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SCARCITY + CREATIVITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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FUCK SCARCITY

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Material scarcity, as the great anarchist philosopher Murray Bookchin once noted – drawing heavily, it must be said, upon the insights of Karl Marx – has been a feature of human societies up to the present day:

'until very recently, human society has developed around the brute issues posed by unavoidable material scarcity and their subjective counterpart in denial, renunciation and guilt.'¹

The various forms of domination and inequality which have structured social relations within almost all human societies necessarily emerged out of the everyday reality of material scarcities. It was struggle over scarce resources which created the possibility, perhaps the necessity, for the production of structures of power in societies, in human selves, and against the wider living world. Bookchin again states that:

'material society provided the historic rationale for the development of the patriarchal family, private property, class domination and the state; it nourished the great divisions that pitted town against country, mind against sensuousness, work against play, individual against society, and, finally, the individual against himself.'²

Bookchin shows how material scarcity must be understood as the connection between the two distinct modes of understanding alienation in

¹ Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism 2nd Ed* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p.11.

² *Ibid.*

modernity as i. our individual alienation within and from oneself, and from a lived and sensuous engagement with matter, and ii. our collective estrangement from social production and the non-human natures which provide the context of all human practice in general. He concludes with a particularly useful definition, stating that:

'scarcity is more than a condition of scarce resources: the word, if it is to mean anything in human terms, must encompass the social relations and cultural apparatus that foster insecurity in the psyche.'³

Michel Foucault similarly pays close attention to the historical development of human subjectivity under changing modes of scarcity. He describes how in the mercantilist period of capitalism – which dominated in Europe from the start of 17th to the start of 18th century – a particular set of practices and apparatus were developed to deal with the threat of scarcity. These practices were replaced in the 18th century by the ideas of the physiocratic economists and the emergence of *laissez-faire* thinking: a different mode of dealing with the threat of material scarcity, and a different collective subjectivity.

Foucault describes how mercantile capitalism organised grain production around an anti-scarcity system – notably characterised by price controls, prohibition of hoarding, limits on export (and also limits to amount of land to be cultivated to prevent excessive abundance) – primarily to prevent scarcity provoking revolt and political unrest in the cities and towns. He describes two general frameworks for thinking about 'philosophical-political horizon' of scarcity as 'the juridical-moral concept of evil human nature, of fallen nature, and the cosmological-political concept

³ Ibid. p.13.

of fortune.⁴ However, the mercantilist anti-scarcity system frequently failed, and the emerging physiocratic free marketeers 'tried to arrive at an apparatus for ... working within the reality of fluctuations between abundance/scarcity, dearness/cheapness ... which is, I think, precisely an apparatus of security and no longer a juridical-disciplinary system.'⁵

Writing in 1793 one of the physiocrats, Louis-Paul Abeille stated that so long as there is free circulation in markets then 'scarcity is a chimera', and Abbot Ferdinando Galiani furthermore stated that 'scarcity is, for three quarters of the cases, a malady of the imagination'.⁶ As something that afflicted an entire population at once (what Foucault calls the 'scarcity-scourge') scarcity had indeed largely become a chimera, although this is replaced by a structural necessity for an anonymous some-of-the-population to endure scarcity, sometimes (which remains the basis for much of the capitalist apparatus today). While mercantile law re scarcity was based upon a set of prohibitions, price controls and a set of legal prohibitions or moral imperatives, under *laissez-faire* scarcity-capitalism Foucault find the origins of a contemporary apparatus of security:

'the apparatus of security ... "lets things happen." Not that everything is left alone, but *laissez-faire* is indispensable at a certain level: allowing prices to rise, allowing scarcity to develop, and letting people go hungry so as to prevent something else happening, namely the introduction of the general scourge of scarcity.'

For Foucault the modern *laissez-faire* anti-scarcity system of dispersing scarcity through freer market mechanisms was more than just a more advanced form of capitalist organisation, it was a 'security apparatus' which

4 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-78* (NY: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.30.

