Goucher College

"In the World but Not of It"

The Kingdom of God as Radical Refusal and New Creation

Katrina Kniss

Senior Honors Thesis

Advised by:

Yousuf Al-Bulushi
Steven DeCaroli
Ann Duncan
Ailish Hopper

Dedication:

To my great grandfather, Lloy A. Kniss, who taught me my first lesson in the importance of refusing to compromise my values. He was one of the first conscientious objectors to the military draft in World War I. While I never met him, his legacy has been passed down through my family. You can read his story in his book, *I Couldn't Fight*.

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Introduction

Throughout most of my life, I have been steeped in a heritage that has formed the kind of questions I ask about the world. My upbringing in the Mennonite Church, an historic peace church in the Anabaptist tradition, instilled in me the importance of community, simple living, social justice, and pacifism. An idea at the core of the Mennonite theological disposition is the concept of being "in the world but not of it"; to live into the counterculture of Jesus's "upside down kingdom" by denying nationalism, militarism, and consumerist materialism, as well as the harmful influences of popular culture. Starting from a young age, I began wrestling with the question of how to distance myself from the ways of the world while still working for the good of the world in my role as a global citizen: should I say the pledge of allegiance in school? Should I vote? However, when I started examining broader questions outside of the Mennonite communities I belonged to, I saw that my theology lacked teeth, or a critical understanding of the world outside of our culturally isolated communities. I claimed a social justice narrative, but without a robust power analysis. I criticized the war-making of the state and lifted up good stewardship of the earth's resources, but I had no understanding of the functions of global capitalism. I wanted to love the whole world, no exceptions, but I had never even heard the term "white privilege". Even if the ideas of the Mennonite church held revolutionary potential, they weren't necessarily being lived in a way that centered the struggles of the marginalized.

It is from this background and viewpoint of the world that I entered into the academic field of Peace Studies, not at a Mennonite higher education institution, but at a private liberal arts college. My interests and lines of inquiry over the past four years have grown in ways I never could have imagined. In my work through Peace Studies I have continued to view peace work through a theological lens, but my experiences and academic studies have centered my personal

discovery of the shaping forces of capitalism and white supremacy, and what it means to promote self-determination and autonomy. I first became interested in the idea of autonomy through my training as a mediator. The Inclusive Model of mediation decenters the facilitators and prioritizes the knowledge and lived experience of the participants, understanding that those living the conflict are in the best position to offer up solutions. This experience began forming my belief that in conversations around conflict and development, it is communities themselves who understand best what they need and what kind of world they want to imagine. I had the opportunity to further explore this theme through my studies in Colombia and India. In Colombia, I interned with a grassroots peacebuilding organization that modeled a commitment to the self-determination of Afro-Colombian and indigenous *campesino* communities, as they negotiated the extent to which they depended on the state for reparations, despite its complicity in the violence that displaced them from their land and damaged their formerly interdependent community structures. In India, I studied mainstream narratives of development and the types of alternatives to development that are being posed by various communities. I had the unique opportunity to learn from the Lepcha indigenous tribe about their struggles to exist as an autonomous group within a global context of nation states pursuing development at any cost.

This line of thought points toward the emerging focus of my intellectual pursuits: the problem of the sovereign nation-state. While many mainstream political and intellectual movements advocate for the strengthening of rights and a more just state, growing bodies of thought and political projects exist that decenter the state as the primary achievement of humanity. Fields such as Christian anarchism, Afro-pessimism, and Autonomist Marxism, as well as thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, all engage in a critique of the state and expose its inherent violence, while also operating at a distance from the state in their creation of newly

imagined political communities. These projects all work towards the conception of a new political community by centering the voices and experiences of the oppressed, and a political community where existence itself is resistance to the dominant powers in society. However, each of these projects faces similar obstacles in the transition from theory to praxis, as communities of practice often reify the very structures against which they are fighting.

Research Questions

Within this broader personal and academic context, I will engage these different bodies of literature to explore the unique perspectives each can add to answering the following questions:

- What could it look like to conceive of a political community beyond the state, imagined from the subject position of the marginalized?
- How can the fields of Christian anarchism, Autonomist Marxism, Afro-pessimism, and the work of Agamben be mutually informative towards a praxis of the formation of such communities?

Literature Review

Christian Anarchism

To this end, I will begin my exploration in the tradition of Christian anarchism. While there is more to Christianity than anarchism, Christian anarchists engage in a political reading of the gospel that claims that a true adherence to the teachings of Jesus, as well as an examination of other major themes throughout scripture, necessarily leads to an anarchic, or anti-authority disposition (Christoyannopoulos 13). Among radical Christian traditions, Christian anarchism is similar to both liberation theology and pacifism in its critique of the state, but differs in the discussion of means. Pacifism often lacks a positive political understanding beyond refraining

from war, while liberation theology has the tendency to fall into the familiar cycle of advocating violent power struggles for state power (Ellul 32). Christian anarchists focus on the life and teachings of Jesus, and specifically the Sermon on the Mount, to elaborate a critique of and engagement with the state that is based in nonresistance to evil. This nonresistance is not passivity, nor is it active rebellion, but a third way which harnesses the creative potential of nonviolence to expose the violence of the state and rid it of its legitimacy (Wink 4). Taking seriously the call to break cycles of violence through love of enemy, Christian anarchists aggregate this concept to the level of the state, thereby critiquing the state's use of force and coercion for political goals (Christoyannopoulos 87). While still engaged in a concern for the welfare of the world, Christian anarchists place their primary allegiance and identity in God's kingdom, not the kingdom of the world or a national identity (Christoyannopoulos 166, Yoder 306, York 24). The kingdom of the world is based in hierarchy, violence, and exploitation, while God's kingdom is one of love, forgiveness, and nonresistance (Christoyannopoulos 167).

