers, and politicians to the wider world? What are the politics that permit the transformation of “because-we-are-too-many” from a tragic, childish error into a statement of the unpalatable but obvious, an analysis that reflects distance and maturity, even into a badge of political courage?⁶

Or, to probe deeper: Is young Jude’s “means-ends” thinking *really* the driver behind human behaviour? Is scarcity the inescapable fact of life as Lord Robbins, the early 20th century British economist, insists? Are we condemned by our “nature” to be forever making ruthless choices as we tirelessly seek to allocate the limited means available to us between ever-expanding and competing ends? Or is scarcity (as opposed to dearth) the *product* of state planning and market forces, at least in the most recent past?

Or, again: Does *Homo economicus*, that obsessive rent-maximising archetype whose brain is apparently wired to act only in response to the procrustean calculus of cost-benefit analysis, really exist outside of those bureaucracies whose rules are designed to enforce such behaviour? Are the sacrificial “trade offs” spawned by cost-benefit analysis – suicide and murder versus trusting one’s parents to find new cheaper lodgings; a forest lost here versus improved macro-economic growth there; children’s’ lives versus a new power station – an inevitable part of the human condition? Or simply the inevitable product of an economic system expanding under

⁶ See, for example, Coward, R, “The numbers are the beasts”, *The Ecologist*, October 2002. Coward sees a conspiracy of silence on the issue of population which she blames on “fear of offending non-western societies” – tellingly overlooking both the resurgence of population discourse in discussions of immigration and the War on Terror (for which, see: Hendrixson, A, “Angry Young Men, Veiled Young Women: Constructing a New Population Threat”, *Corner House Briefing Paper* 34, December 2004, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk>). One might also ask, however: When have Western societies *ever* shown show fear of offending the finer feelings of non-Western societies?

the rule of scarcity?⁷ What about those numerous other societies – typified by commons-based regimes – which have been organised around avoiding such choices?

And how has the modern economist's notion of scarcity survived as a respectable theory when it fits the realities of everyday behaviour as uneasily as Cinderella's slipper fitted the Ugly Sisters' feet?

. . . and Some Observations

Space does not permit a full exploration of all these questions. However, some observations may be appropriate.

The first is that there is plentiful empirical evidence, from detailed anthropological and sociological studies of decision-making within both industrial and pre-industrial societies, that forcefully debunks the notion that economic behaviour can somehow be separated from other social behaviour. *Homo economicus* is simply a figment of the economist's imagination. In the real world, including the world of large financial institutions,⁸ the vast majority of people do not spend their time single-mindedly weighing off scarce resources against supposedly unlimited needs. They make decisions, certainly, but those decisions reflect a plurality of values and concerns whose weight changes with context. In effect, real-world economic behaviour is *never* independent from social behaviour: it is society, culture and power relations – rather than the nostrums of economic theory – which ultimately shape the operations of markets.

Second, needs are not unlimited. Nor do most people conceive of them as such – despite the efforts of the advertising industry and the protestations of economists. As Gustavo Esteva has noted of the new communities that have sprung up on the margins of Mexico City in the wake of successive economic crises:

⁷ For further discussion, see: Fairlie, S., Hildyard, N., Lohmann, L. and Sexton, S., *Whose Common Future? Reclaiming the Commons*, Earthscan, London, 1992, particularly Chapter 6 “Reclaiming the Commons”.

⁸ See, for example, Granovetter, M., “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 91, No. 3, November 1985, pp.481-510.

“People do not assume unlimited ends, since their ends are no more than the other side of their means, their direct expression. If their means are limited, as they are, their ends cannot be unlimited. Within the new commons, needs are defined with verbs that describe activities embodying wants, skills and interactions with others and with the environment. Needs are not separated into different ‘spheres’ of reality: lacks or expectations on one side, and satisfiers on the other, reunited through the market or the plan — even with mood.”⁹

Third, no amount of empirical evidence or counter theory is likely *in and of itself* to undermine the enduring hegemony of the means-ends model of “economic rationality”. One reason for this is that “scarcity” as used in modern economics is best approached as *political strategy* (an endlessly malleable means of legitimising 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). Empirical evidence, coupled with political organising around other explanations, may temporarily deny political space to those who would use the strategy in one arena, but it does not (and will not) prevent its proponents from using it in other arenas where its power has not been weakened. On the contrary, so long as it remains useful – primarily as a means of diverting attention from causes of poverty that might implicate the powerful – it will be recast, adapted and re-used whenever and wherever possible, regardless of the empirical evidence that is built up to counter it.

