Scarcity and the Environment in History and Literature

Rachel Carson Center

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Sponsors: LMU Excellent Program, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Conveners: Susanne Bär (Institut für Nordische Philologie, LMU Munich), Frederike Felcht (Goethe University Frankfurt), Katie Ritson (LMU Munich)

Presenters: Robert Baumgartner (LMU Munich), Klaus Benesch (LMU Munich), Özge Ertem (Koç University Istanbul), Reinhard Hennig (University of Bonn), Christian Hoiß (LMU Munich), Sebastian Huber (LMU Munich), Franziska Jekel (LMU Munich), Fredrik Albritton Jonsson (University of Chicago), Annka Liepold (LMU Munich), Jesse Ramirez (Goethe University Frankfurt), Karen Oslund (Towson University), Oliver Völker (Goethe University Frankfurt).

What is scarcity and how has it been represented in historical and aesthetic contexts? Comprising national and international scholars, and attended by several academics, this workshop attempted to take a cross-disciplinary approach in considering the nature of scarcity and its significance in historical and modern-day debates. Historians and literary scholars presented on scarcity and environment in video games, the cornfields of the USA, medieval Icelandic literature, and contemporary science fiction, among others, to look at ways in which the specter of scarcity has, and continues to, shape our thinking.

ÖZGE ERTEM (Koç University Istanbul) began the first day with her presentation "The British Gentlemen and Ottoman and Indian Peasants in 'Famine-Prone' Lands (1873–1875)." Focusing on the meeting records of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Commission from the Ottoman Anatolia, or Asia Minor, famine, Ertem examined the discourses by which famine and nature was discussed by the British. She compared these with British narratives of the Indian famine, showing how shortage became a spectacle on which they reinforced stereotypes and projected the notion of the economic, political, and cultural superiority of the nineteenth-century West. The representation of scarcity as a choice was discussed, and highlighted as an area for further consideration.

The historical theme was continued by **ANNKA LIEPOLD** (LMU Munich), with "The Morality of Scarcity." She discussed how industrial uses of corn, particularly as a biofuel, led to a debate about the moral justification of growing crops to be used as fuel rather than food. This "food vs. fuel" debate, Liepold argued, thematizes the global scarcity of arable farmland, as evident in the height of the debate having occurred during food price crises of 2007–2008. Both sides have supportive scientific evidence: What, then, is the morally correct use for corn? Demonstrating this question to be highly subjective, Liepold's research gave rise to questions of trust—particularly in the US—and of the complexity of entangled factors entwined in this issue of morality.

FREDRIK ALBRITTON JONSSON (University of Chicago), keynote speaker, then discussed "The Rise and Fall of Cornucopianism?" First using three-dimensional maps of the Forest of Dean, England, as simultaneous visualizations of scarcity and abundance, he indicated how models and statistics were only able to slow, rather than stop, coal—and its resulting wealth—from running out. Linked to God and an eighteenth-century leap in cultural productivity, Cornucopianism became linked to the New World of the US. Fears of exhaustion and Cornucopianism, he demonstrated, are linked: in industrialized eighteenth-century London, concerns arose as to the economic ceiling, and from around the 1780s scarcity was no longer a concern for economists and the material world but of psychology. Clearly, Jonsson pointed out, the environmental history of capitalism is tied to environmental history: going forward, we cannot universalize our current lifestyle for the planet as a whole. This led to discussion as to how the concept of endlessness links sustainability to Cornucopianism: How might historians link this knowledge of the past to the present and future?

KLAUS BENESCH (LMU Munich) opened Day Two of the workshop with his keynote talk, "Writing Grounds: Ecocriticism, Supermodernity, and the Scarcity (and Replenishment) of Place." Benesch began by emphasizing the potential of literature to extend past the bleak economic realm to envision ways of reconnecting humans with the environment. Considering dumping grounds and garbage sites, he discussed the capacity of literature to create sensibilities in relation to such unknown places. Large-scale manufacture dumping grounds, he argued, epitomize an ever-growing global economy of waste—and, if they are manifestations of a need to counter and eradicate scarcity, they are also signs of our dwindling awareness of place. Benesch highlighted an evolvement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the translation of place into symbolic spaces. Proceeding to discuss contemporary texts, including Don DeLillo's Underworld and Jonathan Franzen's How to be Alone, that surround places such as dumping grounds, he showed that, as people become more involved in computerized worlds that replace proximity with meager images of closeness, these texts mark the start of a shift in American literature from space to place

consciousness. Emphasizing the importance of context as a research resource, discussion arose as to the possibility of scholarship in the economics of authorship: since, as Benesch pointed out, there is no easy translation of "scarcity" from one field to another—it works differently in literature compared to economics, for example—from a literary perspective it might be worth considering scarcity in the context of history or economics to understand preconceived assumptions of "scarcity."

Benesch's discussion paved the way for further literary scholarship from **SEBASTIAN HUBER** (LMU Munich) "Making Oneself Scarce: The Poetics and Politics of Scarcity in Herman Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener." Huber analyzed Herman Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street (1853) as conceptualizing a politics and poetics of scarcity in the nineteenth century. Conversely to the conventional reading of Bartleby's death as a consequence of early capitalist mechanisms of exploitation, Huber argued as to imply a more ambivalent layer, mobilizing scarcity not as a passive and debilitating discourse but infused with political, and poetological, potential. This is clear in Melville's evocation of a claustrophobic urban setting in order to criticize the neat concept of "nature" in other Romantic writings. Huber went on to demonstrate how Bartleby transcends a simple critique of American capitalist consumption and production by undermining democracy as a concept. The question of scarcity and simplicity was raised: How can, or should we, define these terms and distinguish between them?