Christian anarchism is a diverse, scattered tradition, and many of the thinkers and theologians whose work adds to the Christian anarchist conversation would not label themselves as such. Most scholars name Leo Tolstoy as the first explicit and perhaps most influential Christian anarchist thinker. While there are multiple lines of thought that can be traced throughout the field, this research will center the theological work of writers such as Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Walter Wink, who name Christians as exiles from the world and are concerned with the creation of viable communities as alternatives to the state (Yoder 303, York 24). Through their radical refusal to take part in political games of power and through their rejection of state authority, these communities rid the state of its legitimacy (Eller 82, Ellul 14, Christoyannopoulos 172). The creation of communities

which embody the principles of the kingdom of God mark the inbreaking of this kingdom, the arrival of the Messiah in the present, and are therefore engaged in apocalyptic politics (Hauerwas, York 26).

Agamben

The Christian anarchist political project closely aligns with the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In contrast to mainstream political traditions, Agamben defines state sovereignty as holding the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence and names the state of exception, the power of the sovereign to use violence indiscriminately in exception to the law, as the originary political moment (Agamben 181). Homo sacer is the result of the sovereign ban, a figure produced in bare life, outside of the protection of the law, but still in an exceptional relationship to it (Agamben 183). Furthermore, Agamben posits the positionality of the subject in bare life, such as the stateless refugee, or more relevant to the conversation with Christian anarchism- the exile, not simply as a negation of rights, but as a potential place of a new positive political project (DeCaroli 214). The refugee is therefore the paradigmatic figure, or limit concept, throughout Agamben's work. Through the refusal of authority and rights, a juridical poverty is created that renders the law indecipherable from life, therefore a form-of-life. This form-of-life moves not as revolution, but beyond revolution, through the creation of a new political community; the unveiling not of an alternative politic, but the genuine one – the already-here-yet-future politic (Agamben 44, York 27). In his theorization of form-of-life, Agamben engages with the Christian monastic tradition, specifically the Franciscan order, emphasizing the concept of voluntary poverty (The Highest Poverty).

Autonomist Marxism

Despite its radical potential to point toward an alternative to the politics of the world, Christian anarchist theory in practice can lack a critical understanding of the functions of the state and the types of programs necessary to disarm it. Examined in light of Marxist analyses of capital, the church clearly has been complicit in the veneration of the work ethic and furthering the exploitation inherent to capitalism (Weeks 48). This question of economics is shaped by my academic study as well. As an economics minor, I have gained a strong foundation in mainstream neoliberal economic models, and their emphasis on equilibrium, cost-benefit analysis, and the explanation of value through marginal cost and utility. These models impart a normative force on the functions of the world that leave concepts such as work and growth at any cost completely unquestioned.

In their conversations on radical history, Lynd and Grubacic claim, "We need Marxism to understand the structure of society and anarchism to prefigure or anticipate a new society" (xiii). When bringing Christian anarchist ideas into conversation with the alternative economic understandings of Marxism, the Autonomist Marxist tradition can provide a theory of the radical potential of nonresistance to capitalist hegemony, through the strategy of refusal. Emerging out of radical communities in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, the Autonomist Marxists insist on the primacy of working class struggle. The working class is made up of autonomous groups that shape the direction of capitalist development, while the capitalist class accumulates surplus and becomes more sophisticated in its exploitation[1] of the working class (Cleaver 4, *Reading Capital* 65, Tronti 4). The strategy of refusal therefore refers to the potential for the working class to

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[1] The extraction of a surplus for the purpose of extracting future surplus.

present an organized refusal to cooperate or to even improve the conditions within the capitalist system, as these actions help to resolve capitalism's inherent contradictions and crises (Tronti 11). The refusal of work, specifically, is a strategy that rejects the ideology of work and exposes even socialist accumulation as a reification of the same capitalist relations (Cleaver 1). By centering the analysis on a diversity of autonomous groups in the struggle against capitalist hegemony, Autonomist Marxists point to the creation of new forms of subjectivity that move beyond the worker-capitalist dialectic, not simply in a return to unalienated labor[2], but in a liberation of time and space from the concept of reproduction itself (Cleaver 7). Here, subjectivity refers to the agency of workers as subjects, and the potential power of the human labor of creation.

A Marxist understanding of capital finds its foundation in the labor theory of value, which claims that the value attributed to a product is the value of the socially necessary labor time needed to produce it, as well as the labor necessary to allow the worker to reproduce his labor, such as food and shelter (Mason 151). However, in our contemporary context of the social factory[3], the value of labor becomes a value without measure. Autonomist Marxist Antonio Negri analogizes the immeasurability of labor to the lack of measure of justice in the world and the immeasurability of the suffering of workers. Negri then argues for a conception of an ontology of suffering, which points to pain as the key to community, as well as the human power of creativity. It is this "creation beyond measure that characterizes human labor as the true figure of the divine" (Negri xv). This framework can provide a new conception of Christian labor, through the work of creation, not of production.

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[2] Full control of production by workers themselves.
[3] A phenomenon where labor extends beyond the factory walls to subsume all activities and areas of life for the purpose of reproduction.

Afro-pessimism

Even with a radical understanding of economics and a strategy of refusal, when viewed through the lens of Afro-pessimism, Christian anarchist practice is susceptible to a naïve view of race. Afropessimists emphasize the importance of dwelling in the suffering and totality of antiblack violence, before speaking of a positive political project. Attempts to gain rights within civil society simply reify the coherence of a society that is predicated on the incoherence of black social death (Hardt 27, Wilderson 229). The black subject is an antagonism that threatens the entire political order, an antagonism stronger than that of the worker, as the worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, while the slave questions productivity itself (Wilderson 230, 231). Some Black Studies scholars, such as Fred Moten, engage with Afro-pessimism and work through it to find the possibility of the operations of a positive political project. Blackness may be an antagonism to civil society, but it is not a non-being ("The Subprime" 240). Moten outlines the constitution of blackness as a radical force, exploring the possibilities for a conception of black life that threatens the destruction of civil society, a blackness that can claim anyone and be claimed by anyone (238). It is by a further engagement with the work of Afro-pessimism, in conversation with black liberation theology, that Christian anarchist practice can come to encompass a politics that is not based in the grammar of civil society, but rather embraces the creative power of suffering in order to take the position of the slave in society, seeing in black life the potential for a new world order. This shift in paradigm places Agamben's limit concept of the refugee in relation with the figure of the slave.

