

What St. Paul and the Franciscans Can Tell Us About Neoliberalism

On Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*

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I.

What I want to argue in this paper is that Agamben's *Highest Poverty* is ultimately about confronting neoliberalism.¹ This claim rests on two assumptions. The first and least controversial is that *The Highest Poverty*, as the first section of the fourth and final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, represents at least a preparation for Agamben's attempt to answer the question of "what is to be done." Though we cannot expect a detailed political program from him, we can safely assume that he is beginning to elaborate the formal outlines of what a genuine alternative to our present order might look like.

The second assumption is that Agamben's shift in focus from the terrain of sovereignty and bare life to that of economy and glory is his way of talking about the neoliberal order that is currently choking the world to death. This claim may seem strange. After all, Agamben is most famous for his work on sovereignty, which took on a special urgency during the Bush years, when the conventional wisdom about globalization and the decline of the nation-state started to

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). In-text citations all refer to this work.

seem decidedly outdated. In the years since, the economy has forcibly reasserted itself as the primary driver of history, a situation that Hardt and Negri, for example, seized upon in *Commonwealth* as evidence that those who focused on sovereignty had been led astray by the self-glorification of the state and consequently failed to account for the everyday realities of economic domination.²

Already in *State of Exception*, however, Agamben had taken note of how frequently the “emergencies” declared by nation-states were of an economic nature, and the longest and most impressive volume of the Homo Sacer series, *The Kingdom and the Glory*—originally published in Italian the year before the global financial crisis under “copyleft” terms—represented a decisive shift away from the political-theological paradigm of sovereignty and toward the economic-providential paradigm of modern liberal-democratic capitalism.³ While he does not completely fill in the genealogy linking the medieval Christian notion of providence to modern techniques of the state, his two appendices—on the political miracle and the economic “invisible hand”—serve as striking confirmations of the continual parallels he draws between the medieval theology and modern political economy. Still, given that he is so reticent about the specifics of modern economic theory, one might rightly be skeptical that he means to address neoliberalism *in specific*. In order to demonstrate that, I will first need to briefly outline what he means by economy and glory.

To define them briefly, the “economic” for Agamben indicates a flexible logic that attempts to manage competing, incommensurable demands. The original setting for *oikonomia* was the Greek home, but the word soon found its way into other metaphorical contexts where

² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), particularly 3-6.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

some kind of coordination of the incommensurable was necessary—for instance, the practice of rhetoric or the administration of a multi-cultural empire. The challenge in all these settings is to mobilize a range of competing immanent principles in the pursuit of some overall goal that transcends and yet includes them. The successful *paterfamilias*, for example, must bring together the very different needs of his wife, his children, his slaves, and his animals and crops in order to enrich himself—which is the same thing as enriching the household. Hence this term was a natural fit for the theological problem that Christianity had set itself, namely that of coordinating between the contingent events of history and God’s goal of redeeming the world—which is, as in the household example, at the same time and inseparably about increasing vindicating his own justice and goodness and about increasing the good of his creation.

Hence the logic of economy always already includes some kind of transcendent point of reference—the father, the emperor, or God. Taking up a distinction that had become a major point of contention for Schmitt and Peterson, whose debate provides a kind of scaffolding for the book, Agamben names the economic-immanent aspect of the system Government and the transcendent-glorious aspect Kingdom. What Agamben points out is how strangely superfluous the transcendent element always turns out to be. If the father’s good is simply identical to the good of the household, for instance, why do we need the father? What does the father add? The answer is glory, which in Agamben’s analysis comes to seem like a kind of *Aufhebung* of superfluity into necessity itself. The transcendent, glorious goal that mobilizes all the immanent, economic forces toward itself serves ultimately to *cover up* the fact that there is no transcendent, glorious goal of humanity. Humanity is essentially inoperative, it has no natural “work” to do—and this very inoperativity is what allows the economic-glorious machine to capture humanity and render it so productive.

