

Stephen Healy, “Saint Francis in Climate-Changing Times: Form of Life, the Highest Poverty, and Postcapitalist Politics” *Rethinking Marxism* (forthcoming)

Email: stephen.healy@gmail.com

Postal mail:

Stephen Healy
Institute for Culture and Society
Building EM, Parramatta South campus
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751
Australia

Phone: +61 9685 9803

Saint Francis in Climate-Changing Times: Form of Life, the Highest Poverty, and Postcapitalist Politics

Stephen Healy

This paper considers the relevance of Franciscan monastic practice to contemporary postcapitalist politics in the time of the Anthropocene. Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the monastic revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries explore the different relationships between the rules governing monastic life and materiality, wherein the renunciation of property and the practice of highest poverty give the greatest expression of a collective, monastic form of life. The embodied connection between having a rule and living it contrasts starkly with emergent Church doctrine that introduced a cynical split between the sacred and the material: good or bad, the priest only need say the words. Centuries later, a version of this cynical split seems operative in contemporary "green consumerist" responses to the Anthropocene, amounting to a palliative gesture when what is required is revolutionary transformation. In contrast, this essay considers how contemporary postcapitalist politics, like monasticism, rests upon embodied forms of collective life.

Key Words: Giorgio Agamben, Anthropocene, Communism, Form of Life, Postcapitalism

Francis in opposition to a nascent capitalism refused every instrumental discipline, and in opposition to the mortification of the flesh (in poverty and in the constituted order) he posed a joyous life, including all being and nature, the animals, sister moon, brother sun, the birds of the field, the poor and exploited humans, together against power and corruption. Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis's situation, posing against the misery of power a joy of being.

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*

The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*

For the first time, what was in question in the movements was not the rule, but the life, not the ability to profess this or that article of faith, but the ability to live in a certain way, to practice joyfully and openly a certain form of life.

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*

Both religious and secular thinkers identify Saint Francis as a revolutionary figure. On the secular side, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) make Francis the last word of *Empire* and

their discussion of the multitude as a revolutionary subject. On the religious side, Pope Francis (2015) similarly refers to his namesake's "radical refusal" to reduce reality to an "object simply to be used and controlled," as stated at the beginning of his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, on the interlinked issues of environment and inequality. Finally, Francis features prominently in Giorgio Agamben's engagement with the eleventh- and twelfth-century explosion of monastic movements grounded in the communal practice of the highest poverty: use without ownership. It is Agamben who identifies a radically different, joyful "form of life" connected to a different relationship with things—one that breaks with a dominant tradition that structured Francis's time and still structures our time.

Agamben's engagement with Francis and the monastic explosion is one element in a larger Marxian return to Christianity, a conversation involving Foucault, Derrida, Agamben, Žižek, Negri, and Badiou among others (see Roberts 2008; Kaufman 2008).¹ The main focus of this conversation has been on Saint Paul's triadic theorization of temporality wherein Christ has already redeemed the world but the Second Coming has not yet happened and we live in the interval between. For these theorists, Paul's temporality becomes a means of recovering a revolutionary Marxian politics: both a recovery from the disasters of the twentieth century and, more centrally, recovery as a means of breaking from the interminable, depoliticizing end of history. While Agamben has been part of this conversation, his writings on Saint Francis push the Marxian-Christian turn in a different direction that foregrounds a different problematic: the question of how to live in common. In this paper I will argue that Agamben's exploration of common life in the context of the Christian monastery provides a crucial perspective on how to answer this question.

This special issue is addressed to the relationship between Marxism and spirituality. My aim for considering these two things together through the figure of Saint Francis is quite pragmatic: to answer the question of how to live with others in the face of an emerging scientific consensus that human communities in the "developed" minority world will need to make 80 percent reductions in their carbon emissions to have any chance of avoiding the consequences of runaway climate change (Lenton 2014). The IPCC (2014) claims that this reduction must be achieved by 2050 to avoid catastrophic climate change. Some argue that these reductions must be achieved within a more immediate time frame (see Spratt 2015; McKibben 2012). Still others ominously conclude that it may be too late to keep global ambient temperature change below the two-degrees-Celsius threshold and thereby to possibly avoid the worst consequences of a warming world (Meinshausen et al. 2015). With luck, some of the changes required will be achieved through large-scale policy shifts—toward renewable energy, reuse economies, and reorganizing the infrastructure in cities and food and transportation systems, but all of these structural changes imply a changed relationship with daily life and consumption in particular. In the minority world, we need to do less consuming, and there is clear evidence that simply "greening" consumption is not a sufficient response (Alexander 2014).