It is this last point that I would like to explore in a little more depth, in the hope that it may assist in our discussions on ways in which the “scarcity discourse” within modern economics might be countered.

⁹ Esteva, G., “Development” in Sachs, W. (ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Zed Books Ltd, London and New Jersey, 1992, p.21.

Power, Not Numbers

Within agriculture, the area I have been asked to reflect upon, that discourse has been largely framed by Malthusian images of demand (“too many people”) outstripping supply, a point elegantly made by both Betsy Hartmann and Erik Millstone in their papers for this workshop. Such Malthusian thinking has not gone unchallenged. On the contrary, detailed sociological and political attention to what is actually happening on the ground has invariably located the causes of hunger not in an *absolute* scarcity but in *socially-generated* scarcity arising from imbalances of power that deny people access to food and water.¹⁰ A very incomplete list of such imbalances might include: unequal gender relations, lack of access to land, ethnic and racial discrimination, caste discrimination, sexism, intra-household inequalities, denial of human rights, the political exploitation of famine, unfair terms of trade, market liberalisation, bureaucracy, state planning, the declining bargaining power of labour, centralising technologies, intra-regional power imbalances, dispossession, the enclosure of commons, and ecological degradation.

¹⁰ If over one billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, for example, it is not because the water is lacking: there is more than enough water available, even in water-stressed areas, to provide sufficient water for basic household needs (40 litres per capita per day) to all those classified as “unserved” today – and the extra two billion expected by 2025. To understand why people go short of water – or any other resource – it is necessary to go beyond the statistics that weigh numbers against supply and look at the complex workings of power at the local, regional, national and international levels. The reality is – and has always been – that water (like food) flows to those with most bargaining power: industry and bigger farmers first, richer consumers second, and the poor last. In the process, the water supplies that the poor rely on are polluted by industrial effluent, exported in foodstuffs or poured down the drain through wasteful consumption.

Similarly, it is the inequalities born of discriminatory power relations, not an absolute shortage of food born of excessive human numbers, that explain the persistence of hunger in today’s world. More than enough food is currently produced to provide everyone in the world with a nutritious and adequate diet (according to the United Nations’ World Food Programme, one-and-a-half times the amount required); yet one-seventh of the world’s people (some 800 million people) go hungry. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are home to half that number – despite grain silos bursting with a surplus of 59 million tonnes of food. If people starve or are malnourished, it is not because there is not the food to feed them but because they lack the money to buy it or land on which to grow it.

Nor is hunger-amid-plenty a phenomenon that is restricted to poorer Third World countries. The US grows 40% more food than it needs, yet 26 million Americans live on the food poverty line. As the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation states:

“After 50 years of modernization, world agricultural production today is more than sufficient to feed 6 billion human beings adequately. Cereal production alone, at about 2 billion tonnes or 330 kg of grain per caput/year and representing 3 600 calories per caput/day, could to a large extent cover the energy needs of the whole population if it were well distributed.” (*The State of Food and Agriculture 2000*, FAO, Rome, 2000 <http://www.fao.org/biotech/C5doc.htm>)

Rooting deprivation firmly and squarely in power relations provides proof – if proof was needed – that no matter how much food is produced or water harnessed, how few babies are born or how dramatically human numbers fall, it is the nature of inequity remorselessly to generate “scarcity”. Without changes in the social and economic relationships that currently determine the production, distribution and consumption of food and water, there will always be those who are judged “surplus to requirements” and who are thus excluded from the wherewithal to live. The human population could be halved, quartered, decimated even, yet hunger would still remain. So long as one person has the power to deny food to another, even two people may be judged “too many”.

Colonising the Future

Unsurprisingly, detailed sociological studies that locate the cause of deprivation in struggles over access to – and control over – resources and power have made both the past and the present increasingly hostile territory for Malthusian explanations of scarcity: neither the historical record nor contemporary realities support the view that numbers, rather than power relations, are responsible for scarcity.¹¹ As a result, fewer and fewer people now suggest that *today's* or *yesterday's* famines and water crises lie in absolute scarcities caused by population growth.¹²

But the future is another country – an as yet unoccupied political space where the “noise” of political economy can be blanked out and Malthusian mathematics are granted an explanatory power which they no longer enjoy when applied to the past and the present. Plugging into the Malthusian notion of “population” as an inexorable force that spurs humans to breed unchecked, neo-Malthusians have shifted their focus from human numbers as the cause of *current* scarcity¹³ to population growth as the cause of absolute scarcity *in the future*.

