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ByIain Boal and David Martinez

Taken from the Commoner website: http://www.commoner.org.uk/feastandfamine.htm, posted to aut-op-sy mailing list. Iain Boal is involved with Retort, the Bay Area radical history collective behind Afflicted Powers. Without having read that book, it's difficult to articulate the relationship of his analysis of the ideological bases that bridge enviromentalism, fundamentalist eschatology in the US and capitalism with the book's thesis on how modernist conceptions of culture and politics condition today's formulations of 'terrorism' (is that the book's thesis? anyone?). But in general an interesting survey of how the mythopoetics of progress is suffused with the logic of scarcity - and how it persists in contemporary iterations of environmental/economic catastrophe; post-progress, post-Enlightenment, but determined to maintain the naturalised panic of structurally imposed chaos unto the last fibrillation of the petro-Rapture. This sighting of shared ideological bases is particularly poignant considering so many 'progressives' in the US are currently fighting to recapture the national mainstream in the name of some version of 'Enlightenment values'...such as evolution being taught in schools and a nostalgia for a democratic public sphere decimated by those divisive Republican agendas. And he's sure got it in for Malthus - the originator of the Peak Oil hypothesis

Feast and Famine : A conversation with Iain Boal on scarcity, catastrophe and enclosure
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Iain Boal is an Irish social historian of science and technics, associated with Retort, a group of antinomian writers, artisans and artists based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is one of the authors of Retort's recently published Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War, which Harold Pinter described as "a comprehensive analysis of America's relationship with the world. No stone is left unturned. The maggots exposed are grotesque."

This text is based on an interview with David Martinez, a San Francisco-based filmmaker and journalist, in late 2005, and on material from a forthcoming book by Iain Boal, entitled The Long Theft: Episodes in the History of Enclosure.

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David Martinez: Iain, in recent months w've been hearing the phrase "peak oil" a lot – it seems to be all over the media. On the talk shows there is even discussion of an impending collapse of society due to dwindling oil supply. The concepts of scarcity and collapse are hardly new, and obviously the invasion of Iraq brought the issue of oil into sharp focus. I'd like to talk with you about "scarcity"and "catastrophe". Can we start with the sacred cow of scarcity?

Iain Boal: Yes, well, with respect to oil, we should begin with the observation that the general problem for the petro-barons has always been glut, or to put it another way, how to keep oil scarce. They've done a pretty good job, although all monopolies have to be measured against De Beers, who have the corner on diamonds. They are the world's masters at constructing scarcity, in this case, of crystalline carbon, which is actually rather common in the earth's crust. So one thing to make clear is that this war in Iraq is not about absolute scarcity. For sure, the history of oil is complex, and the fluctuations in the supply of oil have an extraordinarily complicated relation to price, demand, and reserves. But in order to understand scarcity - whether of oil in particular or of commodities under capitalism in general - you have to look at the discourse of scarcity, you have to look at the moment of the

institutionalizing of economics – defined in the textbooks as "the study of choice under scarcity" – as the dominant way of talking about the world, and the relation of these to capitalist modernity. And that story is indeed interesting.

In order to understand "scarcity" as a sacred cow, we have to go back to the Reverend Thomas Malthus. Because, no question, we are still living in a Malthusian world. Malthus' way of framing the issue of human welfare has triumphed. And I think it's especially important for the Left to understand this. Particularly those who got drawn into politics through concern about the environment, who count themselves as "green". Scratch an environmentalist and probably you'll find a Malthusian. What do I mean by that? What is it to be Malthusian? Well, it's to subscribe to the view that the fundamental problems humanity faces have their roots in the scarcity of the resources that sustain life, because the world is finite and we are exhausting those resources and also perhaps because we are polluting them. Notice how this mirrors the basic assumption of bourgeois economics – choice under scarcity. In his notorious essay, published in 1798 as an explicit response to the anarchist utopian optimism of William Godwin, who was a best seller in the euphoric days after the storming of the Bastille – "bliss was it in that dawn to be alive" – Malthus argued, or rather asserted, that population growth, especially of poor bastards, would inevitably outrun food supply, unless the propertyless were restrained from breeding. This "iron law of nature" was intended, rhetorically, to put a damper on Godwin and the perfectibilians, and in practical political terms to discourage "idling" and illegitimacy and to cut away the safety net for the poor. Recognize any of this?

DM: We're going to run out of food because there's too many people and those people are eating all of the food. That makes sense, doesn't it?