Given the scale of change required, reducing the footprint of life in the minority world is unavoidable: flying less, driving less, eating and entertaining ourselves differently than we do now. While this represents a massive adjustment to material existence in the minority world, there is an equally daunting psychological challenge as well. Rosemary Randall (2009; see also Weintrobe 2012) argues that forced changes in habit and loss of "freedom" are likely to engender both vociferous denial and resentment-fueled efforts to raise the drawbridge around privileged life, to cling to the entitlements of mobility and comfort long after it becomes clear that it's not possible to do so. In her view, the only way around this psychic roadblock is for large numbers

of us to *learn* to want to do what we have to do—to freely mourn and then give up a high-impact, high-consumption way of life sustained by economic growth. Randall’s response has been to form support groups, patterned in part after the Twelve-Step movement, in which people can help one another to work through these losses and to voluntarily internalize and practice a new, less energetic way of life as an animating ethic. It is here perhaps that Agamben’s reflections on a “voluntary,” joyful, collective “form of life” might prove helpful in forging what Gerda Roelvink and J. K. Gibson-Graham (2009) (see also Roelvink 2010), following Val Plumwood (2007), call another “mode of humanity”: one capable of seeing us through a climate-changing time. There are, of course, innumerable differences between Francis’s time and our own, but Agamben opens his reflections on monastic life with an observation that parallels our own time. The monastic explosion of the eleventh and twelfth century was complemented by a profusion of experiments in collective life among the laity and attempts at escaping from the dominant social order and the violence that defined the era.² The present moment seems likewise defined by innumerable experiments in other ways of living collectively and organizing economies, ecologies, and societies.

The essay that follows has four parts. In the first part, I contextualize Agamben’s engagement with Francis in the context of a larger Christian (re)turn in Marxism and explore what is at stake for Žižek, Negri, and Badiou in their focus on Pauline temporality—the promise of an “emancipatory break” that will deliver us from the postpolitical end of history. Germane to my efforts here, I explore how “green consumerism,” for Žižek and others, is a definitive symptomatic expression of the end of history as a cynical, postideological condition. However cogent their analyses, we are left in a familiar spot, waiting for a return of emancipatory politics while the question of how to live is left unanswered. In part two, I give a close reading of Agamben’s analysis of the explosion of monastic movements and in particular how monastic practice constitutes a different “form of life” wherein life lived by monastic rules becomes inseparable from the collective material practice of the highest poverty. Agamben sees in this monastic movement an implicit critique of the Catholic Church as an earthly power, which has implications for us in the present. In part three, I use this conception of the Franciscan “form of life” to understand the postcapitalist project of pursuing a different “mode of humanity” in which we might develop the capacity to survive in the Anthropocene. As in the time of Francis, I point to the contemporary explosion of social movements around the world and to how the success of these movements is predicated upon experimental practices that redefine what is necessary for us to survive and how we care for things in common that we cannot own. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts about what we might gain in thinking together the monastery and its form of life with the current efforts of enacting a different mode of humanity.

The Christian Turn, Green Consumerism, and the Limits of Messianic Marxism

The Pauline tradition that has attracted the Left is central to the “return to religion” in political philosophy and theory. This is because, despite the widespread conservative reading of Pauline apocalypticism in orthodox Christianity and Christian fundamentalism, Pauline Christianity imagines a radical collective break with the prevailing order.

—John Roberts, “The ‘Returns to Religion’: Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition”

John Roberts (2008, pt. 1, 59) argues that Marxian left political philosophers have returned, once more, to Christianity as “that which embodies the memory or prospect of a universal emancipatory politics.” Roberts points out that this return is not new. Marx and Engels had their own complicated relationship with Christianity, and there have been other Marxian returns to Christianity, particularly in the writings of Lukács and Bloch.

For Roberts, in the present moment the work of Žižek, Badiou, Agamben, and Negri constitutes an important strand in this return to Christian thought. Each of these writers (re)cast Paul as a theologian of temporality in which the resurrection represents a break in temporality that allows for the emergence of a revolutionary subject. Paul’s understanding of Christianity operates within a “triadic framework of Judeo-Christian transcendentalism: ‘the already,’ ‘the not yet,’ and the ‘to come’” (Roberts 2008, pt. 2, 80). For Paul, the most significant event in history—the resurrection—has already happened. In the resurrection the old law that dictates the relationship between God and man is over and a new relationship has begun. But the Second Coming has “not yet happened,” in a way that requires the faithful to act as if the return “to come” could happen at any moment.

It is not difficult to see in contemporary Marxist theory this same triadic temporality: “the already” (failed) revolution that has happened, the event “not yet” transpired that might inaugurate a new revolutionary potentiality, and the necessity of living in what Žižek (2010) calls nonevental times, attuned to a revolutionary moment “to come.” Equally important, Paul’s triadic temporality offers a way of understanding the present moment as a depoliticizing “end of history” in which the new law is still to come and—“after the Russian Revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the public destitution of Marxism and historical materialism—become a widespread crisis of political subjectivity itself under postmodern pacification and ‘democratization’ of the political process” (Roberts 2008, pt. 2, 75). Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek have developed various ways of describing the present “end of history” condition: the reduction of governance to the administration of bare life, the privatization of politics through its “democratization” (the postpolitical reduction of politics to the private expression of preference through voting), or the dominance of postideological cynicism. In each case there is a vision of the end of history in which society is forever captured by the existing state of affairs. What is required is a resurrection in the form of an emancipatory return of politics—some rupture or event that will restart the flow of history. In the absence of this break, the present state of affairs—the trinity of technology, markets, and (economic) rationality—continue as a world without end, what Agamben has referred to as “catastrophe” (Whyte 2013).