Case Study

Because Christian anarchism is more a field of thought than a cohesive tradition of practice, my case study through this research will be the Anabaptist tradition. This tradition

emerged during the Protestant Reformation as a radical refusal of the colluded power of the church and the state. Persecuted by both the Catholic church and those in Luther's movement, the very existence of the Anabaptist movement posed a radical, nonviolent resistance to the power structures of the day and constituted a viable alternative formation of a political community. It is on these grounds of nonresistance, refusal of state authority, and the formation of an alternative political community that I name the Anabaptist vision as an embodiment of the Christian anarchist project. From the very beginning, Anabaptist existence was resistance to structures of power and domination. If this is no longer the case, however, what has changed, and what can be learned from that historical evolution? As the Anabaptist tradition has evolved and taken different forms over the past 500 years, certain tendencies and patterns in communal practice have emerged as well. My case study will follow these evolutionary tendencies by investigating specific moments and community experiments in Anabaptist, and specifically Mennonite, history.

Today, the Anabaptist legacy lives on primarily in the Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, and Hutterites. The case study I trace throughout this paper focuses primarily on the Mennonite church, as it is the church of my own heritage, and perhaps the most prominent branch of contemporary Anabaptism, both in the amount of scholarly attention given to it and its engagement in broader social issues. While it may be difficult to pinpoint the anarchist tendencies of the contemporary Mennonite church, the core values of the early Anabaptist movement most clearly live on in Mennonites' personal and institutional commitment to peace work. There are currently an estimated 1.6 million people in 65 countries who are members of the Mennonite church, with 60% of those members living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Edmund 399). My explicit focus on the Mennonite church in North America is intentional, as it

is most closely tied to my own personal experience, and the region still holds much of the global institutional power and resources, despite being a minority in membership numbers. While Mennonites' historical involvement in peace work included principled pacifism and advocating for Conscientious Objector status, contemporary Mennonite institutions continue to be involved in peacebuilding activities that include "formal education, activism in justice making and peacebuilding, with goals of repairing harm, building community, reconciling traditionally hateful groups, and protesting injustices throughout the world" (399). These activities are carried out by Mennonite congregations, higher educational institutions, and international peacebuilding organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams.

The work of advocacy and activism within the Mennonite church is most intense outside of North America and Europe, "in areas where traditional hostility, new social development, or reparative development is taking place… The dialogue between these regions often provides the fuel for the advancement of Anabaptist theological understandings" (Edmund 400). While peace work is foundational to the Mennonite church's identity and mission, this paper serves as a challenge to the Mennonite church in North America to tie its identity more closely to the radical values of the early Anabaptist movement and to confront the structures of power and violence it continues to perpetuate through its very emphasis on these peaceful, separatist values. The Anabaptist tradition is but one example of a community that works to embody an alternative to the state. Recognizing that versions of community existence can take many different forms, this case study from the Anabaptist tradition will be integrated alongside my presentation of the political projects of Agamben, Autonomist Marxism, and Afro-pessimism, to discuss the ways they can be mutually informative to each other as communities of praxis.

Methodology

My approach to methodology is grounded in my discipline of Peace Studies. The decision to begin my introduction with a personal narrative was a conscious one, as Peace Studies seeks to preserve humanity within academic inquiry and recognize the impact and importance of lived experience for understanding the world. An interdisciplinary approach is integral to Peace Studies as well. According to Johan Galtung:

> The basic concern of peace research is the reduction of violence of all kinds; this is done by progressively removing barriers in space (transnational, global studies), in the organization of knowledge (transdisciplinary, holistic studies), in time (integrating empirical studies of the past, critical studies of the present and constructive studies of the future). As such peace research can also be seen as an effort… to counteract fragmentation in the social sciences. 141

I am therefore at home in my engagement with multiple, seemingly-unconnected fields of thought. In approaching this research, I will be exploring the fields of Christian anarchism, Autonomist Marxism, Afro-pessimism, and the work of Giorgio Agamben, among other peripheral thinkers within these conversations.

Primarily employing the method of textual analysis, I will outline the main arguments and goals of each field, honing in on the lines of thought that connect them to one another and the unique perspective each field contains to add to the understanding of the research questions. Textual analysis provides tools to answer the following types of research questions:

> What kinds of meanings are there and why do these people produce them from this particular text in this particular historical place and time? What kinds of effects do texts have regarding the subjectivity, identity and empowerment or disempowerment of the readers? Lehtonen 2

Textual analysis serves as an effective methodology to address my research questions, as it gets to the heart of the cultural effects texts have for their readers in a specific context. It allows me to explore not only the frameworks of meaning created by a writer to understand power relations,

politics and being, and dreams for the future, but also the practical effects of these texts for the communities that are influenced by them. Lehtonen encourages researchers to "develop a model of analysis which goes beyond the horizon of mere text and also takes into account the contextual and reader-related matters that participate in the formation of meanings" (156). To that end, I will engage with texts I as a reader have interpreted to have complementary political projects and systems of meaning-making, but I will also bring to bear the context from which each field of thought emerges, and the tendencies of certain readers to interpret their meanings in different ways, based on examples of Anabaptist community practice. I will use primarily secondary texts, but some primary texts as well which are relevant to Anabaptist history.

