

SCARCITY

A HISTORY from the
Origins of Capitalism
to the Climate Crisis

FREDRIK ALBRITTON JONSSON

CARL WENNERLIND



While the rich previously felt an obligation to take care of the poor during periods of hardship, the enclosures freed them from such obligations and enabled them to concentrate exclusively on their own enrichment. In the early enclosures, figuratively speaking, it was the sheep that pushed the rural population off the land. More painted a vivid picture of how the sheep had “become so greedy and fierce that they devour men themselves.”⁴⁰ The landowners’ quest completely transformed the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Land ceased to be the existential and spiritual foundation of the community, and instead was turned into exclusionary and alienable pieces of property, existing solely for the purpose of accumulation. In addition to losing their homes, family roots, and ancestral belongings, the former tenants lost their main source of sustenance. What remained for them, More queried, “but to steal, and so be hanged . . . or to wander and beg? And yet if they go tramping, they are jailed as idle vagrants. They would be glad to work, but they can find no one who will hire them.”⁴¹

Propertied men were now engaged in a boundless quest for accumulation, while the rest of the people found themselves in a constant state of dispossession. While rich and poor experienced scarcity differently, they were nevertheless part of the same social dynamic. Anticipating Karl Marx by three hundred years, More recognized that the poverty of the landless was useful to the interest of the wealthy, who now had access to a cheap source of labor and captive consumers who had no other choice but to buy at the market price.⁴² Poverty amongst plenty—previously an unthinkable condition—had now become an inescapable feature of the new world characterized by Enclosure Scarcity.

Utopian Scarcity

To reverse this catastrophic development, More suggested, required nothing short of a revolution. A simple redistribution of property would not solve the problem, because wherever the institution of private property was in place accumulation would always run amok. “However abundant goods may be,” More reasoned, “when every man tries to get as much as he can for his own exclusive use, a handful of men end up sharing the whole pile, and the rest are left in poverty.”⁴³ His solution instead was to eliminate the possibility of accumulation altogether by getting rid of private

property. To answer the naysayers, who argued that a society without private property was impossible, as “every man stops working,” More offered an elaborate description of the island of Utopia, a society that not only did not have a system of private property rights, but also had dispensed with markets, money, and commerce.⁴⁴ This depiction of a post-commercial world prefigured the hopes of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutionary radicals.

More’s fictional island was two hundred miles wide and contained fifty-four cities that shared the same language, customs, institutions, and laws. Everyone was trained in agriculture as well as in a trade, often the same as their parents’, such as woodworking, linen-making, masonry, needlework, or carpentry. Diligence in one’s occupation was a must; laziness and inefficiency would quickly get one into trouble. Still, More was quick to point out, “no one has to exhaust himself with endless toil from early morning to late at night, as if he were a beast of burden.”⁴⁵ Indeed, six hours of work per day would suffice to produce enough material wealth to satisfy the needs of the island’s population.

Three primary factors ensured that needs were always met. First, in Utopia, everyone worked. He contrasted this with those European societies in which priests, landowners, nobility, “lusty beggars,” and a significant proportion of women were not engaged in productive pursuits. Second, the people of Utopia worked more intelligently and efficiently than their European counterparts. Although their brains were not superior to those of the Europeans, they were more inclined to learn new methods, techniques, and technologies. This was necessary as their “soil is not very fertile, nor their climate of the best.” To compensate for these challenges, they engaged in hard work, developed new technological solutions, and pursued a deep understanding of nature’s secrets.⁴⁶ With modest material desires and a relative abundance of necessities, the Utopians were liberated, to some extent, from pressing constraints.

The third, and most essential, reason the Utopians lived in a condition of relative abundance was their drastically different view of consumption. Contrary to Europe, where “many vain, superfluous trades are bound to be carried on simply to satisfy luxury and licentiousness,” Utopians did not prioritize the enjoyment of material goods. Fashion and luxury were simply not relevant modes of self-expression. They all wore the same comfortable and functional clothes, with small variations

depending on gender and marital status. Fabricated desires had no place. The Utopians thus embraced the Roman philosopher Seneca's declaration that "Natural desires are limited; those which spring from false opinions have nowhere to stop, for falsity has no point of termination." The story of luxury, he explained, is that first "she began to hanker after things that were inessential, and then after things that were injurious, and finally she handed the mind over to the body and commanded it to be the out and out slave of the body's whim and pleasure." As to "the proper limit to a person's wealth," his guidance was simple: "First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough."⁴⁷

In the absence of a constant preoccupation with consumption, which necessitated endless toil, the utopians enjoyed an abundance of free time. They used this time to pursue true pleasures. The first category of pleasures arose from the practice of virtue and the contemplation of the good life. These were, unsurprisingly, regarded as the highest pleasures imaginable. Pleasures of the body, in turn, were divided into two classes. The first class included eating and drinking, the elimination of excesses in the body, sexual intercourse, and the relieving of an itch by scratching; the second class included the pleasures that come from the enjoyment of art and music. While the bodily pleasures associated with the former were definitely real and genuinely enjoyable, More ultimately found them transitory and insubstantial and he therefore ranked the aesthetic pleasures higher. Indeed, no other creature, More reported, "contemplates with delight the shape and loveliness of the universe, or enjoys odours, or distinguishes harmonious from dissonant sounds," to the degree that Utopians did.⁴⁸

Commerce, markets, and money had no place in Utopia. All commodities were transported to one of four central distribution sites. Here the heads of every household, after carefully calculating their families's needs, could avail themselves of the requisite commodities, entirely free of charge. There was no reason for anyone ever to take more than what was necessary to satisfy the family's needs, for the simple reason that they knew there would always be enough for everyone. Thus, there was no secondary market, no fear of future poverty, and no possibility that anyone would use commodities out of vanity—which More defines as satisfied not by what a person has "but by what other people lack."⁴⁹ The fact that people simply had access to all they needed profoundly influenced the Utopian

economy because it eliminated any sensible rationale for the endless pursuit of wealth.

