

SCIBE

WORKING PAPER NR.

SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

10

**SCARE STORIES: SCARCE STORIES**

Jeremy Till

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## The Ideology of Austerity

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Jeremy Till

# 10

We live in an age of austerity.

No, that is wrong.

We are continually told that we need to live in an age of  
austerity.

Better.

The difference between these two statements is crucial. The first message is the one that is repeated so often that we have come to believe it. It positions austerity as an inevitable, unavoidable, condition that we passively accept. The latter statement, which is the more accurate, begins to suggest that far from inevitable, austerity is a condition that is imposed on us as a necessary evil which will eventually lead us out of the present global instability and on to firmer ground. We all have to make sacrifices, our political masters tell us (while conveniently overlooking that the packages of austerity are far from evenly spread, and affect the poor more than any other group).

The latter sense of austerity – the imposed one under the guise of extreme necessity – is the one that is now used continuously as the justification for government policies throughout the world, with left and right alike colluding in the policies of cuts. But scratch the surface, and it is

easy to see that in many cases the programmes of austerity are not only unnecessary but act as a mask for the playing out of deeply ideological policies. Take my field, that of higher education. The introduction of higher fees is 'explained' by the fact that we can no longer afford to fund Universities out of the public purse, and so the burden should shift to students, who will eventually benefit. This is the common sense argument so favoured by the populist right. The assumption is that this new system will save public money. However, this is far from the truth: buried in an annex of a letter from Vince Cable to HEFCE (the higher education funding body) is the startling admission that the cost next year will actually rise from £8.9bn to £9.1bn. Far from the tripling of fees being part of the government's austerity programme, it adds cost to the exchequer, but we are so conditioned by the rhetoric of austerity that the new fee regime has now been passively accepted as necessary by most people. Insult is heaped upon insult with the added policy that for the first time students going to private universities will have access to student loans, so that taxpayers will effectively be subsidising and fuelling the private sector; hardly a money-saving initiative for the age of austerity.

This is just one example of the way that austerity is used as the cover for the rolling out of an ideological position (in this case the effective marketisation of the university sector.) Another example is the free school programme – an ideological programme if ever there was one. As the building of new schools in the public sector is slashed on grounds of austerity, somehow money is found to establish a range of schools which are all but private except for the fact that the public is paying for them (though the actual costs are not being released, we are told that they will be lowered by relaxing a set of design standards that have been intelligently developed over the past ten years, so that in Free Schools if pupils have to sit in rooms with limited natural light that is acceptable if the market will bear it.)

What we need to learn from these examples – and the many more such – is that austerity is not inevitable, but is too often imposed for other political

reasons which all too often ramps up social inequality. The justification for these programmes of austerity is framed by the dominance of the neo-liberal economic model that subscribes blindly to the twin gods of growth and market freedom, as if the so-called logic of the market will lead us out of the woods. It does not take a genius to note that the 'logic' of the unfettered market (for which read pure greed) got us into the mess in the first place, and so it continues to amaze that the same medicine is being prescribed to treat the very illness that the medicine initially caused. You would not keep feeding dirty water to a child with diarrhoea caused by drinking dirty water, and yet this is what the orthodoxy of neo-liberal economics tells us to do.

Austerity is justified because of a wider scarcity – of money – and the only solution proposed is to limit the endless supply of money in order to re-establish economic equilibrium. In this much austerity, as an imposed condition, is the bastard child of scarcity. Scarcity has been used as a scare tactic ever since the invention of neo-classical economics. It was the Reverend Malthus who first wielded the axe of scarcity in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* of 1798. Malthus' argument is straightforward: population grows at geometric rate, food supply at an arithmetic rate; at a certain moment (the Malthusian point), population demand will exceed supply; scarcity will lead to famine; population growth must therefore be restricted in the face of the spectre of scarcity. What we find behind the veil of logic and so-called objectivity is a deeply ideological text, which was to have direct political consequences. Malthus' rationalisation in favour of population restraint brings with it some unedifying arguments in relation to the poor. If one attempts to alleviate poverty, as was being proposed in the contemporaneous Poor Laws, then (he argued) population growth will follow, which in turn will lead to scarcities. Instead, let scarcity regulate poverty, he argues; it is both the origin of poverty and the effective instrument against any population growth that might arise out of the alleviation of poverty. This *laissez-faire* attitude to the poor, worrying enough in its own way, is also a lever for the exploitation of the poor

because, as Malthus recognised, the poverty arising out of scarcity made the working class more willing to submit to wage labour. The immediate political consequences of Malthus' essay were very direct. The Poor Laws, which he had argued contributed to 'carelessness' among the poor, and a 'want of frugality', were repealed under the Malthusian spectre of the population growth of a rutting proletariat.

Is it too much to equate Malthus' attack on the poor with this coalition government's attack on the disabled, the homeless, the migrants and other dispossessed elements of society? I think not, because in each case scarcity is being used as the justification and cover for a deeply ideological programme.

The only way to escape the apparent hold of scarcity is to understand it not as a naturalised or inevitable condition but as a constructed one. The most obvious example of constructed scarcity is food: there is enough food in the world to feed the global population, it is just in the wrong place and subjected to the distortions of the free market. Hunger in one part of the world is mirrored with appalling waste in another. On top of this, the intervention of multinationals such as Monsanto has exacerbated food scarcity. Using the scar(c)e story that without industrialised and genetically modified food production we face global food scarcity, Monsanto has been allowed to roll out a form of agricultural monopoly that has not only destroyed local livelihoods and practices, but done so, as so clearly shown by Vandana Shiva, with no sustained increase in yields on which the initial bargain was based.

Constructed scarcities affect every aspect of our lives. We are told that there is a housing crisis, but everywhere we look there are empty properties; scarcity here is constructed through the machinations of tenure and ownership. As soon as one understands scarcity as a constructed condition and not an inevitable one, then it makes it possible to creatively intervene in the processes that construct a particular scarcity. A good example is the Renew Newcastle project in New South Wales, Australia,

where a team lead by Marcus Westbury have unlocked the empty spaces of the city through interrupting and playing with planning and legal regulations (which had constructed a scarcity of use), allowing short-term uses to take over and revitalise the previously decaying city centre.

In taking apart the various constructions of scarcity one is resisting the scare stories that are associated with scarcity. But this does not mean that all scarcities are constructed. There are real limits and resources really are running out as mankind endlessly exploits the biosphere. This aspect of scarcity is all too often either denied or forgotten, because at heart it presents a threat to the neoliberal dream of endless growth. At a base level scarcity is the brake on the abundance that capitalism holds up as the promise to the masses. Scarcity – both constructed and actual - challenges the very premise of growth on which capitalism is founded, and demands that we look at alternative paradigms. It is here that the occupy movement is so important. What I learn from the occupiers is the resilience and brilliance of their organisational structures, and their overall critique of the structures of power. What the occupiers teach us, through their spaces, their behaviour and their critique, is that other forms of social organisation are not only necessary but also possible. If, as I believe, we are moving into an era overseen by issues of scarcity (but not necessarily scary scarcity) rather than by the false hope of abundance that capitalism has held out for too long, then we need to rethink our understanding of scarcity and its implications. The occupy movement is a good place to start.

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