IB: Yes, you can feel the rhetorical power of it, instantly. The first thing to notice is that in the very way you have phrased it - and it's a quite standard formulation - the statement is a tautology, not an empirical claim. The phrase "Too many people" in this context entails scarcity, by definition; it follows implicitly that food will run out. Compare it with "Too much salt is bad for you" – notice how the predicate "bad for you" is already contained in the subject – that just what "too much" means. But the more important point is that even if you frame the population/food issue non-tautologically, Malthusians always offer us an abstraction, a generalization, ripped out of history and place.

DM: So please give us the necessary historical context?

IB: Malthus was born into a well-off family in late 18th century England, and he becomes the world's first salaried economist, in the pay of the East India Company. Don't be confused by his being styled the Reverend Malthus, he was no mere country parson. He taught at the training ground for officers of the East India Company, Haileybury College. The company started in 1600 with a charter from Elizabeth 1 to monopolize trade with Asia, and by Malthus' day agents of the company ruled India, Burma and Hong Kong for the British crown, so that one fifth of the world's population was under its authority, backed by the company's own armies, who fought under the flag of St George. It's no coincidence that somebody in Malthus' position, at that time and place, would be involved in devising a science of "economics", and its associated discourses of "scarcity", "laissez faire", and "poverty". The English scene that Malthus is born into was in radical transition from a world of custom and commons to one based on the absolutization of private property, in which the actual producers of food are being cut off from the land as a means of livelihood. And that's a very specific move that the capitalists and landlords in parliament are making. So here is the essential point: the people of England, I mean the commoners, in 1800 are living the new scarcity that is being produced around them. They are being literally excluded by fences enclosing the common land and by the extinction of the customary rights of common, which I will come back to. This is the same process, described so powerfully by Thomas More originally in Utopia in 1515, and later by E. P. Thompson and his

students, that is now ruthlessly in train around the globe under the sign of "structural adjustment" and "conditionalities" devised by the IMF and the World Bank. George Caffentzis, the philosopher of money, and his colleagues in the Midnight Notes Collective were the first, in the early 1980s, to develop the idea that the neoliberal project is, in its essence, a form of "new enclosures", creating this time a fully globalized proletariat. Expropriation of the commons was, in other words, not a one-time event at the dawn of capitalism. And Malthus was the economist rationalizing and justifying the cutting off, the rendering scarce, of subsistence to the laboring poor, in the name of thrift and self-control and the efficiency of private property. The voice of the poet John Clare speaks to us across the years, as an indelible witness to the enclosure of the landscape around his village of Helpston. The "dismal" science of economics is contemporaneous with this process of proletarianization. It would be hard to exaggerate the role of Malthus and the way his assumptions are built not just into economics, but into a whole range of modern forms of knowledge, for example, biology, genetics, demography. These disciplines bear the stamp of Malthus. Darwin himself said that evolution was driven by the motor of "superfecundity" and scarcity of resources. He sat up one night, so the story goes, when he was reading Malthus' Essay on Population and he says that he realized "It's Malthus! That's how I can explain evolution!" Now evolution was not the invention of Darwin, actually his grandfather Erasmus had been a kind of evolutionist. What was new was his conception of the mechanism, the engine that drives evolution which leads to the formation of new species and the staggering variety of life-forms, in all their beauty and bizarreness. That's what he called "natural selection". The basic, Malthus-style, argument is simple: overpopulation creates competition for the resources available, and favors those offspring better adapted to exploit local conditions and resources. So this is the scenario on which economics and Darwin's account of natural history are founded – a kind of anti-Eden, with too many organisms locked in a Hobbesian struggle for survival in a world of scarcity. So both Darwin and his co-discoverer, Alfred Wallace, (who was a naturalist-collector travelling in what we would now call Indonesia and who had also been inspired by the Essay on Population) were projecting Malthus onto the realm of nature, at the same time as the emergence of the science of economics and its premise of scarcity. Actually, my account is too idealist. In a brilliant essay James Moore, the biographer of both Darwin and Wallace, has reconstructed the formative experience of the young Alfred Wallace who saw first hand the struggle over land on the Welsh border, because he took a job as a surveyor measuring common pasture in preparation for bills of enclosure. He, like Darwin, is living and breathing the new political economy. Marx makes a droll observation in one of his letters to Engels: "It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions" and the Malthusian "struggle for existence"." In the same way, it's no coincidence that the sixties counterculture, which was to some extent a gift economy and had a kind of primitivist strain, could inspire a book like Stone Age Economics, written by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins to combat the projection of capitalist scarcity back onto all of human history. It's an interesting counter-myth, that conjures a neolithic world of abundance rather than scarcity.