For the most part, the economic-glorious machine seeks some type of balance, with more or less success. Agamben, however, is always more interested in where machinery starts to break down. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, he seems to reduce the machinery of sovereignty that had so fascinated him in the earlier volumes of the Homo Sacer project to one such breakdown. What he now calls the “political-theological” paradigm represents a kind of short-circuit where the two levels of Kingdom and Government are both embodied in the same sovereign individual. What is most interesting to Agamben, however, is the opposite short-circuit, which happens when the level of Government becomes so dominant that there is effectively no more sovereign or transcendent point of reference at all. At that point, glory and economy collapse into each other, becoming indistinguishable.

What I want to claim is that this second collapse is precisely what happens in neoliberalism. In order to do that, I first need to restore a certain literalism to Agamben’s very abstract treatments of economy and glory. I will first assume that the economic pole of the machine represents what we would call the economy and its governmental regulators—two realities which are always necessarily intertwined. The glorious pole represents the state as such in its attempt to claim glory and honor among other nations, whether through war or through showing off its own wealth. During the most fondly remembered stages of capitalist development, these two poles are more or less in balance: the state nurtures the market economy as the best way to increase its own wealth and glory relative to other nations. We can see a recent example of that in the Cold War era, where both the US and the Soviet Union pursued their respective economic policies as part of their broader competition on the world stage. Within the economic-glorious machine, such an outcome is probably the best that average citizens can hope

for, insofar as their own quality of life (rather than, for instance, their death on the battlefield) becomes a source of pride to the regime.

If we now turn to the question of the two directions in which this balance can collapse, it seems obvious that the “political-theological” paradigm is essentially fascist dictatorship, where all the economic resources of the nation are mobilized toward the pursuit of national glory in war. I propose that the second collapse, which happens when the level of economy becomes so dominant that there is effectively no more sovereign or transcendent point of reference at all, is what happens under neoliberalism. Under neoliberalism, capitalism no longer justifies itself by claiming to be the most effective way of serving the public good. Instead, we have markets simply in order to have markets. The government no longer pursues market policies in order to enrich and strengthen the nation, but for its own sake. Monopolies are no longer broken up, despite the outsize power they accumulate, because they have arisen as a result of supposedly “natural” market mechanisms—and meanwhile, artificial markets are created in fields that had previously seemed to be “natural monopolies” (such as education, health care, or public utilities). Meanwhile, governments worldwide submit to the discipline of global economic forces. Presidents and prime ministers live in continual fear of the bond market, and countries actively seek to *degrade* their citizens’ quality of life by lowering wages and benefits—all in order to increase “global competitiveness.” Competition is no longer a means to an end, a way of producing unforeseen public benefits by encouraging creative entrepreneurs, but an end in itself: we have to compete because we have to compete.

This collapse of glory and economy propagates itself down to the most fine-grained personal interactions. When people work for “exposure,” when it is regarded as a privilege to work for little or nothing in order to add a line to one’s résumé, when every relationship is

always already instrumentalized for the purposes of career advancement, when people avidly participate in online forums devoted to little more than self-marketing—surely at this point glory and economy have entered into a zone of indistinction. In the neoliberal inferno in which we now live, inequality is not an unfortunate side-effect of capitalism that must be tolerated, but an active good. The market exists in order to reveal the natural hierarchy of glory among human beings.

It is this hellish dead-end, this graveyard for all hope, this body of death, that has increasingly been Agamben's focus in what might be called the second phase of the Homo Sacer project. While previously he was focused on the concentration camp as the new *nomos* of the earth, the diagnosis that has come to the forefront in his recent work is that our contemporary political situation has reached an incurable impasse where it can only take the form of an *oikonomia*—a claim that is made a crucial points in *The Sacrament of Language*, *The Highest Poverty*, and *Opus Dei*.

Hence the theorist of sovereignty has emerged as a diagnostician of neoliberalism, even if he is at times an oblique one, and this shift is immediately visible in *The Highest Poverty*. The problems of the state of exception and the concomitant production of bare life have fallen into the background—indeed, Agamben is at pains to demonstrate that monasticism is something fundamentally *different* from law, something existing alongside it in a way that may well have rendered the claim of law over the monk genuinely inoperative. He shows that the monastic rule does not constitute a legal code, that entry into the monastery is not normally accompanied by a binding oath, and that consequently the temptation facing the monk is not a matter of the law and its transgression.