There were no reasons, either, to accumulate jewels, gems, and precious metals. The accumulation of gold had revealed itself to have such divisive effects on society that the Utopians decided to take steps to eliminate it altogether. Although they possessed vast amounts of gold, which they had accumulated to pay for mercenaries in the event of war, they assigned no particular value to gold. To show that there was nothing special about the metal, they used it to make chamber pots and forced people who had been enslaved as punishment for heinous crimes to wear gold earrings and gold chains. For them, it was human folly to covet gold. No one should “take pleasure in the weak sparkle of a little gem or bright pebble when he has a star, or the sun itself, to look at.”⁵⁰

The commitment of the Utopians to eliminate private property was so complete that they did not even allow private property in their own houses. People’s houses and gardens were exchanged every ten years. Yet, the fact that they did not own their real estate forever had no impact on how they cared for it. In fact, they cared so much for their gardens that they competed with each other over whose was most beautiful. This was the only realm in which the Utopians appear to have engaged in competitive behavior. It had everything to do with the creation and celebration of beauty, however, and nothing to do with establishing or representing hierarchy.

More’s vision of Utopia constituted a radical alternative to the commercial world that was beginning to emerge in early modern Europe. More promoted a completely different relationship between nature, humanity, and the world of goods. His ideal society was based on universal participation in work, the elimination of classes, the communal ownership of land and its products, the abolition of money, the development of knowledge to increase the yield of the soil, and the complete redirection of human desires away from the consumption and display of riches and toward the enjoyment of conversation, learning, and beauty. As such, his anti-commercialism went far beyond that of Aristotle’s aversion to *chrematistike* and Luther’s complaint about fraudulent merchants. For More, when “money is the measure of all things, it is hardly ever possible for a commonwealth to be governed justly or happily.”⁵¹ For Aristotle, by contrast, it was impossible to uphold justice in society without money, for the very

reason that it served as a “measure of all things.”⁵² More prioritized the elimination of money as one of the most critical steps, suggesting that if “money disappeared, so would fear, anxiety, worry, toil and sleepless nights. Even poverty, which seems to need money more than anything else, would vanish if money were entirely done away with.”⁵³ People would then focus their attention on pursuits that were convivial and collaborative, not exclusionary and competitive. Togetherness rather than rivalry, friendliness rather than strife, sharing rather than accumulation, would follow. Once again, More echoed the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who instructed his followers: “Turn instead to real wealth; learn to be content with little and call out loudly and boldly: we have water, we have barley: we may vie with Jupiter himself in happiness.”⁵⁴

While Christian moralists such as Luther prescribed moderation as a crucial ingredient of a functional commercial society, More offered a more revolutionary approach. More’s utopian world was not one of great material abundance, yet people experienced it as such because the elements of life that mattered to people were never in short supply. Even though the world of goods was, objectively speaking, far from endless, there was a subjective perception of abundance. We might call it self-imposed scarcity, but that does not quite capture the idea that a culture of consumption could be so fundamentally different that it did not require voluntary austerity. As such, More’s proposal was so radical that some people viewed it as a practical impossibility, pointing to the etymology of the term *utopia* as “no place.” Others emphasized a different reading of *utopia*, namely *eutopia*, which meant a place of pleasure, happiness, and fulfillment that might or might not be attainable. Far more influential was More’s critical concept of Enclosure Scarcity, a condition his contemporaries could see in reality all around them. Indeed, his depiction of a society in which the rich ceaselessly pursue false pleasures and the poor always want more because they have none shaped the conversation about scarcity for centuries.

Conclusion

For the social hierarchy to remain intact and the body politic and nature to remain in balance, the mercantile spirit of infinite accumulation and insatiable desires had to be checked. According to the proponents of Neo-

Aristotelian Scarcity, because nature was considered largely fixed, there was simply no option but to keep demand for material wealth within limits. Once commerce started to become more prevalent, Luther insisted that the Neo-Aristotelian notion of scarcity could be upheld if merchants remained dedicated to proper Christian ethics. If people committed themselves to lives of moderation, they could live comfortably and virtuously at the same time that they contributed to a sustainable harmony between nature and economy. More, in contrast, was not hopeful that desires once unleashed could be curtailed. Instead, he argued that it was necessary to remove the institutions responsible for promoting the culture of unlimited profit-making and boundless desires. In their place, new institutions were required to foster a new *zeitgeist*.

This chapter has examined three ways of thinking about the relationship between nature and economy: scarcity as a carefully calibrated balance of limitations; scarcity generated by an incessant quest for accumulation and a never-ending fear of poverty; and scarcity as a form of sufficiency, made possible by a radical change in the culture of desires. In all three of these versions of scarcity, nature was not absolutely fixed, but it was severely limited. These ways of thinking about scarcity were all grounded in broader ideological visions and political convictions. In chapters to follow, as we travel through history, the reader will recognize echoes of these concepts of scarcity, revised and reshaped to fit specific historical moments and their prevailing imaginaries.