DM: It seems like another book that helps to understand this is Mike Davis's Late Victorian Holocausts. Prior to that, there had been famine, but nothing on the scale of what happened in the 19th century, in previously healthy societies. The famines in India, and the famines in Africa, were produced by British colonialism.

IB: That's a really important point. And Amartya Sen, the sociologist of famine, comes to same conclusion from a different angle. Sen's striking claim is that you don't get famine, really, where there's "democratic" entitlement to food. When you examine starvation in 19th India and Ireland, yes, they have to do more with the history of colonialism. So I recommend Mike Davis's work on the politics of drought and famine, especially as an antidote to Niall Ferguson's reactionary and complacent defence of British imperialism. It is also helpful in thinking about contemporary "natural disasters", so-called – I'm thinking about the huge loss of life in earthquakes in the South, and the

tsunami that drowned so many Achinese, or closer to home, to contrast post-Katrina New Orleans with the firestorms of Malibu, where state subsidies rountinely rebuild the houses of Hollywood executives. So what we're saying here is: it's important to notice the ideological move that naturalizes events which are the result of human decisions. We can talk about oil, but you need to understand the framework of modern political economy and the science of economics, which essentially presupposes scarcity. The fabrication at the core of Malthus, whose essay went through seven editions, was that somehow there was this law of nature, "superfecundity", particularly evident in the poor, who can't control themselves, have lots of children, and eventually, unless they're restrained, inevitably bring about starvation. Population tends to increase geometrically, food supply increases arithmetically, and therefore catastrophe is looming ahead. False, but it has helped to form modernity's narrative – for example, it's the story that fuels the biotech industry and technological fixes in general, and in Malthus' time it was crucial for constructing the discourse of poverty and overthrowing the system of poor relief. The solution proposed by Malthus was truly grotesque. Let me quote Malthus - he's writing now in the 6th edition, which is 1826: "We should facilitate, instead of foolishly invading and daring to impede the operations of nature in producing this mortality, this death of the poor people. And if you dread the too frequent visitation of the horrid form of famine, we should encourage whatever forms of destruction which we compel nature to use. Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits. In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into houses, and call for the return of the plague. In the country we should build our villages near stagnant pools and particularly encourage settlement in all marshy and unwholesome situations. We should also reprobate specific remedies for ravaging disease." This is worthy of Jonathan Swift. But Malthus is perfectly serious. This is the world's first economist, as he constructs the twin discourses of scarcity and poverty. I believe one can trace a line straight to the policies of Thatcher and Reagan, to Blair and Bush, by way of reservations and Auschwitz. And for that matter, to the notorious suggestion by the World Bank economist Lawrence Summers – now CEO of Harvard – that toxic industrial waste from the North should logically be dumped in third world countries because they are seriously underpolluted. Summers is in fact quite right – this murderous corollary follows quite naturally from the logic of cost-benefit analysis and modern economic theory. Malthus and Summers – and this is true for the tribe of economists in general – take as assumptions the very conditions that their discipline has conspired to help produce. Thus, poverty is brought by the poor upon themselves because they are full of vice, lasciviousness, and superfecundity, and, in Malthus' formulation, creating a situation in which nature cannot provide enough. There's a phrase he uses that I must quote to you – he's writing this in an earlier edition, the 1803 edition – which is very striking, because it is actually utopian and worthy of Godwin and gives the lie to his miserabilist project. He speaks of "nature's mighty feast", but remember that Malthus is aiming to justify the enclosures and the extinguishing of rights of common. So he argues: "A man who is born into a world already possessed, if he cannot get subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if the society do not want his labor, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food. And in fact has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast, there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own will if you do not work upon the compassion of some of her guests." So here we have the naturalizing of the horrors of the early Industrial Revolution and the parliamentary enclosures. Malthus is talking specifically about agriculture, but despite the blizzard of gastroporn and mountains of commodities the discourses of poverty and scarcity remain central to capitalist modernity. Actually they are both aspects of the same whole.

DM: So how do you answer the question of carrying capacity? Are you saying that the earth's resources are infinite? That we're just going to go on and on and on?