5 Ibid., p.37.

6 Louis-Paul Abeille and Abbot Ferdinando Galiani both cited in Foucault, *ibid.*, p.52.

constituted a new form of collective subjectivity – the atomised mass of 'population':

'a political subject, as a new collective subject absolutely foreign to the juridical and political thought of earlier centuries is appearing here in its complexity, with its caesuras'⁷

Modern capitalism developed then, as a specific historical form of an apparatus of scarcity based upon an ideology of *laissez-faire*. David Harvey states that 'scarcity is socially organised in order to permit the market to function,'⁸ whilst Andy Merrifield has similarly observes that:

'The fundamental basis of a capitalist economy, of a society based on the profit motive, on exchange value and money relations, is scarcity – *the active creation and perpetuation of scarcity*.'⁹

For Bookchin however, the position of scarcity under capitalism does not stop at this point. The *laissez-faire* approach to structuring a capitalist economy coincided with massive developments and transformations in science, technology and manufacturing. Modernity, for the first time in human history, created the material possibility of what Bookchin describes as a 'post-scarcity society', a condition where all of the essential necessities of a life are delivered with a minimum amount of human labour. If the need to labour under the threat of scarcity had historically lay at the heart of all forms of oppression, inequality and alienation, both in societies and within selves, then for Bookchin post-scarcity describes 'fundamentally more than a mere abundance of the means of life: it decidedly includes the kind of life

⁷ Ibid., p.42.

⁸ David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p.114.

⁹ Andy Merrifield, *Magical Marxism: Subversive Politics and the Imagination* (London: Pluto, 2011), p.96.

these means support.'¹⁰. Writing in the early nineteen-seventies, he argues that:

'the industrial capitalism of Marx's time organised its commodity relations around a prevailing system of material scarcity; the state capitalism of our time organises its commodity relations around a prevailing system of material abundance. A century ago scarcity had to be endured, today it has to be enforced.'¹¹

The condition today is arguably even more full of complexity and contradiction. Conceptions of post-scarcity society continues to animate much of the political imaginary of both of the great liberation philosophies of modernity – anarchism and communism. Terry Eagleton has recently restated how Marx's greatest contribution to the then already existing idea of communism was to realise that it *must* have a material basis, and Bookchin agrees that:

'to have seen these material preconditions for human freedom, to have emphasised that freedom presupposes free time and the material abundance for abolishing free time as a social privilege, is the great contribution of Karl Marx to modern revolutionary theory.'¹²

But we also find an interesting post-scarcity discussion happening in more mainstream arenas. Philip Sadler is one example of a contemporary business theorist who is optimistically arguing that capitalism will necessarily pass through a wholesale and largely 'unforeseen' transformation in the coming decades, referring to many tendencies that

10 Ibid., p.13.

11 Bookchin, *ibid.*, p.102.

12 Ibid., p.102.

would not be out of place in a more Marxian or autonomist setting, such as: falling costs of production, open-source intellectual property and collaborative working etc. Sadler argues that

'although the need for system change is widely accepted, there is little recognition of the need to adjust to post-scarcity conditions and to base policies and decisions on the principles of the economics of abundance rather than on the economics of scarcity'¹³

There are of course however significant differences between anarcho-communist visions of post-scarcity, and more capitalist ideas of commodity abundance. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the contradictions of capitalism will not necessarily derail any possibility of a capitalist condition of post-scarcity. In fact, the prospect of post-scarcity is a spectre *haunting* capitalism. The overwhelming tendencies are for the marginal costs of production to fall, and for the rate of profit to fall. Capitalist organisations have to constantly struggle to find ways to make a profit out of production. This involves designing-in redundancy and failure into products that could in many cases last generations rather than months or years. It involves developing highly proprietary parts and systems such that commodities cannot be repaired, and of course the projection of a vast spectacular infrastructure of advertising and branding that diverts the revolutionary libido and makes this insane situation seem desirable. All of these processes and many more serve to create imaginary scarcities, and furthermore real scarcities through the wastage of materials and the pollution and destruction of the ecosystems that we rely upon for resources. And there are of course important relations between scarcity and environmental degradation: polluted and damaged environments produce less). Indeed,

¹³ See Philip Sadler, *Sustainable Growth in a Post-Scarcity World* (Farnham: Gower, 2010), p.236.

