

Famine: The Geography of Scarcity – Lecture 1 (29/2/16)

Tutorials: Each week, prepare a question for the group, respond to other people's questions, and reflect on the questions.

- **Scarcity Principle** – The principle that when supply and demand are mismatched, resources are misallocated
- **Concepts Around Scarcity**
 - **Productionist** (desalination plants to produce water)
 - **Entitlement/Access** – scarcity can occur when resources exist in a sufficient number, but access to them is not available to the people who need them (Bangladesh famine of 1974 – more food was produced in '74 than the years preceding or following, but wasn't distributed properly)
 - Famines are usually intentional – sanctions in Iraq, barriers to aid in Madaya, Syria.

Lecture 2 (4/3/16)

Shortage – when demand for a commodity/item (e.g. food) exceeds supply

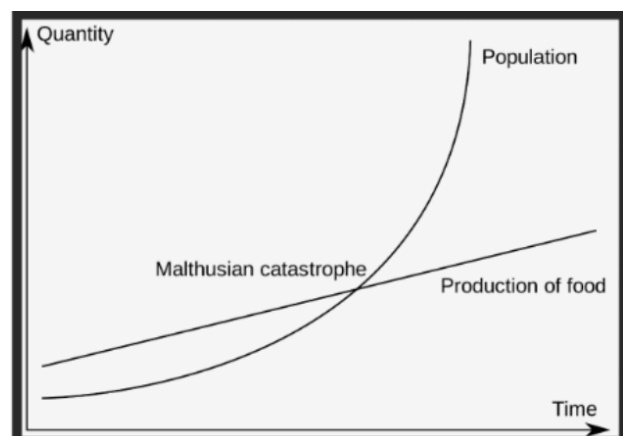
Scarcity Principle – an economic principle in which demand exceeds supply, resulting in a shortage. In theory scarcity means the price of the good or service will rise to an equilibrium point, but this will mean that access to the resource is restricted to those who can afford it. When the resource is a basic food (e.g. wheat) this can cause **food insecurity**.

Discourse – a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as resistance. Ways of constituting knowledge and power relations which influence ways of thinking and producing meaning. The nature of the body, unconscious and conscious mind, and emotional life. *What you do, the way you are.* **The range of imaginable behaviours.**

A particular understanding of scarcity leads to particular solutions. E.g. a Productionist view means where grain is scarce, the solution is to produce more grain, rather than taking a less direct route such as improving the distribution of grain.

Dominant Narratives of Scarcity

- **Limits to Growth** – rapid expansion of consumption results in scarcity. Neo-Malthusian ideas – demand is increasing at an exponential rate, while supply is increasing at a linear rate. **Malthusian Catastrophe.**
- **Neoclassical Economics** – an economic principle in which a limited supply of a good is coupled with high demand, which drives prices up. This



theory is flawed, as it assumes there is always a substitute available. E.g. in a hypothetical situation, if apples become scarce, there will always be peaches and bananas available as a substitute. However in reality, there is no real substitute for clean water/oxygen etc.

Both dominant narratives end up being **anti-poor**, in that they look at things from a macro perspective without taking into account the plight of individual people.

Three Interpretations of Scarcity for this Subject

- **Malthus** – lack of resources, solution is to produce more food. The market will figure itself out (purely economic view)
- **Sen** – poor people lack entitlements/access to food, solved by improving allocation of resources
- **Moral** – scarcity is caused by *omission* or *commission*, solution lies in politics & power

In the past, famines were passed off as the result of a decline in food production or a rapid increase in demand, and were analysed in a technical manner. While this tells some of the story, there is more to it. Contemporary famines are either caused by **Commission** (deliberate acts) or **Omission** (failure to prevent a famine where possible).

“if there are too many people making demands on finite resources, the solution is to reduce either the level of demand or the number of demanders.” (Rayner 2010)

Co-Production

- **Cognitive** – what we think
- **Normative** – what should be
- **Material** – what is
- **Social** – what we do

All are intertwined, and drawn together by the idea of *discourse*.

Malthus

While Malthusian theory remains useful in looking at vulnerability in isolated cases, it is not applicable as a cause of scarcity on a large scale. This is because:

- Malthus wrote before the Industrial Revolution (died 1834), so means of production were much less advanced and less efficient in his time
- Communications and transportation technology have also improved vastly
- We produce enough food for 9-10 billion people, but scarcity still exists

Sen

- Amartya Sen's ideas on entitlements hold some weight in the discussion of scarcity
- “...there is plenty of food, water, and energy on this planet to meet the requirements of a population that demographers project will peak at just below 9 billion. Famines, fuel shortages, and water stress are not the result

of generalized shortages, but failures of allocation to the poor who simply cannot afford to buy what they need.” (Rayner, 2010)

- The world produces enough food to provide everyone in the world with 2,700 calories per day, while the recommended intake is around 2,100. *“We live in a world that is capable of feeding every person that lives on the planet.” (Abhijit Banerjee, The Economist, 2011)*
- However, Sen’s theories fail to explain famines which occur in areas where food is plentiful. E.g. famines that are caused by social or political factors.

Uncomfortable Realities About Modern Scarcity

- Scarcity is a tug-of-war between **haves** and **have-nots**; *we have to be selfish to retain our standards of living.*
- In wealthy countries, we don’t tend to like to discuss scarcity, as we are the beneficiaries of the unequal systems that have created it.

The ‘Scare’ of Scarcity

Scarcity has emerged as a political tool used by powerful groups to perpetuate ideas such as fear of asylum seekers ‘stealing our jobs.’ Closer to home for students, scarcity is being used as a tool to justify increases in tuition fees etc.

John Beddington Lecture

- 35% of world is overweight, 29% is nutrient deficient (starving)
- both ends of the spectrum occur in the same countries
- Inexorable occurrences in the 21st century – **urbanisation, population growth, climate change**
- Poverty is decreasing, food inequality in **increasing**
- **The Perfect Storm**, by 2030 the world will need:
 - **50%** more **energy**
 - **40%** more **food**
 - **30%** more **water**
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