IB: No, not at all. Fair enough. Carrying capacity is a fair question. Commoners, of course, were tuned to the question: it was all about coping and exploiting and gleaning and mobilizing resources. But it's always – historically – an empirical, local, question: How much water is available? How much grazing will a pasture allow? Who's encroaching? How much mast for the pigs or firewood is X entitled to? Will we have to send Y away to work in the city? What I'm trying to say here is that the vulgar error made by modern Malthusians - above all by Garrett Hardin in the vicious and ignorant morality tale he called the "Tragedy of the Commons" - is to assume that the human story hasn't in fact been about dealing with this problem of the carrying capacity, if you want to put it that way, of particular patches of land. There's a word for it. It's called stinting. Commoners have "use-rights" - say, to pasture animals, to take fodder, to gather firewood, to harvest fruits and berries and nuts - but only if you live there, and only certain amounts, depending on the ecological, historical knowledge of the local community about what would stretch it too far. Action informed by local knowledge, typically, is not going to cause ecocide. I'm not saying ecological destruction hasn't occurred throughout history - the deforestation of the Mediterranean littoral is a classic case - but it tends to be by non-locals and elites. Let's call it the state. The other major culprit is capitalist farming in private hands. So Hardin had it exactly wrong. Carrying capacity is now very hard to discuss in a context of extensive agriculture under a capitalist regime which by any non-economistic accounting is very inefficient. Partly because it requires massive external inputs, which themselves have to be moved vast distances – it is not well known, for example, that by a unilateral act of Congress the navy seized ninety islands around the world in the late 19th century to secure supplies of guano, in order to fertilize the US continental soil which was being ruthlessly depleted by the westering farmers. Today instead we are dependent on fossil fuels, and that too goes along with vast subsidies, price fixing, tax breaks, and hidden costs. What would the price of a litre of gasoline be if you factored in the cost of the Sixth Fleet and the military baseworld, or the asthma pandemic brought on by automobilism? And that is only the beginning – at the very least you have to consider the fact that what happens down on the farm is perhaps only about 10% of the modern food-complex chain. The burden is felt across many ecosystems, and it's tempting to become apocalyptic.

DM: I think one mistake a lot of Malthusians make, modern or not, is conflating individuals and states. The people of Mesopotamia wiped out all the forests, so the people of this country are going to wipe out these forests, and we are all equally doomed, and all people are responsible. But how do you answer the carrying capacity question for the whole planet? That's one of the biggest arguments you hear. We are reaching the point, according to x, y, and z empirical facts, where we can't support everyone on the planet, and there's going to be a collapse.

IB: Well, when put that way, it's dangerous rubbish. The United States, for example, is if anything underpopulated, given a less unjust and irrational mode of production and land ownership. Despite what I've said, I don't think there's any cogent argument to be made for being at the limit of the carrying capacity of the earth. But as I tried to insist earlier, I would rather avoid a discussion in these terms, which as the ecologist Peter Taylor has warned us, quickly devolves into global abstractions, obscuring the real loci of power and decision. Of course I don't deny that capitalism is now threatening the basis of life on earth. Certainly that's true. I've just said it, more or less. But again, I refuse to cave in to Malthusian assumptions. Why is it not possible to imagine a reorganization of agriculture, and I don't mean some new technofix from Monsanto. It will surely mean agrarian revolutions, though the content of those revolutions would be contested, to say the least. Marxists have always thrilled to the sight of really big tractors. They don't much like to hear about watersheds and foodmiles and small Kropotkinian communes. I will guess that among the non-negotiable requirements will be a transvaluation of soil (stripped, by the way, of any fascist metaphysic), along with a revolution in biology which will need to find new roots in microbial ecology, while at the same time reviving the disparaged arts of the naturalist. The work of the agricultural historian, Colin Duncan, and of Ignacio Chapela, the naturalist and biologist, will become very important. Now, to tie

this back to our starting point, a lot of talk about oil has the same structure as Malthus' discourse about food as a resource. The impending "oil collapse" has a similar plausibility, and is consistent with the niagara of books and media punditry about the end of…..well, you name it. Of course petro-capitalism should be dismantled as soon as possible. What I am not saying is that it is about to end because we're on the verge of running out of oil. In the chapter of Afflicted Powers in which Retort contests the "Blood for Oil" thesis, we quote a droll but accurate line from Sheikh Yamani, when he was the boss of OPEC, that "the stone age didn't end for lack of stone". And the age of oil won't come to an end because of want of oil. There's a lot of oil left. And they'll keep finding more and extracting it. So I don't think it's going to happen for that reason. Close it down for other reasons, certainly, or else the petroleum economy will continue to produce human and ecosystemic wreckage.