No, the real temptation of the monks is “the will to construct their life as a total and unceasing liturgy or Divine Office” (xii). In an exhaustive and exhausting exploration of every

aspect of monastic practice, Agamben gives us what could be read as a vertiginous compression of the entire history of capitalist exploitation. Monasteries were the first institutions to develop rigorous time-keeping devices for the full temporal articulation of every day—and the demand is even exaggerated to the point of becoming “living clocks” whose recitation of the Psalms is so exact and regular that, as with Kant’s legendary daily walks through Königsberg, one can set one’s watch by it (20).⁴ In a foreshadowing of the neoliberal collapse of glory into economy, even necessary physical labor was reconceived as a form of worship, as monks were expected to memorize the Psalms in order to recite them mentally on a continual basis. Work and worship, economy and glory, enter into a zone of indistinction in the monastic life.

This tendency toward a totalizing liturgy, Agamben believes, is what allowed the early monastic movement to be folded back into the mainstream church against which it had originally rebelled—and thereby enter into an alliance with profane power structures as well. Agamben had already claimed in *The Kingdom and the Glory* that the ritual performance of glorification is the point of contact between the theological and the political, and here it takes on the additional role of providing a means to tame an unruly movement that had always taken its distance from the church’s official liturgical practices. While the Carolingian monarchs favored the monastic rules that seemed most akin to juridical codes and pushed for the formalization of oaths, the church increasingly borrowed from monastic liturgy to legitimize its own authority.

Why is this history important? For Agamben, it’s important because he views monasticism, at least in its early stages, as an authentically messianic movement. If we take Agamben’s reading of Paul as a point of reference, this makes sense insofar as the monks at their best concretely lived out the Pauline “as-if-not” approach to legal structures. The original hermits

⁴ This reference to Kant is not accidental, as Agamben traces the origins of Kantian ethics to Christian concepts of liturgy in the companion piece to *The Highest Poverty, Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

and the communities that grew up around them lived in the “desert” (in the sense of a “wilderness” not under anyone’s effective political control), and they set up their own practices and norms with apparently complete indifference toward their relationship with the official legal authorities. They weren’t setting out to overthrow the law or rebel against it—they simply set to work building their own new type of polity “as-if-not” under the already-existing law. If they were subsequently articulated into the existing order of power, then that shows that the really difficult problem is not at the level of the political-theological paradigm, but the economic-theological paradigm—it is not a matter of law, but of economy and glory.

Already in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, we have hints that it may have been precisely on the matter of economy and glory that Paul’s original messianic movement ran aground, becoming the unappealing compromise formation with which we are all familiar today. The Pauline community is (at least according to Agamben) always described in economic rather than political terms, for instance, and of course the Pauline corpus is a primary source for the doctrine of angels later articulated into an economy of glorification by Pseudo-Dionysius. That history is and must remain speculative, however, and much the same is true for the shift from early monasticism to its more institutionalized forms. In order to more fully explore this problem of how a messianic movement sells out, therefore, he turns to Franciscanism, a movement whose history has been thoroughly documented and which, for Agamben, represents the most radical and promising form of monasticism. If we can determine what went wrong with Franciscanism that allowed them to be rearticulated into the church’s glorious *oikonomia*, Agamben maintains, then we may be able to make some headway on the question of how best to deal with the global, glory-sodden *oikonomia* with which we are faced today.

II.

In the final major division of *The Highest Poverty*, designated only by the keyword “Form-of-Life,” Agamben analyses the emergence and eventual capitulation of the Franciscan movement. His presentation can at times seem curiously organized, but much becomes clear if one keeps the problems of economy and glory in mind. The first thing he notes about the Franciscan movement is that it is precisely a *movement*—not a new institutional structure, not a new set of doctrines, but one among the many late-medieval attempts to live out the Gospel in an unprecedentedly direct way. The Church’s strategy vis-à-vis these movements was either to recognize them as new religious orders or else label them as heretics. For Agamben, though, this ecclesiastical strategy and the historiography that followed in its wake missed what was really at stake:

what remained unthought was precisely the originary aspiration that had led the movements to reclaim a *life* and not a *rule*, a *forma vitae* and not a more or less coherent system of ideas and doctrines—or more precisely, to propose not some new exegesis of the holy text, but its pure and simple identification with life, as if they did not want to read and interpret the Gospel, but only live it. (94)

In a sense this was always the goal of monasticism, but St. Francis pursued it in a more radical way—that is to say, in a radically *simple* way.