¹¹ Such is the extent to which population has been debunked as an explanation for today's poverty and environmental degradation (population did not even feature in the official agenda for the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg) that some commentators have even alleged a conspiracy of silence on the issue, blaming “fear of offending non-Western societies” (for example, Coward, R, “The numbers are the beasts”, *The Ecologist*, October 2002). In reality, however, it is not political sensitivity, but fine-grained political analysis that has denied policy makers the security blanket of Malthusian simplicities to fend off evidence of policy failure.

¹² Even former bastions of Malthusianism, such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), now acknowledge that politics rather than too many people lies at the heart of continuing famine and malnutrition. As Eugenio Díaz and Sherman of IFPRI note:

“A world with an adequate supply of food is clearly more desirable than a Malthusian world in which food is scarce, food prices are high and rising, and people are in conflict over scarcity. However, providing an adequate aggregate food supply will not eliminate malnutrition and hunger, now or in the future. To do that requires much more. To achieve food security for the entire world population, countries must work to reduce poverty and achieve a more equitable distribution of income — tasks that technology alone can only support, not achieve.” (Díaz-Bonilla, E. and Robinson, S., “Biotechnology, Trade and Hunger”, in International Food Policy Research Institute, *Biotechnology – Two Perspectives*, Annual Report 2000-2001, http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/books/ar2000/ar2000_essay01.htm)

¹³ There is increasing recognition, at least in public, that distributional issues are the key factor in determining scarcities. However, this does not prevent neo-Malthusians from seizing on the statistics of hunger to make a case for absolute limits having been met wherever they can. For example, it is often argued that countries which are not self-sufficient in water or food have already exceeded local “carrying capacity”, even though the food imports often reflect changing dietary patterns or the inability of local farmers to compete with heavily subsidised exports from richer countries.

In Egypt, for example, encouraged by the US government's Agency for International Development (USAID) and other development agencies, the Egyptian government invested heavily in livestock. From 1970 to 1980, crop production rose by 17 per cent in real terms, but livestock production grew almost twice as much, by 32 per cent. In the following seven years, crop production increased by 10 per cent, while livestock production leapt

In its 2001 report, *Vision 21*, for example, the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, chaired by Ismael Serageldin, a Vice President of the World Bank, readily concedes that current water scarcities do not lie in absolute shortage – but argue that future population growth will lead to generalised scarcity and water wars. What the Commission terms the “gloomy arithmetic” of water condemns us to future water shortage and water wars – unless, following Malthus,¹⁴ market discipline is brought to water use primarily through water pricing.¹⁵

Other industries – from biotech companies to the hydropower sector – are similarly using threatened scarcities to colonise the future for their particular interests. In Malthus’s day, the resource that private interests most sought to lay hold of was community land – the forests, fields and pastures that villagers held and managed in common – and the labour that survived on it. Two centuries later, the push is towards the privatisation of other publicly-shared resources: seeds, water and air – resources that until recently have been taken-for-granted as common goods, albeit goods that (in the case of seeds and water) have generally been subject to complex communal rules governing their access and use. And, as just as Malthus justified the privatisation of communal land through dystopian predictions of population-induced scarcity, so the arguments for privatising seeds, water and air and are being promoted through a

by almost 50 per cent, requiring an enormous and costly diversion of staple food supplies from humans to animals. Human consumption of domestically-grown maize and other coarse grains dropped from 53 per cent of production in 1966 to just 6 per cent in 1988. Egypt now grows more food for animals than for humans — almost 40 per cent of the total agricultural land is under animal fodder crops. Human supplies of grain have been made up through US imports that contributed to Egypt’s external debt; in 1988, the country’s debt was five times the value of its exports. The consistent beneficiaries of Egypt’s switch to livestock production have been large US grain merchants such as Cargill which have exported US grains at hugely subsidised prices to Egypt (Mitchell, T., “America’s Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry”, *Middle East Report 169*, 1991).