Žižek’s (and others’) analysis of green consumerism offers a quintessential example of why the “end of history” is seen in such catastrophic terms: a world in which real transformation becomes impossible. Žižek (2014, for example) describes green consumers as subjects caught up primarily in the process of the buying and selling of an “experience” central to cultural capitalism. Green consumerism, for Žižek, represents a packaging of ecological conscience—specifically, the belief that ordering fair-trade pumpkin spice lattes at Starbucks from the window of your Prius is all that’s required to bring about a better world. When you indulge in this fantasy, you’re buying not just a set of products but also the cultural experience of being a force for good.

Central to Žižek’s analysis is the post-Lacanian distinction between pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure, he explains, is by its very nature moderate. In the minority world, pleasure is a regime of moderation that conserves health where one can have sugar-free sweets, coffee in moderation, low-calorie beer, and so on. To this list we might add “green consumption” as a

moderate pleasure, one designed to exculpate our guilt while not challenging our way of life overmuch.

Enjoyment, in contrast, is excessive. The function of enjoyment is not to conserve the subject but rather to annihilate it through, for example, the toxic flight of addiction—cigarettes, alcohol, and drug abuse, which illustrate the Lacanian observation that enjoyment serves nothing (Loose 2011).

Žižek argues that the ecological “brand,” when it’s pursued all the way, crosses the threshold from pleasure to enjoyment. Here he asks us to consider a fictional green-minded executive who purchases a larger “energy efficient” house in the country. This purchase is only available to a select few, coming at great economic and ecological cost, and is ultimately far less ecologically sound than living in a densely populated urban environment, and yet this is the “green consumer” fantasy when pursued to its individualist end.

Žižek is not alone in regarding “green” as the new opiate of the masses, as that which promises life only to betray it. Mark Davidson (2012), drawing on the same Lacanian framework, describes this same dynamic operating at a much larger scale in which the sustainable city functions as a cynical “palliative fantasy.” In Davidson’s view, model ecological cities, developed by planners around the world to showcase “green technology,” take the form of a gentrified green district that exists alongside and is sustained by commitment to growth as usual. Erik Swyngedouw (2010) likewise argues that carbon markets also function as a fetishist fantasy in which anthropogenic CO₂ emissions are positioned as the *emergency* but also, conveniently enough, can be *controlled* through expert-led market-based technocratic approaches. This fetishist fantasy indulges the desire to imagine that we can deal with the ecological contradictions of industrialism through a technical fix without confronting the uneven, inequitable distribution of its consequences.

What each of these fantasy frames share in common is a subject—of green consumerism, sustainable urbanism, or CO₂ technofetishism—constitutively and cynically split between pleasure and enjoyment. On the one hand is investment in solutions that “act out” a response to ecological challenges (pleasure), and on the other hand is an unconscious commitment to economic growth (enjoyment).³ Žižek, Davidson, and Swyngedouw each argue that this cynical ideology sustains an imaginary self-image where we can “act out,” exculpating our guilt through green indulgence while at the same time unconsciously avoiding a traumatic confrontation with a real(ity): the fundamentally unsustainable pattern of life in the minority world and our complicity investment in an economy predicated on endless growth.

Žižek’s, Davidson’s, and Swyngedouw’s analyses end with a call to break with the existing order. In their view we need a revolutionary subject that will inaugurate a new law in place of a cynical green consumerist subject and the “old law” governing pleasure and enjoyment. In keeping with Paul’s triadic temporality, these theorists position this event as yet to come, contingent upon some future revolutionary rupture. However cogent their analysis, this deferral to the future is deeply troubling. We are left waiting at precisely a moment when scientific research on the multivalent ecological crisis tells us we are out of time. If Timothy Morton (2013) is right that the end of history has now coincided with the end of the world—as a stable predictable background against which we may measure human progress—then I am not sure how much longer we can wait. It is here that Agamben’s analysis of the eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic explosion offers a different return to Christianity and a different politics centered on the question of how to live in common.

Monasticism, Highest Poverty, and Form of Life

Agamben (2013) describes the eleventh and twelfth centuries as a period of explosive growth in Catholic monastic orders—most notably the Franciscans but also a variety of lay communal movements. His engagement here constitutes, in my view, a very different “return” to Christianity, one that aligns with contemporary postcapitalist explorations of various forms of cooperation and collectivity—efforts to live with less, to care for what we hold in common, or to invest in a habitable future. To establish this parallel it is worth going through his argument in detail. Agamben represents monasticism as an attempt at producing communal life in the here and now rather than waiting for the hereafter. He sees, particularly in the Franciscans, a kind of indirect protest against the Church’s authority by practicing “joyfully and openly a certain form of life” (Agamben 2013, 93).

What defines these monastic movements more than anything else for Agamben is the production of a new genre of writing—rulebooks that mark out every aspect of the life of the brethren who obey them. The rules are exhaustive in their account of how to live life in the monastery. The hours of the day are marked by the recitation of the Psalms. Work, prayer, and rest are prescribed. Each garment that adorns the monk’s body is saturated with significance. Three crucial, interrelated features are discernible in Agamben’s analysis of this blending of life and rule: the voluntary participation of the novice, the joyful nature of collective life, and finally, the practice of the highest poverty.