I will additionally use critical discourse analysis to engage with my case studies within the Anabaptist tradition, in relation to the political project I am laying out. Critical research aims to investigate and analyze power relations in society and to formulate normative perspectives from which a critique of such relations can be made with an eye on the possibilities for social change. Critical discourse analysis is a method which recognizes the way language constructs meaning and leads to social action, and draws on intertextuality – the borrowing of meanings from other texts to create new meanings (Jorgenson and Phillips). Intertextuality is an important place to find commonalities between the fields I am studying, as many of them are already in conversation with one another or pull meaning from common texts. The language within discourse and texts shape the practice of communities. Therefore, the language with which a community imagines itself and its purpose in the world, as well as the way it understands power and meaning, demonstrates the social and political impact of a community on a theoretical level. Engaging with texts also allows me to pull examples from a variety of times and places throughout history and the present. Textual and discourse analysis are best suited as the

methodology to address my research questions, because this focus on theory allows for an in-depth inquiry that can spark new questions of ontology, subjectivity, and the meaning and function of community, questions that directly relate to practice.

While nearly all of the sources I pull from are scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, and historical primary sources, I do cite a few blogs and even a Reddit thread. In an age where information is abundant, there are worlds of thought, specifically in radical political spheres, that are unable to be contained by the markets of intellectual property. By examining these nontraditional texts and discourses through the same analytic precision and comparing them to other traditional scholarly sources, these digital, open-source, nontraditional sources can be used for the production of knowledge.

Conclusion

I have still returned time and time again to the truths and questions that formed my upbringing, and at moments, they resonate with new-found clarity and meaning. If this research is grounded in an understanding of the merits of a diversity of autonomous movements, I must recognize the best parts of my own tradition and heritage, and what those values can bring to the conversation of radical practice. However, the concepts of Christian anarchism cannot continue to be understood in isolation, in a religious, depoliticized sphere. We must recognize their place in the larger dialogue of critiques of the state and allow them to be informed by the radical tradition, without losing their integrity and unique perspective. We must reclaim the radical nature of the gospel. Only then can we understand the valuable insights that Christian anarchism, informed by the political project of Agamben, Autonomist Marxism, and the critiques of Afro-pessimism, can bring to the project of creating a new political community, one that is not tied down in the same frameworks of sovereignty and revolution.

Chapter 1

The Radical Reformation as a Christian Anarchist Movement

This study must begin in a place of historical perspective in order to establish the theological and political concepts to come. Because Christian anarchism is a scattered field of thought rather than a coherent tradition, there is no obvious trajectory of community practice to examine as a case study. However, as I have studied Christian anarchist thought, I have read it through the lens of my own experience within the Anabaptist tradition, and specifically the Mennonite church. My study of the origins of the Anabaptist movement further concretized what I see as a clear link between the two traditions of Anabaptism and Christian anarchism. Christian anarchism and Anabaptism share a common theological core, but Christian anarchism understands the ramifications of this theology in an explicitly political way. Therefore, I am presenting a political reading of Anabaptism, and in doing so, claim it for the Christian anarchist tradition.

Christian anarchism engages in a political reading of scripture that illuminates the inherently anarchic nature of Christianity. While some Christian anarchist thinkers engage with the Old Testament, most place primacy on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, as told by the Gospels in the New Testament. Just as anarchists reject the state due to a prioritized value which is then interpreted as logically incompatible with the state (Christoyannopoulos 21), Christian anarchists reject the state because of the primacy of Jesus's teachings of love, nonresistance, and egalitarianism. Christian anarchism is not alone within the realm of Christianity in its political engagement. To most Christian anarchists, their tradition is a necessary corollary to Christian pacifism. Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology are two other examples of theological traditions that center the voices of the oppressed and marginalized, and

tend toward the left in their politics. Some Christian anarchists, however, profess a more fundamentalist view of scripture, and claim they base their politics in their reading of the Bible, rather than allowing their reading of the Bible to be led by their politics (Eller, Ellul). In both cases, Christian anarchists are more action-oriented than pacifists, and less willing to engage in power plays with the state than those who follow liberation theology.

There are many thinkers who could be welcomed into the fold of Christian anarchism, but for the purposes of this research, I will pull from the work of Leo Tolstoy, Jacques Ellul, and Vernard Eller, as well as contemporary theologians of Christian ethics such as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and Walter Wink. I choose these thinkers both because of their level of influence on the tradition, as well as the relevance of their work in conversation with the Anabaptist tradition. Some scholars have named Russian author and aristocrat Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) as the father of Christian anarchism, although he stands apart from many in the tradition due to his unorthodox version of Christianity, based in rationalism and moralism (Christoyannopoulos 36). While Tolstoy's version of Christian anarchism may not necessarily mesh with Anabaptist or Mennonite sensibilities in regards to the sacredness of scripture and the importance of the church, this dissonance simply demonstrates the many diverse strains of both Christian anarchism and the Anabaptist tradition. Tolstoy was intrigued by the Mennonites in reference to their beliefs in pacifism and nonresistance, and many individual Mennonites were influenced by Tolstoy in some way (Miller). Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) was a French scholar whose specific work in *Anarchism and Christianity* brings a crucial understanding of secular radical history and theory, and demonstrates the relevance of Christian anarchism in response to the modern state. Within the American context, Vernard Eller draws from his own background in

the Anabaptist Brethren tradition to present a version of Christian Anarchy[4] which advocates for

the strictest, most submissive interpretation of nonresistance of the authors listed here.

Yoder, Hauerwas, and Wink do not self-identify within the Christian anarchist tradition,

but I include their work in this research to recognize their addition to the conversation. John

Howard Yoder (1927-1997) is generally named as the most influential contemporary Mennonite

theologian, and his seminal book *The Politics of Jesus* lays a groundwork for a politics derived

from the life and teachings of Jesus, within the vein of Christian anarchist ideals. Stanley

Hauerwas's relevance to this research is his work on the church as a social ethic, the peaceable

community set apart from the world that embodies the Kingdom of God in the present. Finally,

Walter Wink (1935-2012), in his series of books *The Powers that Be,* provides an understanding

of the biblical teachings of nonresistance that leads to a course of action he names "Jesus' Third

Way". Taken together, these thinkers articulate my particular path through the Christian

anarchist literature, and set the foundation on which I will build the case for the inclusion of the

Anabaptist tradition within Christian anarchism, both in this chapter, and the chapters to come.

