



Lithium, an essential but limited natural resource lies below salt piles in Bolivia's Uyuni Salt Flat.



BOOKS *et al.*

ECONOMICS

Making the most of scarcity

A pair of historians dig into the deep ideological roots of our planetary predicament

By Erle C. Ellis

Written by historians Fredrik Albritton Jonsson and Carl Wennerlind, *Scarcity* connects, dissects, and narrates the history of Western economic ideas about the natural limits to human societies, from the deep roots beneath Thomas Malthus's 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population* to Johan Rockström and Will Steffen's contemporary Planetary Boundaries framework. The book's goal is clear from the beginning—to use a deep historical understanding of these ideas to challenge the central thinking behind neoclassical economics, depicted as being “at the heart of the planetary crisis we now face.”

The book's eight core chapters explore five centuries of Western intellectual movements and their conceptions of human-nature relations, including the Enlightenment, Romanticism, socialism, and neoclassical economics. The authors introduce a framework of “Finitarianism” versus “Cornucopianism” as a means to clarify ideological debates about natural limitations and unlimited possibilities, with “each side defin[ing] itself by rejecting the other.”

Anyone interested in the history of ideas will enjoy this book, with its detailed and fascinating narratives connecting important

thinkers on human-nature relations from Aristotle to Rousseau, Adam Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Mill, Marx, Keynes, Marshall Sahlins, Rachel Carson, and many more, together with a host of influencers and influences not usually connected with environmental thinking, from Émile Zola to Hannah Arendt.

Scientists will be drawn in by the authors' efforts to connect historical narratives with environmental and social conditions, from the “Little Ice Age” to the space age. But in the end, this is a book with a mission: to convince us that “business as usual will bring disaster” and that the answer is an ideology of “planetary scarcity” focused on “the limits of human ingenuity, the power of unintended consequences, and the fragility of all earthly things.”

Environmentalists will find this territory familiar, and there is little but critique for other perspectives—and realities. The book completely ignores two of the most important thinkers on human-nature relations since Malthus—the agricultural economist Ester Boserup and Nobel Prize-winning economist of the commons Elinor Ostrom. How are we to understand the failed predictions of both Malthus and Ehrlich without Boserup's model of increasing food production driven by increasing demand? Can we understand sustainable governance of common-pool resources—like Earth's atmosphere—without

Ostrom's polycentric governance? The book is nearly silent on the subjects of demographic transitions and rapid declines in population growth, ongoing intensification of agriculture and increased productivity, and the forest transitions and striking forest recoveries of developed nations.

Although the book spares no effort attacking neoclassical economics—the subject of much debate within economics itself—one feels distant from the action, with very little direct examination of these critical debates. Even the recent “degrowth” movement, which advocates shrinking economies to address environmental limits, is only mentioned in passing—a surprising omission for a book focused on planetary scarcity.

While the authors recognize their limited focus on “a narrow range of elite, white, male thinkers,” they call for others to write a “more expansive history.” It is difficult to understand the absence of at least some effort to go beyond the Western canon in order to present the full conceptual range of thinking on human-nature relations. The reader will find no inspiration herein from the many diverse and broader views of human-nature relations across cultures, whether Eastern, African, or Indigenous. Nor does the book stray far from Western history, conventional environmentalism, or capitalist critique. Within such limits, it is no surprise that the book's narrative begins with the Christian dialectic of Eden's bliss versus toil in the garden and ends with binary thinking of planetary boundaries—safety on one side and disaster on the other.

Planetary scarcity may indeed represent aspects of planetary reality, but as a new ideology it has little to offer those seeking to achieve the main goal of this book—“to reconsider fundamentally how we organize our economy.” Beyond the doom and sacrifice of conventional environmental Finitarianism, there is a growing world of ideas and action for transformative change. These include the developmental and conservation possibilities of clean energy, declining populations, new models of social cooperation and exchange, and biodiversity conservation in working landscapes.

While this book is perhaps a new classic for historians of ideas—particularly those focused on the Western world—those seeking a deeper and broader understanding of how people and planet might interact more beneficially in the future must look elsewhere. ■



Scarcity

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