

# “Scarcity, ‘polite society’ and activism”

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8 September 2015

At Panel A2: *The new politics of scarcity*

during

*Resource Politics: Transforming Pathways to Sustainability*

Conference held at Institute of Development Studies

University of Sussex, UK, 7-9 September 2015

Organised by the ESRC STEPS Centre

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## Summary/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? Understanding how elites have constructed and maintained the scarcity discourse is an essential element of any political resistance to scarcity-as-elite-strategy, and rightly so.

But exposing the successful activism of the rich 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? Is the persistence of scarcity as an explanation for social ills an outcome of the hollowing out of many of the social institutions, such as trade unions, through which elite power has historically been challenged? Or of the often depoliticised organising that has emerged in many countries to fill the vacuum?

## Presentation

Here’s a problem that I have been wrestling with; and which I would like to explore with you.

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 in 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?

A huge amount of work has been undertaken by activists 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 the rich 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.

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 than we might like to think, is to look critically at how many of the cross-cutting, community-embedded networks of solidarity – from trade unions, to faith groups and political parties – that served as vehicles for building mutuality and challenging accumulation have been hollowed out in recent years as capital has itself evolved in response to the challenges they pose.

In many developed countries, for example, trade unions are a vastly diminished political, social and economic force. Generally, this is explained by the impacts of wave after wave of neoliberal anti-union legislation; by the offshoring of jobs; by changing patterns of production that make union organising more difficult; and by the casualization of labour. No doubt these are significant factors. But, as US academic-activist John F. M. McDermott argues in what I found a very helpful paper on the production of labour in modern capitalist societies, 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”.<sup>1</sup>

McDermott argues 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”. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when working class culture was being constructed through myriad relationships 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 creches, 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

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<sup>1</sup> John F. M. McDermott, “Producing Labor-Power”, *Science & Society*, Vol. 71, No. 3, July 2007, pp. 299-321.

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”.

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 already doing so.

I suspect that few such conflicts will be found outside of capitalism: where does such a space exist? They are more likely to be found in the lattices created by the exclusion of working people from “polite society”, where “the denser social terrain of the present” that has been woven over the past century is unravelling and fracturing. For this is where “impolite society” (if that is the appropriate term) is re-emerging to forge new institutions and cultures of provisioning, nurturing and mutual support to weather the destruction that the whirlwind of neoliberalism is inflicting. 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 is partly in this mutual recognition that new forms of activism will most effectively be created to challenge elite power and its narratives of scarcity.

I suspect, too, that the “polite” politics of today’s NGO world will need to give way to more “impolite” (I’m not sure that’s the most appropriate description) politics that seek less to negotiate around single issues and discrete policy changes through short-term silo-ised campaigns, and more to provide solidarity and support for the impolite politics that are emerging. For the struggle is no longer within polite society: rather it is once again outside of Society. It is surely here, and only here, that the elements of another world can best be built, relationship by patiently-nurtured relationship.