Agamben begins his analysis with what cannot appear as anything but contradictions to many of us: the freedom that is to be found when the novice voluntarily submits to the strictures of the rule, the authority of the abbot, and the practice of highest poverty. He describes a formal process by which the novice is inducted into the life of the monastery and the cenobitic community (those who live the common life). But what distinguishes monastic life from ordinary life is *how* these detailed rules are positioned in relation to those who live them. “The rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it. What type of text are rules, then, if they seem to performatively realize the life that they must regulate? And what is a life that can no longer be distinguished from the rule?” (Agamben 2013, 69).

How does this work in practice? How do life and rule emerge together? Writing in a similar vein, Michelangelo Paganopoulos (2009) writes about the Eastern Orthodox monastery of Vatopaidi where he lived and worked as a researcher and monk for a time. Paganopoulos submitted himself to the rules and life of the order: working during the day and having no possessions apart from a small notebook in which to write his sins for confession to the Cypriot father each night. His job was a menial one—trimming the wax from already burnt candles so that the residue might be re-formed into candles and ultimately sold in religious shops. As one monk explained, they were recycling the wax “just like Jesus recycled His body” (366). The task, though simple, was painful since it involved holding a knife for long hours and trimming the burnt wax without cutting the candle.

Because my wrists were already hurting after cleaning only a few candles, the verger asked me loudly to repeat the words of the prayer “Lord Jesus Have Mercy on Me the Sinner” while cutting the melted wax from the candles, as a technique to develop rhythm in the movement of my hands, and in relation to my breathing. Indeed after an hour of reciting the words, I was automatically moving the knife on the wax, breathing according to the rhythm of the words of the prayer. (366)

The verger explained that the rhythm, the words of the prayer, allow one to concentrate on God. The moments where the mind lapsed or wandered were the “sins” to be confessed in the evening to the priest. In contemporary parlance we might identify the performative power of these prayers, both words themselves and the cadence of their repetition, as integral to what makes a monk a monk, including the performance of his mundane duties.

Agamben in his analysis also underscores the importance of repetition, particularly of the Psalms, in constituting monastic life. Rather than being (only) functional to the sacraments associated with the Mass, the Psalms were frequently sung together by the monks to mark the cadence of collective life. For this reason, monastic life—which in both the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Church emerged between the ninth and the twelfth century—is in stark contrast to the tradition of hermitage that existed prior to this period. In place of the ascetic privation of the hermit, life in the monastery was necessarily collective. The monks work, sleep, pray, are silent, or sing together.

Just as the Psalms establish the cadence of monastic temporality, it is the practice of the highest poverty that, in Agamben’s terms, gives the greatest (spatial) scope to monastic life. Writing after Francis’s death, Bonaventure (in Agamben 2013, 124) distinguishes between four types of property in *Defense of the Mendicants*: ownership, possession, usufruct, and simple use (also called poor use). The first three of these are familiar to us today as different ways of holding, having, or using property. The last category of simple or poor use is what is practiced in the monastery as the highest poverty: the right to use something without the right to own it.⁴

Along with celibacy, the vow of poverty is perhaps the most widely known aspect of the monastic tradition, and yet the highest poverty in Francis’s time and after was a source of theological controversy. Pope Nicholas III, writing in 1279, endorsed the practice of the highest poverty by creating a distinction in which the Church owns the property, the monastery ground, and all that is within it, while the monks may make use of it. This is still practiced today as contemporary Franciscans continue to make a symbolic payment annually for the use of the monastery. Pope John XXII later argued, contra Nicholas and Francis, that in the case of consumables that are destroyed in their use, what he calls *abusus*, it is impossible to maintain the distinction between poor use and ownership (Agamben 2013, 131). That is to say, it is impossible in the final analysis to be in the world without laying some claim to it, exerting some ownership over it, if only through consumption of necessities. Agamben mentions in passing that in using the special case of things that are consumed completely in their use, Pope John XXII “furnishes the paradigm of an impossibility of using that was to find its full realization many centuries later in consumer society” (131). Behind this theological dispute over the philosophical soundness of the highest poverty is a much larger story about the Church as an evolving earthly power, one that has its own relationship to the ownership of property, life, and law, which Agamben starkly contrasts with life in the monastery.

Agamben argues that the monastic “form of life” is constituted by the indissociable relationship between monastic life, the rules that define it, and the practice of the highest poverty, which give this life its greatest scope. What makes form of life important for Agamben (2013, 72) is what the concept does to the central terms that organize ethical (and political) thought: “The cenobitic practice (communal life in the monastery), by shifting the ethical problem from the level of relation between norm and action to that of form of life, seems to call into question the very dichotomy of rule and life, universal and particular, necessity and liberty, through which we are used to comprehending ethics.” In the monastic form of life, there is no

difference but rather what Agamben terms a zone of indifference that runs through all of these central oppositions. To have a rule is to live it. What is universal is to be found only in the particular. To be a monk is to freely give up the liberty to own property and, in so doing, to enter into common and joyful life with the practice of the highest poverty.