DM: What you were saying reminded me of a doom-mongering treatise that the neoliberals like to laugh at as well, about how we were going to run out of copper in the mid-70s and how it was going to screw up communications all over the world. But in this case the cornucopian techno-fixers were right. The fact of the matter is, they did come up with something. Capitalism proved itself very flexible in dealing with this particular problem.

IB: Indeed. It can probably even deal with the end of oil. Now whether, or to what extent, you can have a green capitalism is an interesting question. It can certainly be a lot greener than it is. Anyway, capitalism isn't going to go down because of the scarcity of oil. It doesn't mean that capitalism won't survive by going solar. BP, we are told in their new ads, stands for "Beyond Petroleum", and they are a little bit serious about this. As you know, neoliberal capitalism isn't really about owning stuff, even such vital apparatus as the well-heads, or about physically producing or manufacturing stuff. Naomi Klein begins No Logo with the correct observation that the new corporation doesn't make anything; it buys stuff and brands it. And late capitalist corporations more or less lease everything. The issue is accumulation in the overall circuitry of capital.

DM: And along the way creating scarcity. Remember all the talk about the "digital divide"? There's a scarcity of computers in the Third World! Where did this come from? They just invented these things, and say the Third World needs it! I laugh, because in East Austin, in the poorer part of Austin, they don't have bus shelters. And it's blazing hot. 112 degrees during a heat wave and you'll see a family sitting on a pile of gravel, in the part of the city where they most need the bus system, and there's no simple roof over someone's head. So that's the example I use to say that technology does not trump power. Power trumps technology. You want to talk about a digital divide, let's talk about the "roof divide". Two poles and a roof is a technology we've had for about 80,000 years, and society cannot see fit to put a roof to shade the sun from a woman going to work, and you're worrying about getting iMacs down to Guatemala.

IB: Tell it, David. One Long Catastrophe

DM: I'd like to talk about why so many Americans, steeped in Judeo-Christian ideology, are attracted to catastrophism in the first place. It seems to me the underlying ideology is ultimately passive, it takes the world out of our control because it's all going to end and there's nothing we can do. But things continue on, and that's a much more difficult problem to deal with.

IB: Right. But again, to play the historian here for a moment, what happens during the second half of the 18th century and becomes scientifically hegemonic in the 19th century is that Christian catastrophism is replaced by - or perhaps we should say overlaid by, co-existing and partly co-opting - an Enlightenment ideology of progress. And associated with it, the idea of a linear, secular, universal time which moves open-endedly into the future. It's segmentable, equivalent, and can be measured out by the new instruments. This is in some ways the antithesis of the Christian view, where the human

drama is played out on a finite terrestrial stage. There is an abrupt beginning and an abrupt end, the whole affair lasting in one version just six thousand years. Darwin depends upon the great geologist Lyell who posited the very unbiblical idea of "deep time". The historian of science Robert Proctor rightly says that the discovery of deep time is more important than the idea of deep space. At any rate, it ties in well with this emerging ideology of progress. This new idea of a world that effectively had no end – except in terms of a horizon of billions of years – is rather a modern one within the West, though Aristotle was an important exception. It's an Enlightenment concept, and it was not really firmly in place before the mid 19th century, when advanced opinion rejects the catastrophic Christian view of the end time. Darwin and Lyle put into place a new evolutionary anti-eschatology, in which, instead of history ending dramatically, the future's open-ended, and undecided. No longer are we living in the rubble of a ruined world, with a human drama to be played out on the earth before redemption and the end, all according to a divine plan. The Lyell-Darwin synthesis explains the world looking the way it is because of very slow geological changes on the one hand – the small actions of wind, glaciers, rain, erosion, that sort of thing – and on the other, with respect to the living world, the actions of a Malthusian nature, which is producing species but very, very slowly. It's basically anti-catastrophist, what historians of science call uniformitarian. Perhaps you can see why secularizing Victorian gentlemen - imperialists, really - would believe that competition produces progress and the survival of the superior races of animals and, of course, men. Men like the Darwins and their relatives the Wedgwoods. The politics of gradualism are very important here. Non-revolutionary. Evolutionary gradualism is consistent with a certain meritocratic ideal. Darwin married one of his Wedgwood cousins, one of the great industrial non-conformist families of Britain. It was a bourgeois ideology of gradualist improvement – by way of a competitive meritocracy – that he projected onto nature. Again, that doesn't mean that natural selection is ipso facto false, just because you can show that as a theory about the world it has social origins that inform it. They all do. We just have to be aware that theories are partial, and to try to be reflexive about that partiality. But that is probably asking too much. In general, a society gets the science it deserves. It's why a few of us are trying to institute the new field of "agnotology", which would look at the cultural production of systematic ignorance. Now here's an example. For more than a hundred years the earth sciences tended to discount catastrophes, but towards the end of the 20th century, catastrophism begins coming back, big time. Let's call it neo-catastrophism. Part of the explanation is no doubt due to the rising political power of apocalyptic Christians and evangelicals in the United States. But at least as important, in my view, is the catastrophe of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the building of a weapon that scientists began to believe could produce the end of everything. Omnicide. Actually there were scientists, long before Carl Sagan began to make popular the idea of nuclear winter, who began in the 1950s to work on omnicide and the problem of the nuclear extinction of life on earth. So I would say there's been half a century of preparation for what is now a full-blown ideological sea change, from the hegemony of uniformitarianism to neo-catastrophism.