The Anabaptist movement emerged in Europe in reaction to the movement of evangelical

reform sparked by Martin Luther in 1517, and now known as the Protestant Reformation. In the

era of historical transition from feudalism to capitalism, Europe was dominated by the

phenomenon of Christendom, in which all aspects of society – social, economic, political, and

religious – in effect made up one unified Christian body (Snyder 11). Luther and his followers

addressed some of the inherent contradictions of this collusion of church and state power, but

remained tied to the institution and its potential for reform. This moderate reform failed to

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[4] Eller's term for Christian anarchism.

address the economic and political grievances of the peasant class, or their spiritual hunger (15). The German Peasants' War of 1525 was a search for redress which found ideological legitimation in Reformation concepts, such as equality of persons under God. In the 16th century, religious dissent was also civil dissent, and a group of leaders known as the radical reformers carried these Reformation ideals to their logical, anti-establishment end (32). The radical reformers, such as Thomas Müntzer, acted as a mediating influence between the evangelical reformers and the Anabaptists (25). Snyder considers the Anabaptists as one grove of trees in the forest of radical reformers and explains, "the radical reformers belong in another theological 'forest' than did Luther; moreover, the radical reformers share a kinship that places them together in the *same* theological forest, apart from Luther" (43). The Anabaptist movement emerged in this tumultuous context and embraced both Biblical and Reformation writings, embodying "strong communitarian, egalitarian, and anticlerical sentiments whose roots lay in the socioeconomic abuses of preceding centuries" (14). Exploring the theological themes of the early Anabaptist movement through the framework of Christian anarchism lends insight into the radical political impact of the movement.

The connection between Anabaptism and Christian anarchism must first be established through a comparison of their shared theological themes: the Biblical interpretations of Christian anarchists, which Anabaptists embodied in practice. Christian anarchists center their Biblical interpretation in Jesus' teachings, and specifically in the Sermon on the Mount, which some have referred to as the Christian anarchist manifesto (Christoyannopoulos 62). The basis of much of Christian anarchist thought is the call of nonresistance to evil. Most Christian anarchists refuse to justify violence, because violence becomes a habit of simplification and allows evil to seep into communities and movements (73, 74). This virtue is then expanded from the personal to the

structural, aggregated to the level of the state, to result in a rejection of state authority. Christians should not use coercion; therefore they should not empower others to do so through the law or military might (87). The Anabaptists had a similar conviction of non-coercion, as evidenced by their movement of Believers' churches. The most radical aspect of the first Anabaptist communities was their rejection of infant baptism, a mechanism of the church which allowed for state control over its citizens. In rejecting infant baptism, they were thereby calling for un-coerced, voluntary commitment to the church and the way of Jesus (Snyder 177). This rejection of state authority was also carried by Anabaptists in the refusal to swear oaths, a mandate taken directly from the Sermon on the Mount. According to Tolstoy's exegesis of the passage, it is impossible to swear allegiance to the state and at the same time commit to following Jesus (Christoyannopoulos 100). Because the state's power is based on an oath of allegiance by the disciplined unity of a large population, to refuse to swear oaths is to deny the state the basis of its power (101).

For Christian anarchists, the litmus test of Christianity is the ability to live into the invitation to love one's enemies. This not only brings to light the question of violence, but the question of economics and institutions as well. Tolstoy was a harsh critic of the enslavement of the wage system, and Ellul rejected the idolatry of the state as the sole provider of security and protection (Christoyannopoulos 219, 221). In the midst of the capitalist revolution, the Anabaptists themselves rejected the charging of interest and the accumulation of surplus capital, claiming that the norms of the Kingdom of heaven are sufficiency, not surplus (Snyder 15, 227). Snyder asserts, "Where there is true love of God, there must be a radical love of neighbor. What kind of discipleship is left when the economic dimensions of the love of neighbor are passed over in polite silence?" (391). Christian anarchists are also wary of deceptive religious dogma

and the institutionalized church. The early Christian church was not an institution, but a movement of Jesus followers, and the creation of rituals, dogmas, and beliefs are a distraction from Jesus' original radical teaching (Christoyannopoulos 221). Similarly, the Anabaptists framed their movement as a restoration to Jesus' principles and the example set by the early church in the New Testament (Snyder 18).

The political impact of the Anabaptist movement is well-evidenced by the violent persecution of the state against the Anabaptists, and yet the persistent, widespread appeal of the movement, whose followers willingly faced exile, torture, and martyrdom for their beliefs. American anarchist activist Staughton Lynd is one scholar who has drawn a line of connection between the Anabaptists and anarchist movements to come, in his comparison of the anti-institutional witness of the Anabaptists to anarchists who rebelled against Social Democratic institutionalization (Lynd and Grubacic 181). In addition, Thiessen refers to "the role of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement in the resistance to the development of proto-capitalism," noting that Friedrich Engels, in his book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* "had declared that, during the German Peasants War, Anabaptists such as Thomas Müntzer were forerunners of a radicalized proletariat" (Thiessen 27). While the political project of Christian anarchism will be explored in the next chapter in further detail, it can be said here that Christian anarchists do not aspire to take over state power, nor to destroy the state through violence, but rather to reject the authority of the state and expose its inherent violence through their embodiment of a viable alternative in community, based on the example of Jesus. The early Anabaptists are a clear example of this political vision in practice.