Following Francis, Agamben argues that a life lived in imitation of Christ and the apostles was also a protest against the historical evolution of the Church as an earthly power. In specifying the coordinates of the monastic form of life, Agamben (2013, 117) traces the opposed developments shaping the Church during this same period of time, particularly in the divine office of priestly authority in which the Church

decisively affirms the sharp distinction between life and liturgy, between individual and function, that will culminate in the doctrine of the *opus operatum* and the sacramental effectiveness of the *opus Dei*. Not only is the sacramental practice for the priest valid and efficacious *ex opera operato* (“from the work done”) independently of the unworthiness of this life, but as is implied in the doctrine of the character indelible, the unworthy priest remains a priest despite his unworthiness.

In contemporary parlance we might say that the Church was arguing that the clothes make the man or that the cloth “doeth the work.” Instead of the form of life in the monastery, a sharp division between life and law is being codified during this period in the Church and in the divine office of the priesthood. The effect of this radical separation is that it allows the sacraments the priest is empowered to perform, from baptism to unction, to have miraculous properties *independent of* the person performing them. The priest, whether good or wicked, merely becomes a conduit to their performance. It is this same split that allows the Church to venerate Christ while at the same time participating in the ordinary politics and economics of the day—to own property and collect taxations from those working church lands.

The priest is able to do what he likes in private because it is only required that he says the words in public, which means that ordinary people are free to do as they like in their own privacy—to indulge ordinary sins and ordinary lives—by virtue of this same split. As Žižek (2010) has argued elsewhere, this is the secret appeal of the Catholic Church: the Church can bear belief for you while you are free to doubt or sin in your private life so long as you consent to this arrangement. Could it be that in the separation between the liturgy and life in the Church is found the template for dominant cynical ideology that, Žižek argues, structures our own time? This seems to be exactly what Agamben (2013, 130) argues, as he concludes his essay with the assertion that the Church’s radical separation between liturgy and life became the “ontologically operative paradigm,” the “mould” into which secular society was forced.

What this might mean is that there is nothing particularly new about the cynical green consumer subject. It has been observed by others that when we buy swirly light bulbs and live in the hope of safe nuclear power to come, we can then go about business as usual just as wealthy Catholics could buy indulgences in prior centuries (Monibot 2006). But what this also means is that the form of life practiced by Saint Francis *may* have relevance to our own time as the basis for a different response to the Anthropocene. I see in contemporary postcapitalist praxis an attempt to develop a form of life that travels under a different name. Inspired by burgeoning social movements, this project is an attempt to answer to the question of how to live in common.

Contemporary Experiments in Common Life

For the past twenty years, Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) have argued that we no longer need wait for the end of capitalism to practice a postcapitalist politics. Though they do not draw explicitly on Saint Francis, like him they seem to have faith that we can create a common life (and even joy) now and that there is no need to wait for a time to come. In the years since making this initial argument in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, there has been an explosion of social movements and scholarship focused on a postcapitalist politics: solidarity economies, economic democracy, peer-to-peer economies, degrowth economies, *buen vivir*, indigenous economies, transition towns, downshift and simple-living movements, and cooperative economies, to name but a few of the attempts at enacting another world that reassembles what already exists in the present one (Roelvink, St. Martin, and Gibson-Graham 2015).

J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy (2013) further elaborate a postcapitalist politics by drawing on examples throughout the world of people taking back the economy for people and planet. The efforts and initiatives highlighted in the book attempt to answer some of the central ethical dilemmas of common life. What is necessary for survival? How do we organize economies and distribute surplus? How do we engage in ethical exchange with others? How do we care for commons? How do we invest in a future worth having? These concerns are expressed as questions both to invite the readers into a shared space of collective reflection and action and also because there is no final answer: no matter what answer is given, the question remains.

There are two ethical questions that have special resonance with Agamben's reflections on monasticism: "What does it take to survive well?" and "How do we care for what we hold in common?" The question of what's necessary for survival and how to care for common property are long-held concerns in Marxian theory.⁵ What the phrase "surviving well" is meant to signal is the way in which we can no longer understand survival as "necessity" in human terms alone. In the Anthropocene, concerns about our individual and collective survival have to be read against the needs of the more-than-human planetary community (see also Gibson Graham 2008).

It might be enough to say that the explosion of contemporary movements that attempt to live differently, simply, lightly, and with less impact echoes the Franciscan ethos of simplicity and Francis's fabled regard for plant and animal life. But following Agamben's analysis, we can go much further than this. Following Plumwood (2007), Roelvink and Gibson-Graham (2009) describe a central aim in postcapitalist politics, to "go forward in a different mode of humanity"—one that recognizes what is at stake in a time of accelerating ecological crisis (see Steffen et al. 2015). This "mode of humanity" is at once connected to a different way of thinking (reframing economy, humans, ecology) and a different way of being in the world (actually doing things).

