

# Scarcity, Abundance, and Sufficiency

## Contributions to Social and Economic Theory

By

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#### ABSTRACT

Economic sociology has established itself as a strong and vibrant field in the social sciences. A number of significant studies have been conducted on the relation between the economy and society: on firms, markets, networks, money, and general action theory. But little has been done on the issues of scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency (SAS). Both economical and sociological approaches seem to assume scarcity as an important premise. But none seems to question the deeper nature of it. The SAS theme seems to be analytically underdeveloped in both disciplines.

This thesis aims to explore an alternative ground for critical economic sociology or more generally for social and economic theory. Instead of focusing on the problems of rational choice, which a number of sociological studies have done, the thesis starts even earlier in the set of assumptions that condition human agency, it focuses on the premise of scarcity. The central question posed is: 'What is the nature of SAS in social and economic theory?' Five studies have been carried out in order to answer this question. These studies focus on quite divergent empirical fields – famine, voluntary simplicity, and educational choice – in order to explore the varying importance of the sociocultural mechanisms underlying SAS.

*Paper I* deals with absolute SAS and the assumption of universal scarcity in neoclassical economics. A critical examination of this assumption is conducted by studying the empirical phenomenon of global hunger in relation to a theoretical elaboration of SAS. It also proposes a framework for explaining and understanding absolute SAS.

*Paper II* further tests the framework developed in Paper I. The food entitlement decline and the food availability decline are commonly seen as conflicting approaches to explaining famine. The paper analyses the relation between these two approaches and argues that these approaches can in fact be reconciled under one framework by outlining their causal sources. This analysis also shows that there is a third causal source that needs to be incorporated with the other two approaches. The whole analysis is exemplified by the Bengal Famine of 1943.

*Paper III* focuses on relative SAS. It studies how voluntary material simplicity countervails the causal effect of relative scarcity generated by the environment of a consumer society. Analyses of both interviews and texts were carried out. It is shown that voluntary material simplifiers manage, though with difficulty, to neutralize the causal effect of the consumer society. This is achieved by mediating the cultural properties of the economic ethic of material simplicity, which promotes the deflation of human wants. They actualize what has been called the *modus vivendi* of material simplicity, a practical state of relative abundance.

The aim of *Paper IV* is to study the formation of wants based on interviews with upper secondary school pupils. The paper shows that an organic view of decision-making is in better accordance with observations than is a hierarchical view and thus supports previous research claiming that pragmatic rationality (based on habitus and reflexivity) plays a more important role in students' decision-making processes than does instrumental rationality.

*Paper V* compares two classical economists and their views on scarcity, namely Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) and Lionel Robbins (1898-1984). However, both scholars' views tend to naturalize and universalize scarcity, and thus to overlook abundance and sufficiency, which are important states in the social provisioning process. It is argued that this is due to neglect of the sociocultural causal underpinnings of SAS.

Hence, the thesis offers three main contributions to social and economic theory in general: (1) a tentative typology of SAS; (2) a holistic (multi-casual) explanatory approach to SAS; and (3) an alternative foundation for social and economic theory, based on what has been called the SAS theme. It is shown that this theme contains various socioeconomic phenomena that are intimately linked to SAS (famine, want, property, market, justice, poverty, action, conflict, etc.), which then set the stage for new kinds of socioeconomic inquiries as well as new relationships between existing ones. Hopefully, this will enable an even deeper understanding of how SAS conditions social and economic life.