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## The Aesthetics and Politics of Scarcity—A Swedish Example

In my introduction to this volume, I will highlight some variations in representations of scarcity using the example of writings by Erik Gustaf Geijer that combine literature and history and thus the two types of discourse that are in the focus of this collection. Geijer's texts reveal some connections between the politics and aesthetics of scarcity: his poems contributed to the formation of Swedish national romanticism after 1810, and Geijer himself started teaching history at the University of Uppsala that same year. I will briefly discuss Geijer's early poem "Manhem" from 1811 and his essays on "The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society" from 1840. Geijer's writing allows us to distinguish between two modes of thought in representations of scarcity: the idealization of scarcity as the "simple life" and its problematization in discourses on poverty. It will also give us the opportunity to explore the links between space and scarcity.

### Tales of Simplicity: Representing Scarcity

In *Scarcity and Modernity*, Nicholas Xenos develops the idea that

Scarcity in the general sense is a modern invention. . . . Before there was scarcity there were scarcities. Very few conclusions of a general nature followed from the experience of episodes of insufficiency.<sup>1</sup>

Xenos contrasts the former "*period[s]* of insufficiency"<sup>2</sup> with the *general* condition of scarcity in modernity. According to Xenos, the modern understanding of scarcity is characterized by reflections on the modern dynamics of desire, as outlined, for example, by Adam Smith and David Hume: needs are no longer interpreted as naturally fixed; instead, consumer society produces a constant desire that cannot be satisfied. Needs become social rather than natural—thus, aesthetic theory reflects on the structure of social relations in order to understand human sentiments.

1 Nicholas Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 3. Here and subsequently, italics in original.

2 Ibid.

Xenos locates the invention of scarcity in London, which he conceives as the capital of the eighteenth century and the center of the so-called consumer revolution.<sup>3</sup> Geijer traveled to England in 1809–10 and was impressed by London and its abundant trade.<sup>4</sup> However, the English model was not applicable to Sweden, as John Landquist writes in his biography of Geijer: the ideal of the gentleman required wealth, and England was a military power; whereas Sweden was economically depressed and had lost large parts of its kingdom to Russia. According to Landquist, Geijer, as a Swedish moralist, had to proclaim the moral advantages of poverty, since he addressed himself to the poor. After returning to Sweden, Geijer published “Manhem,” one of his most popular poems. Landquist reads this poem as a reaction to the Swedish situation, contrasting with Geijer’s impressions of Britain.<sup>5</sup> Praising the simple lifestyle of the venerable Nordic peasant—the independent “odalbonde”—, “Manhem” criticizes the comforts of modern life. The text complains that the days of our fathers are gone—we find a national “we” in this poem that indicates its function in nation-building—and with those days a time of virtue and power has disappeared. Nowadays, the poem states, German learnedness (“lärdom”), Gallic clothes, and Indian spices please the Northern son and thus bind him with chains to new desires. Finally, the poem calls for the purification of the time-honored temple of virtues in order to re-establish the ancient “Manhem,” the legendary home of men.<sup>6</sup>

As Anton Blanck has noticed, the poem bears a striking similarity to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s criticism of modern civilization.<sup>7</sup> “Manhem” develops a counter-economy of desire in its condemnation of luxury and its idealization of the harsh conditions of life in ancient Sweden and ascribes these positive effects on the human character. However, even though the text praises the simple-minded, strong, masculine peasant and emphasizes its hero’s lack of formal education and practice in delicate speech (“att sirligt tala”), the form of the text itself is highly elaborate; it is written in a strict rhyme scheme and uses recurring motifs, such as the contrast between masculine resilience and the

3 See *ibid.*, 7f.

4 See for example Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Samlade Skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, vol. 13, *Brev* (Stockholm: Norstedt & Söner, 1931), 92–95. For a general introduction to Geijer’s trip to England, see Roger Pilkington, “Geijer in England,” in *Att följa sin genius: Tio studier om Erik Gustaf Geijer sammanställda av Geijersamfundet*, Geijerstudier 6 (Karlstad: Press förlag, 1982), 41–56 and John Landquist, *Geijer: En Levnadsteckning* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1954), 53–67.