Because Anabaptists were not united by a set doctrine, but rather discerned looser confessions of faith in small communities across vast geographical regions, the task of defining

the core of Anabaptism has been long disputed by Anabaptist studies scholars. Although

Anabaptism is an umbrella term used to identify diverse communal articulations of a movement,

there were core values which marked the Anabaptists as a "visible community of saints": adult

baptism, the ban, the supper, and mutual aid (Snyder 91). Other writers point to a variety of

characteristics which they claim were definitive of Anabaptism (Dyck, Hays, etc.), but there is a

general consensus that the Schleitheim Confession, written by a community of Swiss Anabaptists

in 1527, represents a foundational Anabaptist text and can be generalized in most cases to fit the

early Anabaptist experience (Dyck 139). The first three articles of the Confession are baptism,

the ban, and the Supper. Snyder explains,

> They called for the baptism of adults following confession of faith; those who accepted
> such a baptism signified by that baptism that they placed themselves under the discipline
> of the community (the ban) to be corrected if they erred; and those who accepted baptism
> and community discipline then celebrated the Supper of remembrance, unity, and
> fellowship together. 61

Even as communities migrated across Europe, Russia, and North America, and evolved in their

own contexts over the following centuries, the original Anabaptist movement continues to shape

the practice of contemporary communities. In his famous 1944 essay, "The Anabaptist Vision",

Harold S. Bender draws upon the Schleitheim Confessions to define the core of Anabaptism and

call contemporary churches back to their radical roots. However, Bender also adhered to the later

Anabaptist preference to personal and communal over societal transformation, emphasizing the

distinctive boundaries between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, calling the

church to separate from the world (Thiessen 27). Bender outlines three areas of emphasis: the

essence of Christianity as discipleship; a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and a

new ethic of love and nonresistance (14). The popularity of the essay, and the impact it had on

Anabaptist faith communities for the following decades, demonstrates the resonance of the

historical values of Anabaptism, still felt by its descendants centuries later.

The Anabaptist movement also demonstrates some of the tensions, difficulties, and common pitfalls communities face in the creation of a communal order of life, based in theory and theology. The tensions within Anabaptist theology and practice are by no means resolved, and the remaining Anabaptist communities today are a direct result of these distinct evolutions of practice around the questions of integration into the world and hermeneutics. The centuries following the Radical Reformation have seen the Anabaptist movement evolving along different tendencies of theological thought and practice, as communities spread across broad regions of Europe, Russia, and North America and adapted to their contextual environment. The original sectarian groups were the Swiss Brethren, South German Anabaptists, the Hutterites, and the Mennonites who reorganized after the violent fall of Münster (Loewen 87). The Dutch Mennonites were the most fully integrated into society, and the Russian Mennonites in effect established a Mennonite state within the Tsarist empire (92).

Returning to the Schleitheim Confession, while the first three articles articulated a common understanding of the Anabaptist experience up to that point, articles four through ten established an ethic of separation from the world, giving up on the utopian pattern of reforming the world, in favor of withdrawal into an alternative society (Snyder 61). This tension along the spectrum of withdrawal from and integration into the world has remained a central question within Anabaptist communities and their descendants. While this argument today falls along theological lines, the original question of withdrawn Anabaptist communities was not based in ideology, but in a necessity for survival in the encounter with a hostile world (181). While the zeal of the early Anabaptists meant a willingness to embrace and even celebrate suffering and persecution, in many places, simply being a member of the Anabaptist movement meant a death sentence. In others, Anabaptism was still not tolerated, but Anabaptists were not specifically

sought out (182). In those places where persecution was harshest, Anabaptists embraced an apocalyptic framework for the church. In one unique case, the city of Münster, Anabaptist leaders took control and became "the state", justifying their actions by claiming the town as the New Jerusalem of the Last Days (181,182). Moravia was originally the only place where Anabaptists were openly tolerated. Here, communalism flourished and Anabaptists became an integral part of local economies (182). These original articulations of the sectarian vs. integrated community tension carry on in Anabaptist discourse today.

The other central conflict relevant to this research is the tension between the inner and outer life of the believer, which is closely related to the tension between Law and Spirit. This tension was directly related to the issue of how to balance the role of biblical interpretation and the work of the Holy Spirit in forming community principles and discerning the will of God. While belief through free will and adult baptism were radically individual acts, this baptism then bonded the individual to the limitation of choice by the community (Snyder 229). This unresolved tension between authority and freedom lingers in Anabaptist communities today (Hays135). Is Christian life spiritual, experiential, and inward-focused, or does it appear through outward, legislated marks of the true Church (Snyder 302)? Is the true Church meant to be a perfectionist community of saints set apart from the world through dogmatic communal law, or is it meant to be a community without bounds of exclusion but also indistinguishable from the rest of the world? The call of this research is to challenge the Church to a relationship of nonconformity to the world, and at the same time active involvement. The true Church is a community that withdraws through a refusal of the authority, power, and violence of the state, thereby radically transforming the world through their embodied existence as an alternative. This

path involves a call to generative suffering and an imagination open to the movement of the

Spirit.

Chapter 2

Beyond Revolution, Beyond the Law: Christian Anarchism in Conversation with Giorgio Agamben

The modern political tradition speaks to the contractual origins of the state as the emergence of rights and a legal structure established by a bond of trust between people, which prevents civilization from regressing to the chaos of the state of nature (Hobbes and Locke). Furthermore, Hegel has posited the state as the culmination of rationality by autonomous actors, where violence has been bracketed outside of the sphere of politics. Therefore, mainstream political projects are guided and enabled by the centrality of the state paradigm, with the goal of strengthening the state and the expansion of the rights and protections it confers. There exist, however, growing bodies of thought and political projects that decenter the state as the foremost achievement of humanity. The political projects which have emerged from the field of thought of Christian anarchism, as well as the ideas of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, engage in a critique of the state paradigm and expose its inherent violence, while also operating at a distance from the state in their creation of newly imagined political communities. Examining the works of Agamben in conversation with Christian anarchism reveals the common themes of moving beyond revolution, voluntary exile, and apocalyptic politics, a discovery which can be mutually informative to both traditions in the transition from theory to community practice.

