

The Phenomenon of Scarcity: Being, Man, and Society
Elena Leontjeva, Aneta Vainė, and Marija Vyšniauskaitė (Editors)
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Musicologists are well aware of the crucial meaning of silence and pause, but they write about sounds. We can find similar examples in various fields of research as the prevailing object-based thinking dismisses the absence of an object. That is why scarcity, which we constantly experience in different areas after being verbalized, is most often desubstantivized and turns into the gerundial “lacking” that marks the problematic, dysphoric state of an individual or society. The analysis of scarcity is not uncommon either in popular or specialized literature, but the argument usually revolves around a single question: How to avoid scarcity or at least alleviate it?

In this case, the editors of the book charged eighteen authors from four European countries with a doubly ambitious task of revealing the history of ideas on scarcity and of pondering the nature of this phenomenon. First, the goal was to cover the period from ancient Greece to the present across subjects ranging from biblical studies to economics. Second, scarcity and its diachronic and actual reflection was addressed by avoiding the *a priori* negativity characteristic of the customary approach toward it and by discussing what at first glance looked like an outrageous hypothesis about the positive meaning of scarcity.

How were the preconditions for this kind of starting point created, and how did the authors succeed in validating the hypothesis? Scarcity was perceived and addressed in its universal and broadest sense—as privation, deficiency, lack, and frailty. This focus, besides conceptual arguments, was prompted by a paradoxical circumstance that all the above-listed English terms have a single equivalent (*stoka*) in the Lithuanian language in which most of the texts in the book are written.

The first two parts of the book discuss the phenomenon of scarcity from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences. The third part is an interdisciplinary synthesis consisting of a text and a number of schemes. The latter are used to present a concept map—a network of relationships between the factors and consequences of scarcity and the directions of its interpretation. Several features stand out in this book. Although every author uses examples and methodological tools of a specific discipline such as philosophy, theology, biblical studies, social and cultural anthropology, psychology, qualitative sociology, and economics, a possibility of metadisciplinary research is constantly advanced. The focus of the authors falls on scarcity as an aspect of the order and structure of existence, and above all, on the applied value of its deeper, more mature understanding and anthropological validation.

Naglis Kardelis reveals that ancient Greek philosophers saw scarcity as a source of movement, and for Plato “no passion, no passionate aim, passionate hobby or passionate love is possible without relative scarcity” (15). Thus, scarcity contains in itself a condition for an individual’s limited humanity. Bishop Kęstutis Kėvalas aims to develop a new

philosophical-theological discourse that may be called the “theology of scarcity.” His essay argues for the thirst for love as the deepest experience of the reality of scarcity that can also contain its most positive interpretation as the longing for love urges an individual to seek fulfilment. The author calls this aspect the “blessing” of scarcity. Three other essays from similar disciplines address the concept of scarcity through a hermeneutic analysis of the book of Genesis (Elena Leontjeva), the tradition of Thomas Aquinas (Pavel Syssoev), and the critique of contemporary theologians directed to consumeristically charged economic theories that supposedly propose a nihilistic treatment of an individual as a being of scarcity (Holger Lahayne).

In their turn, two essays of an economic profile approach the problem from the opposite side. Stephen Davies offers a historical account of the long life of humanity in a world defined by Thomas Malthus’s theory (cf. his *Essay on Population*, 1798) and points out that we are only just beginning to realize the situation of the recent time—not only as the partial overcoming of the state of constant scarcity of bare necessities for survival but also as the “intellectual breakthrough (alongside others such as a technological one) that transformed humans’ understanding of what scarcity is and what moral implications it has for human beings and human life” (223). Žilvinas Šilėnas and Vytautas Žukauskas present an overview of the functioning of the concept of scarcity in contemporary economic thought as well as its relation to the concepts of property, value, and innovations. They then critically analyze various responses to scarcity and in particular to the actions of the redistribution of goods that, according to the authors, are the source of unproductiveness because, unlike scarcity itself, they do not involve an act of creation. Economic arguments, and their relation to moral philosophy, come to the fore in the essays devoted to sociological and anthropological aspects of scarcity.

It becomes clear from the book as a whole that scarcity is detected from different angles and defined in various ways by many fields of science, and the universalistic concept of the phenomenon of scarcity unlocks a large number of problems of humanitarian-social research even as all the disciplines included in this collection of essays unlock the notion of scarcity itself. For example, readers may be familiar with the contribution of the Late Iberian Scholastics to the development of economic thought, but according to the essay by André Azevedo Alves and Pedro Góis Moreira, a development in the notion of scarcity was already in the works by representatives of the Salamanca School: “the old idea of ‘scarcities’ was slowly developing into the modern concept of ‘scarcity’, understood in a purely positive and general way” (198).

The greatest strength of this volume is the earnest attempt at critical questioning of the status of scarcity as an opposite of good, that is, the denial of the sought-after order of things, deprivation, erosion, degeneration, or merely evil. The authors have more or less succeeded in revealing the ontological, purposeful nature of scarcity that is concealed by daily individual experiences, and they have demonstrated from various angles that scarcity is not only a constant of earthly life that has to be accepted but also the basic condition for change, improvement, and initiative. Regarded as a stimulus, it determines the approach to freedom “as the freedom to act and be fulfilled [...] on an uneasy road

to cognition, creative work, and helping others every day” (331). Giving a new meaning to scarcity is an efficient means to overcome insecurity, which is one of the greatest obstacles—or even *the* greatest obstacle—for the expression of social and cultural activity and creativity. The authors survey a complicated phenomenon, bringing many distinct disciplines into conversation.

There are some points in the volume worthy of critique as well. The authors almost ignore modernity as a factor of change in the relationship between transcendence and scarcity. One might get the impression that interpretation of scarcity at the moral level is still being dominated by the notions of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. Although scarcity is only reflected in other noumena and does not have a shape itself, on choosing it as the target of research, the tendency of the discourse to turn it into an object approaching a noumenon could hardly be avoided. The editors’ attempts to encourage interaction among the essays or at least an indirect response to one another are quite obvious, but repetitions could have been more boldly blue-penciled, and cyclical reversion to the already discussed arguments could have been more strictly avoided in the synthesis. There is a perceivable stylistic dissonance between the authors who have chosen a strictly analytical position and those whose texts imply an effort to make an impact on social behavior and consciousness.

The Phenomenon of Scarcity is a worthwhile addition to ongoing debates about the transformation of scarcity and solutions to the inequality of opportunities, and about the contradiction of poverty and irresponsible waste coexisting in the world. The volume opens a perspective for finding rigorous new arguments from pro-free market positions about the limited possibilities of the state to alleviate scarcity. Moreover, the book is a useful tool for raising political consciousness of the fact that a complete overcoming of scarcity is not only a utopian idea but also basically a harmful populist claim that must be avoided irrespective of the disposition of views on the right-left spectrum.

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The Spoils of War: Greed, Power, and the Conflicts That Made Our Greatest Presidents

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith
New York: PublicAffairs, 2016 (320 pages)

If one thing is clear about *The Spoils of War*, it is the self-characterized “cynical perspective” of the authors. Their subject is the human tragedy of war and what exactly leads American presidents to pursue it. Is not the cost of war virtually always so great as to deter even the boldest soul? Do we not honor our wartime leaders exactly because we know how dreadful war is and therefore we realize the strain borne by commanders in chief? Yet, these questions betray a completely different point of view than the one pursued by the authors. They believe that leaders do what will benefit them personally. And they have