5 See Landquist, *Geijer*, 65.

6 Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Samlade skrifter*, ed. John Landquist, vol. 2, *Skaldestycken, Tal och avhandlingar 1817–1819* (Stockholm: Norstedt & Söner, 1924), 21–23.

7 See Anton Blanck, *Geijers Götiska Diktning* (Stockholm: A. Bonnier, 1918), 243–45.

detested effeminacy. Thus, the idealization of a simple life is realized by means of highly artificial poetic language. In this poem, scarcity forms the basis of the idealized national character and is associated with strength and simplicity. Luxury, in contrast, is the product of foreign influences. These observations point to two aspects that are relevant for the aesthetics of scarcity.

Firstly, representations of scarcity can be idealized. In “Manhem,” the imagination of a former way of life that was closer to nature—the poem emphasizes the peasant’s connection to the soil—serves as a contrast to new and foreign influences. The purpose of this idealization is the construction of a national identity. Scarcity is the precondition for the protagonist’s heroism and a driving force behind his actions; it leads to masculine strength. We can also imagine other positive narrative functions of scarcity: it might intensify sensual perceptions, contribute to the victory of the mind over the body, or emphasize the power of nature, for example.

Secondly, as the elaborate form of the poem shows, the representation of scarcity can occur in different, even opulent, forms. In “Manhem,” the critique of learnedness signals that the social structure of reading had changed, a fact that was important for nation-building, as scholars such as Benedict Anderson have suggested.<sup>8</sup> The poem’s complicated idealization of simplicity reveals in its critique of learnedness an insecurity concerning the development of literacy and education for all, but also a growing interest in a new type of historical protagonist: the people. This is one of the main political elements in the imagination of scarcity: it is often linked to the representation of the lower classes. However, the forms of this representation vary according to their political goals.

The contrast between form and content in “Manhem” indicates that literature was going through a transition period around 1800: the ideal of the heroic peasant had not yet found its literary form—literature still had to develop a language for the austere lives of ordinary people. Later, realism and modernism would offer more appropriate aesthetic strategies for the representation of scarcity.

8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

### The Nature and Economy of Scarcity

Almost thirty years later, Geijer wrote in his essays on “The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society”: “It has often occurred to me that one ought to think about writing the history of the poor (to which as yet only fragmentary contributions exist); since ordinary history is chiefly of the rich and powerful.”<sup>9</sup> Obviously, Geijer’s interest in a history of the entire people remained, but it had changed from the idealization of simplicity to a problematization of poverty. Geijer’s interest in poverty is characterized by the attempt to understand society as a whole:

No true insight can be obtained in the parts, without a general view of the whole, . . . and the more complicated a subject is, the sooner one is confused by the multitude of its particularities. . . . Such a subject is pauperism, complicated in the highest degree, in our time especially. . . . Nothing merely negative can be comprehended except through the positive whose converse and opposite it is. . . . On the other hand, it might be the case that the positive can not rightly be understood without its negation. Thus the physician studies in *disease* the laws of *health*. It is possible that in order to understand the right nature of *wealth*, it may also be necessary that we study *poverty* [sic].<sup>10</sup>

We notice how the imagination of scarcity informs the imagination of a complete and abstract unity, such as the market, society, or the global. Sandra Sherman has shown that the imagination of poverty changed with the development of the statistical imagination.<sup>11</sup> Geijer refers at some points to statistical data, but he develops a historical narrative in particular. Geijer’s comparison of his own approach to a physician who “studies in *disease* the laws of *health*” underlines that nineteenth-century economic thought was heavily influenced by conceptions of natural science—and that the rhetoric, the metaphors, and comparisons in concepts of scarcity deserve our attention. The connection between modern concepts of nature and economic models is typical of liberal thought. Michel Foucault even declares in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* that investigate the rise of liberalism: “If we take things up . . . at their origin, you can

9 Erik Gustaf Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society: A Series of Political and Historical Essays*, trans. B. Hale Lewin (Stockholm: L. J. Hjerta, 1840), 4.