The work of Giorgio Agamben centers around the concepts of the state of exception and *homo sacer*, the figure of bare life. For Agamben, the sovereign is "he who decides on the state of exception", who decides when the law can be suspended, and therefore is an exceptional figure. Agamben is also influenced in his understanding of power by French philosopher Michel Foucault, who studies the formations of power in different historical periods, naming the most

recent power formation as biopolitics, a phenomenon in which the state is increasingly concerned with populations rather than individuals and its primary goal becomes the regulation of biological life, rather than the sovereign power of killing (Foucault 241). In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben explores the concepts of "zones of indistinction" and "threshold" as they relate to the relationship between sovereign power and bare life, especially as exemplified in the ban. For Agamben, bare life is not a pre-political life, the purely biological life of *zoe*, but a life that has been stripped of the law, while still being in relationship to it, in a state of exception. Calling into question theories of the contractual origin of state power, Agamben claims that the ban is the "originary political relation" (181). The ban is a state of exception that is a "zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion" (181). The state has the ability to ban a human life to be "delivered over to its own separateness" (110). In this way, the exile is excluded. However, since this exile is in a form of bare life, they are still completely at the mercy of the state and able to be killed without being sacrificed. Therefore the exile is also included, as they are "caught in the sovereign ban and must reckon with it at every moment" (183). The ban is what holds together bare life and power in this zone of indiscernibility (110). Because the production of bare life is the originary political element, Agamben argues Western politics has been a biopolitics from the very beginning (181).

It is within the arena of the production of bare life, in the figure of *homo sacer,* that Agamben posits his political project. The positionality of the subject in bare life, such as the stateless refugee is not simply a negation of the law, but a potential place of a new positive political project. Because *homo sacer* represents the absence of rights and is excluded from the law, Agamben argues that this figure holds the unique potential to point to the formation of a political community outside of the law, beyond the current formations of Western political

ontology. Through the refusal of authority and rights, a juridical poverty can be created that renders the law indistinguishable from life, therefore a form-of-life. This juridical poverty cannot be realized outside of a community of practitioners, which Agamben explores through his engagement with the Christian monastic tradition. It is as this point that Agamben's political project overlaps with the concepts of Christian anarchism.

The first point of overlap between Christian anarchism and Agamben's work is a conversation around power that moves the political project *beyond* the idea of revolution. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben explores in detail the relation between constituting power and constituted power, as well as potentiality and actuality. Constituting power is power creating, like in a revolution, while constituted power is power in place, such as that of a state (*Homo Sacer* 39). The question that remains then, is what distinguishes these two types of power and how closely related they are. Italian Marxist Antonio Negri claims that constituting and constituted power are irreducible to each other, as sovereignty marks the end of constituting power in its complete consumption of it (43). Foucault, on the other hand, remarks that "the State consists in the codification of a whole number of power relations which render its functioning possible, and Revolution is a different type of codification of the same relations" (qtd. in York 29). Agamben seems to side more with Foucault in this instance, as he fails to see any isolation of sovereign power from constituting power in Negri's argument (*Homo Sacer* 43).

Christian anarchists also add to this conversation in their disposition towards revolution. Vernard Eller frames the intersection of relative and absolute choices as two perpendicular axes. On one axis are the poles of the arkys (hierarchical power and coercion) of the establishment (constituted power) and the arkys of revolution (constituting power) and on the other axis are the two poles of God and the World (82). The only absolute choice is that between God and the

World, while the choices between human-created alternatives are relative. "With the relative human choices, we must recognize the essential commonality of the two poles; they are two varieties of the same thing (84). Both revolutionary movements and established governments demand we follow them as truth, as God, or be damned, but only God can demand such universal allegiance. Christians must recognize that history is not decided by the clash of human arkys, but is governed by the divine arky of God (72). The label of Christian anarchy therefore derives from the disposition of refusing the authority of worldly powers in full submission to the power of God alone, or "Jesus' primacy over the powers" (Eller). Recognizing the close relationship of sovereignty and constituting power, Walter Wink says "rebellion simply acknowledges the absoluteness and ultimacy of the emperor's powers and attempts to seize it" (qtd. in York 31). Similarly, John Howard Yoder implores Christians not to "glorify the power structure of the state even by the attempt to topple it" (308). Tripp York, a commentator on Christian anarchism, affirms the idea of non-teleological politics through his assertion that "effectiveness is not how we gauge faithfulness" to Jesus's kingdom (xv). The type of change Jesus came to Earth to enact "was not a restoration of the monarchy, but a bringing down of the proud and mighty. The kingdom Jesus proclaims will not take the familiar hierarchic form of a state" (135).

Agamben brings his discussion of constituting and constituted power further into focus by relating it to Aristotle's ontological concepts of potentiality and actuality. The traditional reading of Aristotle is that potentiality disappears into actuality, just as Negri argues constituting power is consumed by sovereignty. Agamben, however, emphasizes Aristotle's oft-misunderstood point that potentiality keeps its relationship to actuality in the sense that potentiality will only be actualized when there is no longer the potential not to be. It is this same potential not to be that keeps the sovereign ban in relation to the exception by no longer applying

(*Homo Sacer* 46). In support of Eller's point of the relativity of choices between human-created

categories, Agamben affirms that Western ontology is characterized by categorization and

teleological structure, which drive our practice and politics ("9/27"). The only way to release

constituting power from sovereign power is "to think the relation between potentiality and

actuality differently – and even to think beyond this relation" (44). To this end, Agamben

proposes a new understanding of the ontology of potentiality which is grounded in the potential

not to be. This ontology is a non-teleological politics that refuses to slip from practice into

dogma or final achievement, thereby displacing the ontological categories of potentiality and

actuality themselves ("9/27"). Agamben names this displacement as inoperativeness, which he

defines as "a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted in the transition from potentiality

to actuality" (*Homo Sacer* 62).

The next logical question then is how the Christian anarchist response to the inherently

violent state should look. One example to consider is the figure of Bartleby the scrivener. In

Herman Melville's classic short story, to which I will refer later in more detail, Bartleby

radically embodies the potential not to be through his enduring refrain of refusal: "I would prefer

not to" ("9/27"). This phrase is similar to the Christian anarchists' radical refusal to take part in

the political game, to denounce not merely the abuses of power, but power itself (Ellul 14, 23).