DM: But don't both make a certain sense?

IB: Of course it's both! Both are true, but I'm talking about ideology here. For sure, when you're trying to understand the natural history of earth, you have to have consider sudden violent events as well as wind erosion.

DM: Asteroids hit the planet every once in a while? I: Just so. Take the major extinction event at the K/T, the Cretaceous-Tertiary, boundary. Most in the field of earth science now believe there was an impact in the Yucatan 65 million years ago which did for the dinosaurs, and produced a kind of nuclear winter effect.

DM: And produced the Gulf of Mexico?

IB: Well, a tsunami which was maybe a mile and a half high. An unimaginably large event. This is not so appealing to the settled Victorian imagination of Darwin and Lyell, who preferred to contemplate the action of water, and the slow scrutiny of a Malthusian god, selecting out the fitter organisms. Now, as I've said, I take it that we have to investigate the world and our condition, and our history, by positing the possibility, and I think the reality, of catastrophes and extinctions together with those uniformitarian principles also being at work at the same time. But one question we must ask is: Why are we so obsessed with catastrophe and "endism" right now?

DM: When I was a kid in the 70s I went to Disneyland, and one of the exhibits was FutureWorld, all about how the world was going to look in the future. A friend of mine went there recently and said they changed it to this Jules Vernian, early 1900s projection of the future, so they made it a past future, that we all know is not real, with giant buildings and blimps and airships...

IB: What Joe Corn, the historian of technology, neatly called "yesterday's tomorrows", and which, of course, always reveal far more about the moment of their imagining than any future.

DM: I thought that was really telling because nobody wants to project the future right now. Nobody would believe it now if you made a little diorama showing how the future's going to be great. I think people do realize that all is not well, and that our current systems are not going to hold.

IB: Well, I can't say it too clearly. In my critique of the sacred cow of scarcity, I'm not saying that there isn't scarcity. In fact I insist on it. But we have to understand why and how it's produced, and it's crucial, I think, to do the work of unpacking the ideology behind scarcity and neo-catastrophism. For one thing, it's interesting to ask: "Why all this talk of scarcity and collapse now?" After all, catastrophes are a permanent feature of history. So when you hear someone say, "The world's food supply is going to run out in such and such a year", well, excuse me! Forty thousand children die each day from the effects of malnutrition. Or perhaps I should say – from the causes of malnutrition. For these souls it's already too late. And there are millions - the precariat - for whom catastrophe is looming. This isn't the future we're talking about. It's tonight. In other words, if we look at the landscape of modernity, we should be talking catastrophe. Of course we should. It's been one long catastrophe. But we should refuse to do so in Malthusian terms, blaming the state of affairs on overpopulation and poverty. And we should be aware that catastrophism and apocalypse talk are especially congenial to fundamentalists. What is so poignant is that things could be otherwise. We don't in fact live in a world of Malthusian scarcity. Far from it. I mean - and please forgive me for this abstraction but you know why I use it - think of "nature's mighty feast". And yet the history of modernity is the history of enclosure, of the cutting off of people from access to land, to the common treasury and to the fruits of our own labour. Excluded by fire and sword and now "structural adjustment". Everywhere you look, there nothing much natural about it, this kind of scarcity. It's a story of artifice and force. No wonder the fables offered us by modernity's clerisy are the Prisoner's Dilemma and the Tragedy of the Commons. The premises of economics are a disgrace, and so are all the proliferating offspring of Malthus.

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