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From Anti-Abundance to Anti-Anti-Abundance: Scarcity, Abundance, and Utopia in Two Science Fiction Writers

It is difficult to remember in these times of looming eco-apocalypse that the relatively recent past called itself the “age of abundance.” For roughly two and a half decades after the end of World War II, the United States appeared to have finally solved the riddle of scarcity. In the eyes of its proponents, the post-scarcity United States was a land of full production and employment, high wages, and cheap consumer goods. But not everyone was content with this “Golden Age of Capitalism,” as one prominent historian has described the period.¹ Among the discontent were two science fiction writers, Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin, who destroyed the United States in their fiction in order to rehabilitate scarcity. Dick’s and Le Guin’s visions of scarcity are both critiques of abundance and utopian gestures. They are utopian not because they are hopelessly idealistic, as a common definition of *utopia* would have it, but because they insist that the age of abundance is a false utopia, and that another, better world is still possible.

My main argument in this essay, however, is that scarcity has lost its critical power and now represents the greatest barrier to imagining better futures. The utopian imagination underwent a major transformation in the 1970s, the decade in which the US energy crisis, the country’s defeat in Vietnam, the explosion of the “population bomb,” and the alarming realization of “limits to growth” proved that the age of abundance was short-lived. If, during the previous era, scarcity provided alternative visions of the good life, in the subsequent historical situation of environmental crisis it disciplines the imagination into accepting austerity. To avoid or simply deal with eco-apocalypse, so the dominant narrative goes, we must scale back massively, learn to accept insecurity, and in effect forsake the utopian dream of an existence that is free from toil and want. Perhaps this dream is simply no longer valid; perhaps it was always just an idealistic fantasy. But maybe our task today is to begin to reinvent utopia. To this end I propose the concept of “anti-anti-abundance,” a cultural politics that seeks to build on critiques of abundance without sacrificing its utopian potential.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus Books, 1994).

Paying for the Printer in the Age of Affluence

The age of affluence: customers at a crowded New Hampshire grocery store in 1958. Photo © Nick DeWolf. Used with permission.



Between roughly 1945 and 1973 lies an era of economic optimism in US thought and culture that cannot but appear strange from our perspective today. Allow me to offer two brief examples, one from a major economist, the other from a popular magazine. John Kenneth Galbraith, perhaps the most widely read US economist of his generation, wrote in the opening paragraphs of *The Affluent Society* that “nearly all [nations] throughout all history have been very poor. . . . Poverty was the all-pervasive fact of that world. *Obviously* it is not of ours.”²

The 16 October 1964 issue of *Life* magazine struck a similar note. The title of the issue’s central article boldly declares: “Prosperity—1964: It’s Unprecedented.” The caption to a photograph of the Super Giant grocery store in Rockville, Maryland, gushes about “the customers [who] move through the \$5 million grocery store, picking from the thousands of items on the high-piled shelves until their carts become cornucopias filled with an abundance that no other country in the world has ever known.”³ These two examples encapsulate a moment in which elite opinion and popular media produced a powerful image of post-scarcity America as an achieved utopia.

The science fiction of Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin dissents from US abundance. In the 1956 story “Pay for the Printer,” one of his many visions of the aftermath of a nuclear World War III, Dick imagines an alien species called the Biltong, whose special ability is to create, or “print,” replicas of human artifacts. (Today, our Biltong are called 3D printers.) Living in a devastated world of ash, the survivors of World War III are completely dependent on the Biltong, and remain so enthralled by the old world that they use the aliens to recreate it in microcosm: “In the store windows, the television sets and mixers and toasters and autos and pianos and clothing and whiskey and frozen peaches were perfect prints of the originals.”⁴ As Dick’s list of consumer goods suggests, the Biltong

2 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 14. My emphasis.

3 “Prosperity—1964.” *Life*, 16 October 1964, 36.

4 Philip K. Dick, “Pay for the Printer,” in *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*, vol. 3 (New York: Citadel, 1990), 243.

are figures for the same abundance that excited the authors of “Prosperity—1964.” They represent a production process that operates independently of human effort, automatically generating a consumer cornucopia. Dick’s critical stance toward consumerism emerges when all the Biltong replicas begin to fall apart, leaving most of the survivors in a condition of radical scarcity, without the raw materials and skills necessary to make their own objects. Not only is the US utopia a false world of brittle, mass-produced commodities, Dick suggests, it is also a world of alienated labor, in which effortless consumption has caused Americans to forfeit their creativity.