The parallel that I wish to explore here is one in which we might consider this postcapitalist mode of humanity, though secular, as a "form of life" and in which the former shares with the latter an indifferent relationship between life and rule, given greatest scope through a different relationship with things. To do this, I want to explore some of the examples used in *Take Back the Economy* and elsewhere that provide an answer to the questions of what's necessary for survival and under what conditions we can survive well together by caring for what we hold in common. I focus my attention initially on the household as a space like the monastery where a different mode of humanity might be practiced "joyfully and openly," as Agamben put it. Broadening out from the household, I draw on the work of postcapitalist theorists to find other

examples in which surviving well in the age of the Anthropocene finds greatest-scope forms of collective experimentation.

In *Take Back the Economy*, we describe Cathy as a representative of a diffuse social movement in countries across the minority world focused on “simple living,” or what Hamilton and Mail (2003) call “downshifting.” Cathy, the founder of Cheapskates.com, has a passion for living cheaply. While there is a long tradition within Christianity (and many other traditions) of voluntary simplicity, at first blush Cathy’s motivations are quite different, avowedly secular. “Cheapskating” is a commitment to an array of home-economic practices: self-provisioning DIY, continually auditing the household budget, and eliminating unnecessary expenditures. Cheapskating is not a renunciation of ownership but a desire for a life where consumption is thoughtful and deliberate. Cathy’s devotion to cheapskating stems from a personal crisis when an unfinished housing renovation project coincided with the birth of twins and an unexpected job loss. Her initial response was to curtail her family’s discretionary spending, but that was followed by a progressive reengineering of virtually every aspect of her household economy: cooking, cleaning, child care, entertainment, and home repair. She does this by means of both a rigorous household accounting process as well as experimentations in household provisioning—not just cooking but the use of home chemistry to produce better, safer, and cheaper supplies for laundry and household cleaning. She details these experiments and shares them with likeminded subscribers to her website, where she has parlayed her passion into an online business. On the site, Cathy describes herself as a cheapskate and not a miser. When she does buy something, she uses her savings and sense of discernment to buy things that are truly useful, durable, beautiful, or enjoyable—and she’s in a position to do so because she’s not spending money when she doesn’t have to. The goal is not to live life in fear of spending, she explains, but to avoid wasting money on things that do not matter, in the service of creating a life she describes as “debt free, cashed up, and laughing.”⁶

It is in Cathy’s insistence that there is “joy” to be found in this life of frugality that I begin to hear a deeper resonance with Francis’s form of life. What if we were to risk taking this comparison a bit further? Agamben says that it was the materiality of poor use that gave form to the free, joyful collectivity of monastic life, while Father Richard Rohr,⁷ in a complementary fashion, says the monastery provided freedom and relative security from the violent struggles over property that defined Francis’s moment in history. The joy and freedom that Cathy and her fellow cheapskates pursue is of a different kind: freedom from crushing consumer debt common in the minority world. Thus it is not so much the renunciation of property but rather the feeling of being owned by things, through debt, that is at issue here.

At this point it might be objected that the promise of living debt free is, in a sense, the experience of “individual salvation” in relation to consumer society. That may be the case, but even with the example of Cathy one can see the contours of a more collective practice through the sharing of information. Likewise, while Cathy is concerned with cheapness and her own sense of joy, her cheapskating ways have ecological implications that connect with critical scholarship focused on household sustainability. Gibson et al. (2011) argue that our conception of sustainable households must move beyond merely greening consumption practices. “Green,” in their view, has the effect of siloing environmental concerns, generally confining them to the most affluent class of consumers who are in a position to buy “green.” Ironically, the affluence of these consumers remains an overriding factor, and they still end up consuming more green food, energy, and electronics than those less affluent. In contrast, Cathy’s focus on cheapness has a very different starting point than the green, middle-class sensibility. Though the aim is

“cheapness” and not “greenness,” Cathy’s practical advice on frugality might speak to a broader socioeconomic spectrum while accomplishing the same ends: reduced consumption.

Gibson et al. (2011) argue that sustainable householding needs to place household economies into a broader interhousehold context. Writing in a speculative vein, Gibson-Graham (2011) follow along in the spirit of Dolores Hayden’s “grand domestic revolution,” asking us to imagine suburbanites that knock down the backyard walls, creating a common space for gardening and neighborhood water and biodiversity conservation. Other postcapitalist theorists have further explored the interhousehold as the context for experimentation in more equitable and sustainable living. To name but a few, Oona Morrow (2012) reimagines households as spaces of collective economic, social, and ecological embodied experimentation, including the collective recovery of the lost arts of self-provisioning. Kelly Dombroski (forthcoming) tracks efforts by mothers to adopt less ecologically damaging practices of infant care, such as the adoption of elimination communication practices that eliminate the need for nappies. Louise Crabtree (2006) reviews existing cohousing and land-trust communities throughout Australia that disintegrate household functions—from meal preparation to childcare and security—into the context of larger collectivities, such as housing in the context of community land trusts.