Next, a talk entitled "Urban Poverty: The City as a Place of Scarcity in Baudelaire, Rilke and Hamsun" was given by **FRANZISKA JEKEL** (LMU Munich). Jekel addressed the interactions between depictions of poverty, literary presentations of space, and poetological concepts in novels. Through comparative analysis of texts including Rainer Maria Rilke's Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge and Charles Baudelaire's Le Spleen de Paris, Jekel viewed themes of interaction between poverty, literary representation of space, and poetological concepts to consider how novels create new understanding of scarcity, and the correlation of poetological themes and depiction of urban space. Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop, the possibility of combining themes—such as urban and rural poverty—was raised: are they represented differently?

OLIVER VÖLKER (Goethe University Frankfurt) followed with "'Hang on to the Words': Language and Memory in C. McCarthy's The Road and M. Atwood's Oryx and Crake." Völker discussed how scarcity can be understood as a comprehensive issue, encompassing language, vision and memory. As we are usually confronted with red lists in the context of endangered or extinct species, Völker highlighted how both passages widen our understanding of scarcity and possible loss by extending it into culture. The importance of the fragile resource of language in representation

was raised: How can we retain language as a means of understanding the environment from a unique angle?

The emphasis shifted to literature and film with **CHRISTIAN HOIß'S** (LMU Munich) "Scarcity and Abundance in The Hunger Games—A Chance for Value-Based Teaching." Hoiß used Suzanne Collins' trilogy to highlight the prospect of using literature to support value-based teaching in the environmental humanities. Questions to ask include how values of justice, intergenerational equity, dignity of man, modesty, prosperity, and sustainability are negotiated, which concrete analogies can be found—for example, neo-colonialism—and whether the novel is a parable to our world today. Are there ways to avert such a future? Again reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop, the relevance of value-based teaching was discussed: How might scholars use research in this way?

Debate surrounding the representation of scarcity in moving image continued with **ROBERT BAUMGARTNER (**LMU Munich) with "'Don't Starve': The Representation of Scarcity in Contemporary Video Games." Baumgartner presented representations in games including Don't Starve, Minecraft, and Rust, showing how a basic structure of surviving and overcoming scarcity (for example, on a desert island) can be used as a basis for fundamentally different games. Although these follow the economical and technological optimism of modernity, others like Pathologic and The Void represent scarcity as an existential threat that cannot be prevented by technology; thus, exploitation is the only means of survival. Baumgartner opened this medium to intermedial discussion in this area: questions were raised including how scholars might look into the conditioning of people, and how such games feed back into everyday life.

The second day closed with **JESSE RAMIREZ** (Goethe University Frankfurt) on "Anti-Anti-Abundance; or, Scarcity and Abundance in American Science Fiction Since 1945." Ramirez highlighted how the apocalyptic visions of such literature, with a focus on The Dispossessed by Ursula Le Guin and Philip K. Dick's Pay for the Printer, contest the "achieved utopia" of the age of abundance, particularly in the 1970s: in fact, these texts demonstrate scarcity and the virtues of poverty. Ramirez thus argued that scarcity has lost much of its critical power, suggesting that it is now time to reinvent "utopia" by developing a new vision of "critical abundance," or a cultural politics of "anti-anti-abundance," without sacrificing its utopian potential. Questions arose as to the carrying capacity of the earth, Marxist ideology, and the "good life," raising further the need for an interdisciplinary project or conference about how one might live a "slower" life.

Day Three was opened by **REINHARD HENNIG** (Mid-Sweden University) with "Constructing Collective Environmental Memory: Representations of Scarcity and Abundance in Medieval Icelandic

Literature." Using two groups of sagas—the Sagas of Icelanders and hagiographic texts–Hennig highlighted the polarized representation of abundance and favorable environmental conditions in the former, and scarcity and unfavorable environmental conditions in the latter. Recent archeological evidence suggests a more complex picture than the traditional scholarship focus on the historicity or fictionality of these two narratives: in fact, the sagas likely draw on traditions and knowledge concerning past environmental conditions in Iceland whilst also serving the interests of distinct social groups. Hennig demonstrated the Icelandic sagas to be underestimated as sources for the interdisciplinary study of medieval human ecodynamics, and that they represent two different attempts to construct collective environmental memory through literary representations of abundance and scarcity. This generated debate as to defining literature types-—how might scholars define present-day genres such as religious, fiction or poetry, in order to interpret their representations of scarcity?

The session was closed by **KAREN OSLUND** (Towson University) with "Scarcity and Abundance in the Arctic: A Colonial Condition?" Exploring scarcity in the Arctic as a measure of colonial conditions and state management, Oslund highlighted how an understanding of Arctic history is being constructed around concepts of scarcity and abundance. Examining conditions of scarcity in different historical contexts in Iceland, Greenland, and Canada, Oslund highlighted how the notion of scarcity was used as a tool of colonialism, as a deficiency (either real or perceived) calling for action: for example, the need to instate a better trading company in Iceland or elsewhere in the Arctic, to "rescue" people from their environment, and to "improve" their abilities to cultivate land. Agreeing that both scarcity and abundance have been used historically for the levitation of colonial regimes and resource exploitation, how does this apply in the Arctic today? Is only abundance now represented in today's discourses?

The "Scarcity and Environment in History and Literature" workshop explored scarcity in history, literature, and other media. The importance of geographical and temporal themes was highlighted, as well as topics of politics, economics, theology, and gender. The relevance of visual sources such as video games was acknowledged for interdisciplinary discourse, and the question of how such scholarship might be used in a modern environmental context was raised. The importance of consistency and definition of terminology was also emphasized, particularly in relation to "scarcity," "simplicity," and "sustainability." The possibility of an interdisciplinary publication to result from the workshop was raised, and will be further considered.

--Stephanie Hood