But suddenly two magical objects appear: “a wooden drinking cup, crude and ill-shaped,” and a knife “as crude as the cup—hammered, bent, tied together with wire.”⁵ The cup and the knife are not replicas; they have been made the old-fashioned way, by human hands. In this post-nuclear world in which all the Super Giant grocery stores have disappeared, the handicraft production of a “crude” cup and knife is astonishing. “Pay for the Printer” contends that the United States’ so-called plenty is cheap: it is consumed mindlessly, and produced without the skill and pride that give value to the products of labor. Dick’s cup and knife symbolize the rebirth of value, which Dick measures by neither price nor status, but by genuine usefulness and the purposiveness of manual work. The cup and knife are utopian objects—not because they exist in a perfect world (far from it), but because through them Dick refuses to accept that the age of abundance is the best of all possible worlds.

To be sure, Dick could not imagine a positive alternative to the false US utopia. Very few social dreamers could do that after George Orwell’s *1984*, a monument to the pervasive Cold War idea that all utopian projects inevitably result in totalitarianism. As we will see, the utopian literary imagination returns from exile only at the end of the age of abundance, fueled by the energies of the counterculture, New Left, and new social movements like environmentalism. “Pay for the Printer” belongs instead to the negative history of utopia. Faced with the reality of the affluent society, Dick’s most effective tool was negation, apocalypse. By destroying the United States and reintroducing scarcity, Dick created an imaginative space in which a few humble objects can gesture toward a future in which human beings once again control their own destiny.

5 Ibid., 249.

The Dispossessed in the Age of Limits

Marking the US's defeat in Vietnam, the oil crisis, the publication of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth*, and the onset of economic recession, the years 1972–73 promptly closed the age of abundance. Perhaps the most salient symbol of the new scarcity was identified by Donald Worster in his lunchtime colloquium talk at the Rachel Carson Center in January 2014. It is the image that appears on the cover of an early edition of *Limits to Growth*: a progressively shrinking Earth. Our planet, once thought to be so generous to the American “people of plenty,” is no longer big enough to sustain their massive appetites.

Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* was published at this juncture. Two neighboring planets take center stage in Le Guin's novel: Urras, an abundant world that is analogous to the early postwar United States, and Anarres, a harsh world that is home to an anarchist utopia. Anarres is a “barren stone,” blasted by howling wind and dust, able to support life only because of the inhabitants' tremendous labor, which still cannot forestall occasional droughts and famines. Le Guin's novel is so compelling because of her complex treatment of the relationship between scarcity and utopia. On the one hand, scarcity on Anarres is necessity, an absolute material limit on individual and collective freedom. And yet because life is possible on the planet only on the strength of rigorous cooperation, scarcity enables Le Guin to develop a remarkable depiction of solidarity. Shevek, an inhabitant of Anarres and the novel's protagonist, explains soberly that “a society can only relieve social suffering, unnecessary suffering. The rest remains.”⁶ Such a statement should put to rest the straw-man definition of utopia as a hopelessly naïve vision of perfection, for Shevek makes it clear that utopia can never transcend humanity's existential and bodily vulnerability. Instead of treating our finitude as the ultimate rebuttal to utopia, Shevek intriguingly claims that it is the foundation. He explains this position in an eloquent passage that is worth quoting at length. Anarres, Shevek explains to his hosts on Urras, is

all dust and dry hills. All meager, all dry. And the people aren't beautiful. . . . The towns are very small and dull, they are dreary. No palaces. Life is dull, and hard work. You can't always have what you want, or even what you need, because there isn't enough. You Urrasti have enough. . . . You are rich, you own. We are poor, we lack. You have, we do not have. Everything is beautiful, here. Only not the faces. On Anarres nothing

6 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2011), 60.

is beautiful, nothing but the faces. The other faces, the men and women. We have nothing but that, nothing but each other. Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free.⁷

Measured according to the riches of Urras, Anarres cannot but pale in comparison. Yet Shevek claims that in a world in which property and commodities have disappeared, the free individual and the solidarity of community shine forth. In a state of radical scarcity, Shevek says, human beings have nothing—*except each other*. Scarcity is the material condition under which the Anarresti suffer together, struggle together, and triumph together; it reminds them constantly of their world's fragility and motivates their collective labors to overcome it.

On the other hand, Shevek also understands that necessity threatens the very core of anarchism. He observes: “If we let one another down, if we don't give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only *resource*.”⁸ The economic term resource implies that solidarity is not an achieved virtue, but a sheer tool or means. In other words, if solidarity is imposed by the environment, it risks becoming a perfunctory obligation, not the achievement of the free association of individuals (the basic tenet of anarchism). Moreover, there is a fine line between motivating and deflationary scarcity. If scarcity becomes too extreme, as it nearly does during a severe drought on Anarres, it does not inspire solidarity, but instead reduces people to animalistic, selfish, and violent drives for self-preservation (the world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, which I will come back to).