¹⁴ Malthus never intended his *Essay on Population* to be an exploration of the mysteries of human fertility: rather, it was a polemic in defence of private property. Market forces and market reasoning, he argued, bring discipline into the chaos that is Nature. Property brings prudence, and prudence separates the deserving from the undeserving. Absent private property and, thanks to Population, the world is catapulted headlong into scarcity: the four horsemen of the Apocalypse ride unopposed. Population was the tool that Malthus used to elevate these politics into a theory and to use that theory as a political battering ram: by harnessing his politics to mathematics, he furnished the privatisation movement with a spuriously neutral, pragmatic set of arguments for promoting a new political correctness – one that denied the shared rights of everyone, however poor, to subsistence, sanctioning instead the rights of the “deserving” over the “undeserving”, with the market as arbiter of entitlements. This was the essence of the Malthusian argument – and the political goal to which “population” was first strategically deployed.

¹⁵ “Commission members agreed that the single most immediate and important measure that we can recommend is the systematic adoption of full-cost pricing for water services . . . Without full-cost pricing the present vicious cycle of waste, inefficiency, and lack of service for the poor will continue. There will be little investment from the private sector, services will be of poor quality and rationed, and there will be little left for investing in water quality and other environmental improvement.” World Commission on Water for the 21st Century, *A Water Secure World: Vision for Water, Life and the Environment*, World Water Council, London, 2000, p.35.

similar scarcity discourse. In agriculture, the talk is of extra mouths in the South causing global famine – unless biotechnology companies have the right to patent and genetically-engineer seeds; in climate, of teaming numbers of Chinese and Indians causing whole cities to be lost to flooding through their greenhouse gas emissions – unless companies are granted property rights in the atmosphere through carbon-trading schemes; and, in water, of thirsty slum dwellers causing water wars – unless water resources are handed over to private sector water companies. It goes without saying that the “war-room” mentality generated by such predictions of scarcity-driven apocalypse serves admirably to divert attention way from the awkward social and environmental history of the discredited policies and projects – from dams to nuclear power stations to genetic engineering – that the public is now invited to embrace in the interests of meeting globally-aggregated predictions of demand.

Learning from the Future?

Indeed, such is the power of “scarcity” to colonise the future that even those who, quite properly, locate today’s scarcities in political conflict, frequently crumble when confronted with projections of future population growth, setting aside the insights of political economy in favour of Malthusian metaphors that emphasise numbers over power relations as the explanation for future shortages.

In doing so, they grant Malthusianism an explanatory power that they would actively deny it when applied to the present and the past. Instead of the past being a guide to future action, the future (implausibly) becomes a guide to the present. George Santayana’s dictum that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”¹⁶ is jettisoned in favour of the ungrounded, and thus politically even more malleable, exercise of “learning from the future”. In the process, “scarcity” is rehabilitated: removed from the messy political realities of the present, it regains its authority as an abstract model, redeploying its mesmerising powers over those who would privilege theory over lived experience.

Yet future crises are likely to be rooted in the same dynamics in which they are rooted today: political conflict, exploitative distributive institutions, sexism, racism, human

¹⁶ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Volume 1, 1905

rights abuses and environmentally destructive practices. If society wants to prepare for future resource crises (and there surely *will* be future scarcity of one kind or another), it would therefore be more prudent to look to the present rather than to some theoretical Malthusian model of the future. The future will grow out of the present, not out of society suddenly turning Malthusian. The better way of dealing with “future crisis” is not imagining a future Malthusian world which bears no relationship to what exists now or ever has existed, and then imagining how to stave off that hypothetical Malthusian world, but rather dealing with current scarcities *now* on the realistic assumption that what causes scarcity today is going to go on causing scarcity in the future.

Denying Malthusianism a refuge in the future is thus of critical importance if the past is not destined to be repeated and the present forgotten. But it is also important if “scarcity” (as it is currently used in economic discourse) is to be marginalised as a political strategy for diverting attention from the root causes of hunger, environmental degradation, conflict and the like. For granting Malthusianism a space in the future is one of the principal everyday actions through which the scarcity-terrorised thinking of young Jude – and the power relations and activities that it helps to support – are reproduced, rejuvenated and allowed (even when debunked by practical experience) to return to haunt the present.

As Betsy Hartmann notes, undermining the power of Malthusian scarcity ideologies and policies is “one of the most important political projects of our time”. I join with her in hoping that this workshop will further the political organising that will undoubtedly be essential if Young Jude is not to stalk the future along with Malthus’ ghost and the shambling remains of Lord Robbins.