Eagleton has argued that standing within sight of an era of post-scarcity, capitalism is gravitating towards ecological catastrophe as the best means of perpetuating the era of scarcity. If Marx realised that the overcoming of scarcity was a precondition of most paths to communism, Eagleton speculates whether the emerging ecological crisis is a mechanism for historically precluding those possible futures.

However, the same deep contradictions of the capitalist process are structuring scarcity today in what are arguably even more profound ways. As already stated, the primary tendencies in production are for both costs and profits to fall. Yet as David Harvey has recently shown, the quantity of capital circulating in the global economy looking for profitable investment opportunities is greater than ever before. Since production is increasingly unable to provide capitalists, pension funds and the like with profitable investment opportunities, new avenues of speculative investment have been found through investing in assets. Property, land and housing are typical investment routes, but so are mineral and agricultural assets, and because this kind of widespread investment necessarily has a ponzi character (if everyone does it values increase), it can seem to work. Such investment strategies have of course been behind a series of asset and share price crashes and 'market failures' since the seventies. The kinds of assets that are being targeted by investment funds have in recent years have further widened. Beyond new technologies providing one new route of speculation (remember the dot com bubble), food is increasingly an investment opportunity, and this is becoming a significant source of food scarcity and food price inflation (although there are many other fundamentals that will be pushing up global food prices in the near and medium term, notably climate change)¹⁴.

¹⁴ See discussion with John Beddington and Deborah Duanne on coming food price rises and scarcity on BBC Today programme 2.1.13

We find ourselves today in a paradoxical situation in a highly unevenly developed world. Bookchin, Marx, Marcuse and many others all remind us that we quite recently stood at the gates of a post-scarcity society, and indeed, since the middle of the twentieth century, if not earlier, it would have been perfectly possible to reorganise human society such that there was an abundance of good food and water, and a rewarding advanced industrial-ecological urban environment and global landscape for the global human population. (And those responsible for precluding that possibility should be tried for crimes against humanity.)

Tragically, today the very possibility of a post-scarcity society seems to be slipping over the horizon, and is barely imaginable ... but it is not gone yet. Rather than the liberation of really-free-time (the ultimate scarcity), many of us today find ourselves today in the appallingly paradoxically compulsion to work constantly under conditions of affluenza, to become ever poorer. Yet in other parts of the world, but also just a few streets away from us, fellow human beings are living under conditions of abject poverty.

At the same time, a newly constructed threat of scarcity shadows our near future. It is estimated that there will be 10 billion extra humans added to global population in the next decade. While we deal with the implications of that, climate change events multiplied by the apparent endgame of this phase of capitalism suggest the very actual potential for massive real scarcities across both developed and developing countries. Many of the new scarcities produced by climate and environmental change will manifest themselves through space, and there will be new forms of environmental and spatial scarcity produced...

But we must not forget that constantly through these processes, capitalist scarcity also alienates us from a proper understanding of our relation to nature, and to the rest of the world. It turns the world into what Heidegger called a 'standing reserve'. There is a sense in which the very idea that *resources are running out* is itself a huge misunderstanding, a form of alienated thinking. Capital in this sense alienates us from a creative,

sensuous and social grasp of our relationship to resources (or whatever word we should use): to matter and life.

We must not allow the current normative conception of scarcity to continue to dominate... it is thoroughly ideological, and hides the reality that *there is still the possibility of choosing post-scarcity*. And of course, post-scarcity thinking still needs a way to conceptualise the possibility of scarcity and how *it* – post-scarcity as a social form – will guarantee the holding of the possibility of an actual scarcity-scourge in permanent abeyance.

A critique of the capitalist conception of scarcity involves a re-examination of both the concept of the commons, and the production-apparatus of contemporary subjectivity. Much work has been done in this area in different-though-interrelated ways, by for example Harvey, Hardt and Negri, and various associated *autonomia* fellow-travellers, to name but a few. Our task is to make a specifically spatial contribution to thinking and acting around these questions, as architecture, cities and urbanisms are always some kind of mediation of modes of subjectivity.

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