10 Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 3–4.

11 Sandra Sherman, *Imagining Poverty: Quantification and the Decline of Paternalism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 2–5, 10, 27–28, 35–39, 83–85, 100–23.

see that what characterizes this new art of government I have spoken about would be much more a naturalism than a liberalism.”<sup>12</sup>

Geijer’s series of essays stands in a long tradition of academic reflections on poverty—one of its most prominent examples was Thomas Robert Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798. In his reflections on scarcity and abundance, Nicholas Xenos states of this period: “Amid the light of hope and shadows of fear cast by the [French] Revolution, the simultaneous existence of poverty and affluence began to be perceived as an anomalous situation.”<sup>13</sup> However, the reactions to this perception and the suggestions for the normalization of the anomalous situation differed. One could accept scarcity amidst abundance as a natural and necessary part of the entire system, but it was also possible to see it as a development that required regulation or political interventions—if only for the prevention of revolutions. Malthus and Geijer represent these two approaches.

Like Malthus, Geijer considers environmental factors as important for an understanding of poverty. But in contrast, Geijer does not suppose that there is a natural law that leads to the miserable condition of the poor, a “power of population” that exceeds “the power in the earth to provide subsistence for man”<sup>14</sup>—and thus normalizes poverty: based on his understanding of the environment, Malthus developed the idea of a perpetual scarcity that cannot be overcome. Geijer, on the other hand, described the specific environmental conditions of Sweden in order to explain Swedish history. According to Geijer, the good Swedish soil and its favorable climate—at least compared to other Nordic regions—led to the early agricultural development of Sweden, and he states:

It is the winter that determines the character of northern housekeeping. They [i.e., our forefathers] cannot live from day to day, but must live with respect to the whole year, and during the far longest portion of it, upon that store which has been laid up during the shorter.<sup>15</sup>

12 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 61.

13 Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity*, 36.

14 Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 61.

15 Geijer, *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 67.

In this passage, natural conditions, i.e., the periods of scarcity resulting from a long winter, become the foundation for economic practices such as storage and planning. Geijer distinguishes this “chief natural feature of Northern life” from “*an allodial right acquired by labour, for Swedish soil was never won by conquest.*”<sup>16</sup> In his essays, Geijer binds the ownership of soil and the accompanying rights to labor. However, according to Geijer, the economy of scarcity, careful storage, and planning, and the link between fixed property, labor, and rights were weakened through the Swedish history of warfare, the inheritance of extraordinary rights and privileges, the development of war-related industries like mining, and the increase of moveable capital. Thus, his approach combines his understanding of the environmental conditions with a historiographical account in order to understand poverty, or, broadly speaking, the social structures that give rise to poverty.

Geijer thinks that labor “has in common with health its natural laws which are not to be infringed with impunity, and one of these laws is, that *production* is regulated by *demand.*”<sup>17</sup> His belief in laws of the market is typical of liberal thought, and Geijer is famous in Swedish historiography for his turn from conservative to liberal.<sup>18</sup> However, he states, “at a period of emergency, if society itself must come forward as an extraordinary labour-contractor, the application of this labour is therefore most usefully directed to such undertakings as promote the future demand for labour, by removing the obstructions which have hitherto affected it,” and he suggests investing in “*increased facilities of communication*” since they increase the “*Common Capital*”<sup>19</sup> in Sweden. Geijer is liberal in his will to understand and follow the laws of the market, but he holds no laissez-faire position, since the functioning of the market can sometimes require state intervention.

