Foreword

Despair Is No Solution

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The genocides of the 20th century have unveiled the true heart of humanity. At our center lies an ability to commit evil of an almost unimagined degree. . . . The unthinkable has already happened; the idea of future catastrophes is therefore not unthinkable.

—Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann

The Coming Age of Scarcity scares me. Perhaps you will feel the same. The reasons are not far to find. They are summed up in this foreword’s epigraph, which comes from the introductory essay that Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann, the editors of this volume, have provided.

Showing how scarcity and surplus populations can lead to disaster, The Coming Age of Scarcity is about evil. It documents “ethnic cleansing” and excavates the world’s expanding killing fields. Sadly, it anticipates mass death and genocide in the twenty-first century even while trying to prevent them.

The writers who have contributed to these pages know evil when they see it. They intend that their readers see it, too. They succeed—so much so that this book does more than scare me. It leaves me depressed, almost to the point of despair.

To understate the case, this book discourages me. Perhaps it will do the same for you. How could it not? The world’s expanding megacities and refugee hordes, as well as pressures for and protests
against immigration, are only the latest signs of an unrelenting global population crunch, which increasingly leaves the world with more people than anyone needs. A world with more people than anyone needs is a deadly place. It is a stage set perpetually for mass death and genocide.

Surplus people are only one of the preconditions for mass death and genocide. Roger Smith's essay rightly argues that scarcity is another. As this entire book suggests, moreover, the specter of scarcity is likely to be even worse in the twenty-first century than it has been in the twentieth. That judgment is credible even though the late-1996 World Food Summit will have taken place in Rome before this book appears. Sponsored by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the summit meeting intends to renew the commitment of world leaders to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and to ensure lasting food security for the world's people.

The word renew bears watching. A similar World Food Conference in 1974 had already committed—supposedly—the world community to such worthy aims. Two decades later, however, the FAO reports that 800 million people in developing countries face chronic malnutrition. Eighty-eight countries, forty-two in sub-Saharan Africa alone, are in low-income, food-deficit conditions. Meanwhile, with the figures calculated in 1985 U.S. dollars, external aid for such places declined from $10 billion in 1982 to $7.2 billion in 1992. The daunting problems faced by the 1996 World Food Summit are made even more so by the fact that the meeting has no binding effects on anyone. Each participating country remains free to do as much, or as little, as it sees fit.

Sociologist Gil Elliot rightly identified the twentieth century as the most devastating in history as far as human-made deaths are concerned. No updating of Elliot's 1972 calculations would do anything to change that judgment. To the contrary, although "Never again!" still resounds after Auschwitz, post-Holocaust history has nearly turned that cry into an all-too-hollow cliché. The fact is that genocidal killing has taken more lives since the Holocaust ended than it did in the first half of the twentieth century. The arrival of a new century, moreover, will unlikely bring relief. There is every reason to think that the twenty-first century will feature even more human-made death than the twentieth.

At least thus far, attempts to prosecute those who have been accused of genocidal crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia do not inspire confidence that the threat of arrest and punishment will do much to deter genocide's fury. Nor can one take heart from the open-
ing of John Cobb’s essay, which observes that projections about the future are uncertain because history is always full of surprises. As his analysis helps to make depressingly clear, more often than not history’s surprises are lethal to the point of catastrophe.

In every contribution to this book, there are plenty of reasons for despair. Joseph Tainter shows how competition and expansion—long the boosters for “progress”—exacerbate conflict that can turn genocidal. John Gowdy measures the biophysical limits to industrialization, creating a nasty surprise for those who think that the future will be benignly open forever. Ted Trainer sees present society as unsustainable, Virginia Abernethy wonders about the bloody divisiveness that accompanies resurgent tribalism, and Chris Lewis analyzes the necessary collapse of modern industrial civilization.

The list could go on and on, but this book’s impact drives home the point that, in one way or another, we are approaching the end of the human world as we have known it. Do not misunderstand: an apocalyptic doomsday is not at hand. The world is not going to end anytime soon, but the times are changing decisively nonetheless.