Gibson-Graham (2011, 4) use the term “experimental orientation” to partly describe this different engagement with the matter that comprises common life: “The experimental orientation is another way of making (transformative) connections; it is a willingness to ‘take in’ the world in the act of learning, to be receptive in a way that is constitutive of a new learner-world, just as Latour’s concept of ‘learning to be affected’ describes the formation of new body-worlds. In experimentation there’s no active transformative subject ‘learning about’ a separate inert object, but a subject-object that is a ‘becoming world.’” Part of what the use of this term “experiment” implies is a connection with laboratory science. Cathy, in her various DIY approaches to householding, embodies this experimental orientation. But what Gibson-Graham describe above goes further than that—the “experiments” involve learning from and being transformed by the objects you encounter in the course of learning to survive well. These encounters can take place in the household but also outside of it. Jenny Cameron, Craig Manhood, and Jamie Pomfrett (2011) detail the way in which urban and community gardens are affected by their collective provisioning practices and in particular how they learn by doing with others. Ann Hill (2015) describes kindred experiments in community survival through peri-urban farming practices in flood-vulnerable portions of the Philippines where gardeners improvise and learn to be affected by the social and ecological dynamics of a climate-altered world.

What all of these efforts share in common is a shift in the ecological problematic from individual to surviving well in a collective context, and there is also a different kind of engagement with the matter—households, food, home canning, gardens, nappies—that shapes life. Following Roelvink (2010), Jenny Cameron, Katherine Gibson, and Ann Hill (2014) in their further explorations of urban farming in flood-prone urban areas of the Philippines describe this intimate, experimental engagement as the formation of a new subjectivity: a hybrid collective. They see the experiments in adapting to life in the Anthropocene as a joining with all elements that compose that space: “Children, chickens, citizens, carrots, commitments, compost, commons and computers along with microbes, rainfall, secateurs, seeds, fences and so on” in an “experiment” that is already underway (120).

At this point we can state more formally the parallel between Francis’s “form of life” and the other “mode of humanity” being developed in the context of postcapitalist politics. For Agamben it was the material practice of the highest poverty that gave greatest scope to the

indifferent relation between life and law in the monastic life, as joyful and collective. For postcapitalist theorists, intimate experimental engagements with matter in households, gardens, and communities are the most capacious context for the emergence of a hybrid collective. In contrast, the hybrid collective subject of a postcapitalist politics requires not so much a renunciation but an attenuation of properties: a willingness not just to question what we own or how we relate to others but an attenuation of the properties that define us as human. In the context of this collectivity, the question of how to survive well admits more than human necessity into consideration.

The concept of hybrid collective postcapitalist political theory, as it has been developed by Gibson-Graham (1996) and others, extends the post-Althusserian antihumanist tradition (see also Gibson-Graham 2014). In a similar way, could we not also see a process of “self-forgetting” that appears in some versions of the eponymous prayer of Saint Francis? Could it be that form of life, as Francis developed it, drew on a different tradition but arrived at a similar understanding of the (post)human condition? At this point it might be rightly objected that it is all very well to talk about a different mode of humanity but, insofar as it has been described, this different mode has moved no further than from the household to the garden, a space no bigger than the monastery. But there is nothing in postcapitalist scholarship that confines this new mode of humanity to a particular scale. Indeed, the political project would be to extend this other mode of humanity in the household outward into the city, the countryside, the infrastructure that links them, the forests, the oceans and atmosphere—attenuating the properties that separate them and establishing larger hybrid collectivities that experiment in enacting other worlds. This is not hypothetical—there is both a scholarship and a practice that seeks to understand this other world by building it: municipal solidarity economies (Utting 2015), community-based enterprises (Cameron 2010), open-source food systems, various forms of peer-to-peer financing, community-owned solar and alternative energy systems, and so on (Cameron and Hicks 2014). More recently, Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy (2016) describe a new practice of solar commoning that links “solar citizens” to a large financial and physical infrastructure in order to sustain a postcarbon energy system. And what sustains this initiative is what solar activist and community entrepreneur Danny Kennedy (2014) refers to as the “audacity of an inevitable idea”: what’s required to transform the system already exists and merely needs to be moved into place.

Conclusion

It is the problem of the essential connection between use and form of life that is becoming undeferrable at this point. How can use—that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable—be translated into an ethos and a form of life? And what ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?

—Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*

In the conclusion of his essay, Agamben (2013, 145) suggests that form of life is not only to be understood as a form of protest against the Church, whose authority came to depend upon the radical separation between liturgy and life, but is in fact a confrontation with the “operative ontological paradigm” that structures “Western” thought and consumer society. In the final pages, he asks the questions quoted above: How can use without ownership be translated into “an ethos and form of life?” And “what ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in

use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?”

In my view, the questions he asks here are different versions of the same questions that animate postcapitalist politics: the question of what’s necessary for us to survive (use) and the question of how we care for what we hold in common (the world insofar as it is inappropriable). Both our individual and collective survival depends upon what we must use but can never wholly own: the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and lithosphere. Pope John XXII concludes that the total consumption of a thing—what he calls *abusus*, which destroys the thing in the process of consuming—cannot be separated from owning such a thing. Using the simple example of food and drink to undermine the philosophical position of Saint Francis, his argument does, eerily, describe a truth humanity must now realize about itself: we possess the capacity to so thoroughly consume the world, to *ab-use* it so completely, that it will matter little whether or not we lay claim to it as individuals, enclose it, or continue to degrade it as an unmanaged open-access commons.