Geijer’s approach to the nature of scarcity is regional in its relation to environmental conditions and historical in its perspective on labor. Geijer considers an environment with scarce resources as a factor that encourages more economical behavior. The historical development of labor leads him to an optimistic perspective:

16 Ibid., 68f.

17 Ibid., 143.

18 For a short critical discussion see Elsa Norberg, “Erik Gustaf Geijer,” in *Svenskt biografiskt leksikon*, accessible online: <http://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=12976> (24 August 2014).

19 Geijer *The Poor Laws and Their Bearing on Society*, 144.

The main article of agricultural produce, grain, has upon the whole fallen in price while both population has increased and the value of agricultural labour has risen. The experience derived from the two most civilized states in Europe [i.e., France and England] may serve as that properly belonging to the advance of civilization, and shews that an increasing population, with industry may easily surmount the dreaded difficulties of insufficient means of subsistence.<sup>20</sup>

Geijer's perspective includes the "advance of civilization," the division of labor and industrialized production that also changes agriculture. This perspective reminds us of Ester Boserup's influential criticism of Malthus's pessimism in the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

### Spaces of Scarcity

In his reflections on *Scarcity and Modernity*, Xenos states: "There is good reason to believe that the perception of scarcity as a universal condition of the human species . . . is peculiar to the modern Anglo-European eye,"<sup>22</sup> and he contrasts this modern perception of scarcity to Marshall Sahlins's description of the hunter-gatherer society as "the original affluent society," a society with abundant leisure time and few needs.<sup>23</sup> Sahlins took part in the so-called formalist-substantivist debate in economic anthropology that discussed whether the neoclassical concept of the economic man can be applied universally or whether human needs result from the structure of social organization—simply put, do all people have to economize, or is the economic man an effect of the market economy?<sup>24</sup> This debate questions whether the scarcity of means for potentially unlimited ends that twentieth-century liberal economics presupposes really exists, or whether it is an effect of modern capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Sahlins's methods were strongly criticized, and David Kaplan states that "the original affluent society thesis . . . may be as much a commentary on our own society as it is a depiction of the life of

20 Ibid., 166.

21 See for example Ester Boserup, "The Impact of Scarcity and Plenty on Development," in "Hunger and History: The Impact of Changing Food Production and Consumption Patterns on Society," thematic issue, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 2 (1983): 383–407, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/203712>.

22 Xenos, *Modernity and Scarcity*, 2.

23 See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972), 1–39.

24 See Karsten Kumoll, *Kultur, Geschichte und Indigenisierung der Moderne: Eine Analyse des Gesamtwerks von Marshall Sahlins* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), 92f.

25 Cf. Lionel Robbins, *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (London: Macmillan, 1932).



hunter-gatherers.”<sup>26</sup> However, Xenos’s reference to Sahlins helps to keep in mind that economic concepts, such as the modern and liberal idea of scarcity, are bound up with specific historical and geopolitical constellations.

What were those spaces of scarcity in Malthus and Geijer? Malthus imagined scarcity not only after a period of bad harvests and the French Revolution, but also after the British loss of the American colonies—and the postcolonial fears of former colonizers are an important factor in debates about scarcity right up to today. Obviously, the loss of land stimulates reflections about scarcity. Furthermore, spatial models of thought can influence how scarcity is envisioned. Malthus introduces the explanation of his thesis with the words: “Let us now take any spot of earth, this island for example.”<sup>27</sup> Fredrik Albritton Jonsson has shown how the model of the island has influenced Malthus’s and other political economists’ vision of limits to growth.<sup>28</sup> Geijer developed his vision of a simple and restricted Swedish life that preserved the people’s independence and strength after the loss of Finland to Russia. The difference between Malthus’s concept of natural scarcity and Geijer’s belief in overcoming scarcity through progressive politics is related to the two men’s differing ideas of nature—and to the divergent positions of peasants in society. Their understandings of the interaction between human beings and their environment informed their visions of scarcity.

26 David Kaplan, “The Darker Side of the ‘Original Affluent Society,’” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 56, no. 3 (2000), 318, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3631086>.

27 Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 16.

28 Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment’s Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 188–231, esp. 188–201.