Compared with traditional monastic rules, the Franciscan rule is extremely short and straightforward. The detailed articulation of life into a rhythm of constant worship is absent. Indeed, Francis is remarkably indifferent to the liturgical office that so thoroughly captured his monastic forebears. For lay brothers, he simply assigns the Lord’s prayer; for ordained brothers, he encourages them to fulfill their obligations to the Roman Church without supplying any

further guidance. In what could be read as a fresh implementation of the Pauline strategy of the “as-if-not,” Francis does not critique or attempt to overthrow the existing liturgical order—he simply assumes that his brothers should pray. If they don’t know how, he sets about teaching them to do so directly out of the Gospels. If they are priests who already have the obligation to pray according to the Divine Office of the Roman Church, then that works too. Here one can hear an echo of Paul’s recommendation that each remain in the state in which he was called—in the Franciscan community, worldly status (which here includes ecclesiastical status!) is rendered inoperative, a matter of indifference.

Hence for Agamben, the Franciscans succeeded in carrying out a messianic suspension of the order of glory. It also appears that they did so with regard to an area that we would recognize as primarily “economic,” namely the question of property. The “highest poverty” of the title is the unique type of poverty claimed by the Franciscans—they don’t just lack all possessions, they lack the very ability to possess anything in the first place. Yet it is precisely at this point that the Franciscan movement will ultimately run aground. And the reason for this failure, in Agamben’s view, is that the Franciscan movement allowed itself to become entangled with the very structure that the earliest monasticism had so successfully eluded: the law.

There are many levels of irony at work in the debate that Agamben documents and assesses in the final chapters of *The Highest Poverty*. The first is almost too obvious to notice: the foremost advocate of the legal structure of poverty that seeks to invalidate the Franciscans’ claims is precisely the pope, who claims to act on behalf of the messiah who, according to Paul, came to suspend the claim of the law. The more fatal irony, however, is that the Franciscan attempts to define the “highest poverty” in legal terms only wound up further validating the law and setting them up for an eventual takeover. Agamben summarizes the tension as follows:

Beyond the diversity of the positions and the subtlety of the theological and juridical arguments of the Franciscans who intervene in the controversy..., the principle that remains immutable and nonnegotiable for them from beginning to end can be summarized in these terms: what is in question, for the order as for its founder, is the *abdication omnis iuris* (“abdication of every right”), that is, the possibility of a human existence beyond the law. What the Franciscans never tire of confirming... is the lawfulness for the brothers of making use of goods without having any right to them (neither of property nor of use). (111)

To put the paradox more concisely: the Franciscans want to argue that their status as living completely beyond the law is totally lawful. They claim to have a legal right to abdicate every right.

Agamben goes on to say that “from the perspective that is of interest to us here, Franciscanism can be defined—and in this consists its novelty, even today unthought, and in the present conditions of society, totally unthinkable—as *the attempt to realize a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law*” (110). In order to get at this aspect of Franciscanism, however, he must read the controversy against the grain, picking out the missed opportunities and the ways they might have been seized. In the interests of time, I will focus on two points here, one negative and one positive.

First, the negative: Agamben believes that the strategy of claiming that the pope owned all the apparent Franciscan “property” on their behalf was a dead end. The reason for this is not purely strategic (in the sense that it left them more vulnerable to the papacy’s whims), but conceptual: it validated the principle of property as normative for the Christian life. What’s more, it enshrined the principle of ownership despite the fact that Franciscan polemics against

property clearly showed that they were aware of its inherently nihilistic nature. Agamben quotes a tract from a Spiritual Franciscan that makes the observation that ownership is an end in itself, completely divorced from any kind of use value:

That using something for one's own pleasure [*ad delectationem*] does not constitute, in itself, the goal of the one who loves riches is evident in the case of the miser, who loves riches above all, yet does not use them for his own pleasure and in fact almost doesn't dare to eat, and the more the love of riches grows in him the more the use he makes of them diminishes, because he does not want to use them, but to keep them and amass them as his own [*quia eis non vult uti, sed conservare ut proprias et congregare*]. . . . (129)

The fact that the pope is ultimately able to shut down the Franciscan arguments by equating the use of something that is “used up” or destroyed, such as food, with ownership points in a similar direction: possession is ultimately the right to destroy.