Sometimes the ending of an era is cause for celebration. Ironically, in an age of mass death and genocide, such a conclusion would be unrealistic. The conditions accounting for our deadly age will die hard. Whatever happens, including even the corrective and constructive changes that this book’s authors recommend, the shifts are likely to be wrenching and violent. Things will get worse before they get better—if they do get better.

One reason is that for too long too many of us, including even people who have the means to buy this book and the time to read it, have enjoyed the world that is too much with us. Much as we deplore mass death and genocide, we will still find it extremely difficult to bring about the global changes that are needed to check it. Even while trying to prevent mass death and genocide in the twenty-first century, we may also resist the changes that are really needed to eliminate them.

The many beneficiaries of existing circumstances will not set aside their privileges easily any more than the wretched of the earth will placidly accept their desperate conditions of scarcity. As the pressures mount, and they will, parties on all sides will defend their interests. In too many cases, moreover, the defense will be by any means—wrenching and violent—that are perceived as necessary. History may prove such judgments wrong, but that outcome would be so surprising that only the foolish would bank on it.
This book calls forth dark moods within me. And yet it evokes other moods as well. Perhaps it will do the same for you. At least in my case, these "and yet" moods are neither removed from nor located beyond the darkness with which this book engulfs me. Their movement is a stirring within that darkness, but the movement is not easily named. What I feel is not captured by words like hope or conviction, and even less do my feelings involve much that a glib word like optimism contains.

The stirring aroused within me by The Coming Age of Scarcity is best expressed in the negative. It is reflected in this foreword's title: despair is no solution. Those words also come from the introduction that Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann have written, which ultimately urges people to work against despair within and despite the darkness.

As I explore these feelings and write the words that they have provoked here, I do so as a philosopher and teacher who has spent most of a thirty-year academic career studying the damage that the Holocaust and other forms of genocide have done. In particular, I have written these words right after completing the syllabus for my current course on the Holocaust and genocide and just before the 1996–97 academic year begins. Reflecting on the essays in this book while I have been preparing again to teach young college students about the subjects it addresses, I have been reminded once more that teachers are constantly stalked by despair. How could we not be?

Most teachers are idealists. However jaded we may become, most of us became teachers because we wanted to mend the world. That hope, however, encounters discouragement aplenty. History, especially genocide's history, provides it. So does teaching, which is a less-than-reassuring activity when humankind's future is at stake.

We are all beginners every day. No matter how hard we teachers try, indifference persists, prejudice remains, ignorance endures, and no place on earth guarantees safety from the destruction that such forces can unleash. Education's gains take place against stiff odds; learning is not evolutionary progress. Every year, every class, means starting over because wisdom does not accumulate.

Teaching about the Holocaust and genocide makes me more melancholy than I used to be. It makes me realize how much despair lurks around every classroom door. Even more, however, such teaching makes me understand that those recognitions are not the conclusion, but they must be the stirring amid darkness, the insistence affirms that
despair is not the solution. To let despair have its way would be to give every genocidal act a victory that it does not deserve and must not have.

Where mass death and genocide are concerned, however, what is the solution? Is there such a thing? Perhaps, but if so, what ingredients does it contain? Responses to those questions—good and thoughtful ones—are found in this book's pages. As they draw to a close, I would add only two words of recapitulation: a warning and then a fact.

The warning: "If we stop remembering," says Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "we stop being." The memory and analysis of mass death and genocide found in this book warn against despair. The effect of that warning can be to sensitize us against indifference, which is despair's best friend and evil's welcome accomplice.

As for the fact, the essays in this book can sensitize us against despair and indifference because history shows that human-made mass death and genocide are not inevitable and no events related to them ever will be. We know this because human-made mass death and genocide emerge from decisions and institutions that depend on ordinary human beings who are responsible for their actions and who could act differently and better than they often do.

If we heed the warning and do not deny the fact—especially in an age of scarcity, mass death, and genocide—we will keep working to mend the world's broken heart. Despite much of its content, then, this book awakens, haunts, and challenges me in ways that I ignore at everyone's peril. I trust it will do the same for you.