There is an urgent need to connect us to what’s necessary for surviving well on a planet kept within a tolerable global ambient temperature—a steep learning curve for the collective actions required and little time in which to do it (perhaps none). What it might mean is not so much using the world without owning it but caring for it through our engagements with it, large and small. Even the smallest of experiments I describe here may yet enable larger transformations. For example, it would be easy for some in the critical left to dismiss Cathy’s cheapskating as yet another instance of consumer subjectivity, green or otherwise, someone who has fully internalized life in pursuit of the bargain while adjusting to a declining standard of living. All of that might be true, but we are still left with the question of what is necessary for our survival, with how and how much to consume, and it is here that Cathy’s efforts may prove instructive.

A better place to start might be to recognize that we understand only a little of what might be: it could be that Cathy’s struggle to free herself from consumer debt might enable her, and millions like her, to be less economically insecure and less fearful, more open to other forms of collective practice, or even inclined toward greater solidarity with people in the majority world—more receptive to collective action and more inclined, as Pope Francis suggests, to follow his namesake in not reducing the world to a thing to be abused. What climate science makes clear is that people in the minority world have to change their patterns of consumption. Psychoanalysts like Randall suggest that unless this transformation is attended to willingly, it will engender resentment. From my perspective, the collective reflection of the carbon conversations Randall advocates could be complemented by a postcapitalist politics of experimentation on multiple fronts—directed at household and community, food security and infrastructure. Here the emphasis could be placed on the joyful possibilities of surviving well in a collective context.

In light of these other collective possibilities, the problem with “green consumerism” is not its emphasis on green consumer goods but that it asks too little of us. Indeed, that there is little room in such a vision for us to do anything *other than consume* the idea of a just and sustainable world. The split cynical conscience that Žižek, Davidson, and others identify places our green-conscious pleasure in what we do to “do good” while continued economic growth and the promise of more consumption remains unconsciously aligned with our enjoyment. This is a problem, and our enjoyment will indeed “serve nothing” if we cannot develop a different mode of humanity. What form of life allows us to imagine is a different relationship between ethical intention and everyday practice as that which constitutes common, joyful life. Francis saw it as a

form of protest against the Church's authority, which was instituting its own cynical split between liturgy and ordinary life. In the present moment, "breaking the mold" and "confronting the paradigm" requires more than a critical awareness of the cynicism and insufficiency of green consumerism: it requires us to *practice* a different mode of humanity. Practice it, not wait for it "to come."

History makes its own argument against the vain nature of this hope for an emancipatory return, but what's missing is an alternative form of redemption. Both Agamben's version of Saint Francis, via form of life, and a postcapitalist politics with its process of material experimentation, transforming, and being transformed offer us an alternative version of the story in which we participate in redeeming ourselves. In *The Coming Community*, Elanor Kaufman (2008, 38) begins her discussion of Agamben's version of messianism with his retelling of a Hasidic rabbi who explains that "to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor completely begin the world anew. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this brush or this stone just a little, and thus everything." The messiah is required (to come, or come again), Agamben explains, because it isn't clear what cup, or brush, or stone is in question or which way to move it. What if, by means of experimentation and collectivity, we were to enact other worlds more just and less damaging, ways of living less all consuming and more reparative? We may move *the* cup, brush, or stone required, or we may not, but we cannot wait.

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¹ Michel Foucault’s history of sexuality, genealogy of confession, and identification of the priest as the template for the exercise of pastoral power in the secular age (the host of experts that care for the self) constitutes a different sort of return to Christianity that is also crucially important for this conversation. See for example Hardt (2011).

² As Agamben points out, these movements among the laity were all too often branded heretical and met with violence. The monastic movements, in contrast, stayed just enough inside the confines of the Church as an earthly power that they were allowed to persist.

³ One form that this enjoyment takes is the way in which even “environmental problems,” when they are acknowledged, “are transformed into an engine of growth and innovation” (Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015).

⁴ Why is the vow of poverty, as it has come to be known, central to monastic practice? Contemporary Franciscan monk and progressive activist **Father Richard Rohr offers** a historical

explanation. In Francis's time the ownership of land was an important part of identity since land title was connected to the family name. Francis's family was part of a then emergent merchant class that disrupted the traditional ownership schema, particularly in areas around Italy's protoindustrial cities, laying the conditions for a cycle of violence, dispossession, and reprisal. Francis's conversion moment came after spending a year as a hostage in one such conflict. The experience set him on a path to renounce not only patrilineal land title but also all personal property in an effort to escape the cycle of ownership, covetousness, and violent retribution endemic to his times.

⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy (2009) for a history of the latter.

⁶ See Cathy's blog: *Debt Free, Cashed Up, & Laughing: The Cheapskate Way to Living the Good Life*, <http://www.debtfreecashedupandlaughing.com.au/p/about.html>.

⁷ See more on Father Rohr at the website of the Center for Action and Contemplation, accessed 16 July 2016, <https://cac.org/richard-rohr>.