More broadly, though, Agamben argues that the Franciscans fatally misjudged their opponent insofar as they believed that they could achieve legal recognition for their extra-legal zone—but claiming that which exists outside the law *is precisely what the law does*. The law recognizes plenty of unowned objects, but always as potentially owned, always as available to the first comer. Here one might look to the fragility of structures like the welfare state or even the Soviet economic apparatus in the face of neoliberal appropriation. Setting up a “liberated zone” free from immediate economic pressures within the capitalist state or even instituting “socialism in one country” is not enough—it just sets up a new field for accumulation, as we can see close to home in the profiteering that has emerged in higher education in recent decades. One can see a similar strategic failure in claims that, for example, universal health care or more robust Social Security benefits would spur further economic growth. Even though those claims are most

likely true, they still concede the terms of argument to the opposition and make it more difficult to think a thorough-going alternative.

Closely related with the failed strategy of “Franciscanism in one country” is the failure to develop a concept that Agamben believes to be uniquely promising and that he is planning on devoting the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series to: *use*. A quotation from Bonagratia clearly illustrates the argumentative strategy surrounding the concept of use: “as the horse has de facto use but not property rights over the oats that it eats, so the religious who has abdicated all property has the simple de facto use [*usum simplicem facti*] of bread, wine, and clothes” (110). The problem, in Agamben’s eyes, is that the Franciscan theorists failed to develop “a definition of use in itself and not only in opposition to law” (139)—and the first place one would look to develop such a definition is precisely the letters of St. Paul:

The preoccupation with constructing a justification of use in juridical terms prevented them from collecting the hints of a theory of use present in the Pauline letters, in particular in 1 Corinthians 7:20–31, in which using the world as not using it or not abusing it (*et qui utuntur hoc mundo, tamquam non utantur*; the original Greek *hōs mē katachromenoi* means “as not abusing”) defined the Christian’s form of life.

In my view, this would be both an application and a development of the Pauline “as-if-not.” It is an application insofar as the Franciscans would define what they mean by use “as-if-not” in relation to the law, in total indifference to its relationship or non-relationship with a legal status or category. It is a development insofar as it would begin to give concrete positive content to the Pauline “as-if-not,” which like the Franciscan “use,” is still defined primarily negatively. The Franciscans not only needed to return to Paul, in other words, but to radicalize him in order to carry out the messianic strategy of the “as-if-not” successfully against the three-pronged attack

of law, economy, and glory. A positive development of use would also answer to the call to reject the strategy of “Franciscanism in one country”—it would provide a model for an alternative relationship to things that potentially suspends the force of law and the regime of property for *everyone*, rendering it inoperative on a global level.

III.

In order to clarify the relationship of *The Highest Poverty* to neoliberalism in specific, I believe it may be helpful to address the ways in which its account of the Franciscans might be read as an oblique critique of Marxism—something I have already suggested in drawing parallels between the failings of the Franciscans and the failings of Social Democracy and Soviet Communism. Agamben’s relationship to Marxism is a fraught one, complicated by a certain opacity or strategic ambiguity when he directly addresses the issue. There are clear parallels, but there is always a twist that keeps one from identifying Agamben as a Marxist fellow-traveler. For instance, we can take the final paragraph of the chapter on use:

The specific eschatological character of the Franciscan message is not expressed in a new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world to bring to completion, not the historical meaning of the “person” in the economy of salvation, so much as his life as such. The Franciscan form of life is, in this sense, the end of all lives (*finis omnium vitarum*), the final *modus*, after which the manifold historical dispensation of *modi vivendi* is no longer possible. The “highest poverty,” with its use of things, is the form-of-life that begins when all the West’s forms of life have reached their historical consummation. (143)

If we take away the Christian references, it seems that this paragraph could be at home in the 1844 manuscripts: Franciscanism is history's riddle solved, overcoming alienation and restoring us to authentic use value. Yet the twist comes in the last sentence—the eschatological form-of-life represented by Franciscanism is not the consummation of the West's forms of life, but comes *after* that consummation. Perhaps Franciscanism is not so much history's riddle solved as history's riddle set aside.