Anti-Anti-Abundance

Despite the powerful achievements of Dick and Le Guin, their critical uses of scarcity have reached their apotheosis in today's ideologies of austerity. We can already see the problem in Dick. While the apocalyptic return to scarcity might help keep the utopian imagination alive, it also destroys the utopian possibilities embedded in the age of abundance itself. The foremost philosopher of what might be called “critical abundance”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

was the radical German-American Herbert Marcuse. Although he was a fierce critic of postwar America, Marcuse did not reject the thesis of abundance per se. He agreed with liberal intellectuals like John Kenneth Galbraith that the US economy had created the possibility of a post-scarcity society that could finally liberate humanity from toil and want. Freedom is possible, Marcuse claimed, not under conditions of scarcity, which have historically condemned most people to drudgery and sacrifice, and have naturalized inequality in the notion that life is essentially unfair. Rather, freedom requires conditions of technological complexity. Only the most advanced economy can enable people to fulfill their basic material needs with a minimum of toil, freeing them to pursue higher forms of human flourishing. Marcuse differed from liberal intellectuals, however, in his belief that a capitalist society, a society dedicated to the exploitation of labor and the accumulation of capital, can never actualize this possibility without revolution. A major aspect of such a revolution would be the democratization of the economy and the redefinition of needs, of what *counts* as abundance and scarcity.

While Le Guin has much in common with Marcuse, she, too, overvalues scarcity. Le Guin's use of scarcity was powerful in her historical moment because it came, as I have already mentioned, just as the age of abundance ended. The utopian scarcity of Anarres derives much of its force from its being a critique, a rejection, of that prior moment in history. But today we are even deeper into the post-abundance age of ecological limits, and science fiction's critique of abundance is no longer as useful because it has become reality. The affluent society is really gone; we no longer need science fiction to imagine worlds in which it has disappeared. What we are likely to face as climate change worsens can already be seen in the responses of the advanced capitalist world to the Great Recession of 2008, in particular the domestic and international austerity programs. As in the financial crisis, the profits of destroying the environment are privatized, but the costs are socialized. In this new climate, scarcity becomes ideologically suspect. Allow me to spotlight two main issues.

First, Dick's and Le Guin's method of rolling society back to conditions of scarcity has become an exercise in consumer reconciliation. Compare Dick's "Pay for the Printer" to McCarthy's *The Road*. They share a post-nuclear setting, but while Dick uses fiction to valorize labor, McCarthy valorizes consumption. In place of Dick's crude handmade cup, McCarthy singles out a Coke can, which perceptive viewers of the film adaptation have used in spoof advertisements on YouTube. The reader or viewer can experience

the imaginary destruction of the United States, close the book or stop the movie, drink a Coke, and appreciate it anew. The effect of the scene is thus not critique, but gratitude for luxuries. This is, in fact, why McCarthy wrote the book: in a rare TV interview, he told the talk show host Oprah Winfrey that the message people should get from *The Road* is that life is good, and we should be grateful. So let us drink our Cokes and enjoy our unsustainable system while it lasts!

Second, to make a virtue of scarcity today is to endorse the austere logic of cutbacks, canceled social services, unemployment—or, if you are lucky, temporary work—and general belt-tightening. These policies are imposed on working people while benefiting the wealthy, and treated euphemistically as “cleaning house,” becoming “lean” and “efficient.” That Le Guin’s thinking was already perilously close to austerity can be seen during moments in *The Dispossessed* when scarcity functions as purification: after a drought, Shevek says that now “priorities were becoming clear again. Weaknesses, soft spots, sick spots would be scoured out, sluggish organs restored to full function, the fat would be trimmed off the body politic.”⁹ As climate change becomes more unmanageable, we will hear plenty more of this rhetoric. Expect less. Enjoy what you have. Be thankful the situation is not even worse. Be thankful that we have climate change to trim the fat and set our priorities straight.

While I certainly do not deny that climate change demands difficult modifications to our social structures, values, and daily lives, in closing I want to gesture, with admitted vagueness, to an alternative cultural politics that I call “anti-anti-abundance.” Back in the age of abundance, Jean Paul Sartre and the Students for a Democratic Society defined their positions toward communism as anti-anti-communist. They neither endorsed communism nor capitulated to anti-communist hysteria, but settled instead for a double negative. I think this should be our position toward abundance today. The double negative refuses the celebratory ideologies of postwar consumerism, which live on, zombielike, in talk of unlimited growth, *and* the austere logic of scarcity. Let us instead develop a concept of critical abundance, a position that enables us to remember the utopian kernel that Marcuse saw within the age of abundance—the possibility of a life free from toil and want—and to recognize the necessity of a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system and its definition of the good life. The age of ecological limits does not necessitate obedience to limits, at least not yet, while there is

⁹ Ibid., 262.

still time to act. It is also an opportunity to show that what are abstractly called “limits” are really the historically specific effects of a world made in the image of capitalism. It is an invitation to take a utopian leap beyond that world.

Suggested Reading

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