One can find more direct remarks on Marx in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, such as when he says, “It is curious that when the Hegelian Left breaks with this theological concept [of the providential economy of salvation], it can do so only on the condition that the economy in a modern sense, which is to say, the historical self-production of man, is placed at the center of the historical process. In this sense, the Hegelian Left replaces divine economy with a purely human economy” (46). Later, referring explicitly to the 1844 manuscripts, he writes, “After having conceived of being as praxis, if we take God away and put man in his place, we will consequently obtain the result that the essence of man is nothing other than the praxis through which he incessantly produces himself” (91). Yet by the halfway point of the book, Agamben has dispensed with economy as an ultimately infernal reality that has no redemptive potential—only when the economy of salvation is over and we are left to glory without economy do we begin to have access to the core of *inoperativity* that Agamben sees as the real potentiality for transformation. This inoperativity is not the dialectical outworking of the process of economy, but something that emerges only when that economy *stops*.

In short, Agamben believes that the ultimate outcome of capitalism is not its self-overcoming in communism, but precisely the dead-end of neoliberalism. While Marxists castigate Agamben for his inattention to concrete economic facts, Agamben is obliquely pointing

out that neoliberalism is what it concretely looks like for the economic to be determinative “in the last instance,” for every other possible point of reference—whether glorious or legal—to be collapsed into the economic and explained in its terms. When Marxists demand greater attention to the economy, they are knocking at an open door.

This is at the root of Agamben’s suspicion of Negri and Hardt’s project in *Empire* and its sequels. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben compares them to the infamous bishop Eusebius, who did so much of the ideological work of marrying his messianic movement to the fortunes of the empire.⁵ In retrospect, though, we might better compare them to the Franciscan theorists trying to negotiate a space for their movement with the pope, the very embodiment of the collapse of the legal and glorious into the economic. Just as the Franciscans still perhaps believed that the pope as representative of the economy of salvation would recognize their claim even at the risk of undermining his own power, so also Negri and Hardt provide the latest version of the thesis that capitalism is preparing the ground for communism. The economy is still fundamentally one of salvation.

In his oblique way, Agamben is arguing that the economy will not save us. Here Agamben has clearly been deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin’s critique of mainstream Marxism in his theses “On the Concept of History” and, perhaps more decisively, the “Theologico-Political Fragment.” There Benjamin writes:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. (*Reflections*, pg. 312)

⁵ Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, pg. 11.

Nevertheless, “the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach” (312). While there is much in this brief fragment that is enigmatic, I believe that this messianic dynamic can be related back to the Pauline notion that the law—and, as Agamben argues, the entire economic apparatus of world history—was created “for sin” (see *Kingdom and the Glory*, 165-66). Its function is to make us long for the coming of the messiah, even though it has no necessary relationship with the messiah. Here one could review the entirety of Romans 7, but I would simply highlight the messianic non-sequitur in verses 24-25: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

For Agamben and Benjamin, what is missing in the mainstream of Marxism is precisely that hiatus, that gap, that non-sequitur. Capitalism produces its own grave-diggers, who then seize power and produce the new classless society. In Pauline terms, the problem with the mainstream Marxist narrative is that it is precisely salvation by works: it ultimately remains within the terms of the economy of salvation rather than suspending it. The challenge Agamben’s project issues to Marxists is to ask whether they still expect the economy to save us—and to ask those who believe they are beyond such illusions whether they are still ultimately too fascinated by the “mystery of the economy” to consider what it could mean to succeed where Paul and the Franciscans failed, that is to say, what it might look like to render the economy inoperative so that we might become human again in a new and different way.