One of the biggest scriptural challenges thrown against Christian anarchists is the seeming

justification of the state as ordained by God in Romans 13. In his letter to the Roman church,

Paul writes, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God:

the powers that be are ordained of God" (Romans 13:1). While some Christian anarchist thinkers

simply disregard this passage, others engage with it to come to an understanding of the call to

"subversive subjection" (Christoyannopoulos 265). These thinkers claim that God has ordained

the powers of the world only in the sense that God has *ordered* them, to govern those who choose not to live into the way of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the call to be subject to the state is simply an extension of the call to love your enemies. According to Eller, "to 'be subject to' does not mean to worship, to 'recognise the legitimacy of' or to 'owe allegiance to'. It is a sheerly neutral and anarchical counsel of 'not-doing'—not doing resistance, anger, assault, power play, or anything contrary to 'loving the enemy'" (199).

In this sense, subversive subjection encompasses what some theologians call "Jesus' Third Way". This concept falls within the context of debate over the means Christians should use when facing evil in the world. Specifically, whether the call to nonresistance allows room for civil disobedience. One clear example of the disparate ethics that result from differing interpretations of scripture is commentary around Matthew 5:39. This passage is used as the proof text from the gospel of Jesus for both just war theory and isolationist pacifism: "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." This verse has generally been taken to mean Jesus is advocating for nonresistance to evil. For proponents of just war theory, this interpretation means that one should never act in self-defense. However, the prima facie duty to the law of love requires action in defense of an unprotected neighbor, which will sometimes call for violence. In contrast, pacifists use this verse to justify their rejection of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, as these methods of action are coercive and therefore in violation of their interpretation of Christ's law. Walter Wink, author of *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, blames the King James translation for the creation of the idea that the only reaction to evil can be that of fight or flight. He argues,

> The Greek word translated "resist" in Matt. 5:39 is *antistenai*, meaning literally to stand (*stenai*) against (*anti*). What translators have over-looked is that *antistenai* is most often

used in the Greek version of the Old Testament as a technical term for warfare. It describes the way opposing armies would march toward each other until their ranks met. Then they would "take a stand," that is, fight.

Seen in this light, "resist not evil" is better translated as "Do not repay evil for evil," or "Don't react violently against the one who is evil."

Herein lies the fundamental ethics of Jesus's teachings. Wink's interpretation of *antistenai* leads to a new understanding of the second part of Matthew 5:39 when examined in historical context. "…But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." In Jesus's time, the left hand was considered unclean. Therefore, to hit someone on the right cheek would require the aggressor to use the back of their right hand to hit their victim, a blow only inflicted on inferiors. If the victim then turned their cheek so that their left cheek was facing their attacker, however, the only way for the attacker to give a second blow would be with the right fist, a sign of equality. Wink explains,

> This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. By turning the cheek, then, the 'inferior' is saying: 'I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won't take it anymore. 2

The action was neither a passive acceptance of domination nor a forthright violent opposition to it. Instead, this action asserted the victim's dignity while still honoring the humanity of the oppressor, a creative response known as "Jesus's Third Way." When this violence Christians face is aggregated to the level of the state, subversive subjection "does not legitimize the state, but it also makes a point of not legitimizing any insurrection against it" (Christoyannopoulos 273).

Returning to Bartleby's refrain of "I would prefer not to", Agamben explains Bartleby's phrase as a "liminal zone suspended between affirmation and negation, being and nonbeing,

predicated on the renunciation of any will or reason to choose either option", just as subversive subjection will not legitimize either the state or insurrection against it (Whyte 319). He argues that Bartleby is engaging in an "experiment in potentiality itself, which requires the overturning of the principle of the irrevocability of the past", which makes him the new figure of the Messiah (319). Bartleby is not acting in order to actualize his power, but rather remains in potentiality, in the liminal zone that can be compared to Jesus' Third Way. Bartleby's messianic modality shows that "potentiality does not precede actuality but follows it, restoring it to contingency and enabling the forgotten to act on the present" (319). The political implications of this modality can be captured by the positing of the redemptive role of remembrance given by Walter Benjamin:

> Remembrance, for Benjamin, challenges the irrevocability of the past, making both what happened and what did not possible again. If Benjamin sees remembrance as intimately bound to redemption, this is because redemption, in his view, is not a passage through empty time to a brighter future, but a relation between the present and its past, in which the struggles of the past are seized and re-actualised in the "time of the now". 319, 320

Those hopes and dreams of the marginalized which never came to pass, are made possible again through the redemptive work of the Messiah in the present. Furthermore, for Agamben, the Messiah "transforms temporality itself, enabling 'another world and another time' to make themselves present in this world and in this time" (*Homo Sacer* 320).

Christian anarchists also claim the redemptive role of the church, as it embodies the messianic characteristics of the Kingdom of God. According to York, "The church embodies the very hope that is the history of the world, which is, ultimately, a redemptive history… As political ambassadors of the city of God, we are eschatological witnesses to the way the world was created, was meant to be, and one day will be again" (25, 27). The way of subversive subjection, however, is not easy, though it brings about salvation. Bartleby dies hungry and alone, imprisoned for his refusal to decide between the options given him. Yet Agamben affirms,

"the walled courtyard [where Bartleby meets his end] is not a sad place." Rather, he sees the jail as a site of universal salvation (Whyte 322). Similarly, voices from the Catholic Worker movement, as summarized by Christoyannopoulos, tell us, "The penalty for disobedience should thus be patiently and forgivingly endured. Besides, for Christian anarchists, prison is a kind of resting place in today's world, a 'new monastery' in which Christians can 'abide with honour'" (289).

The Messiah figure and the messianic act of rendering the law inoperative is important to both Agamben's work and that of Christian anarchism. Messianism is the mode in which monotheism confronts the question of law ("9/27"). The Messiah is the one who fulfills the law, thereby transgressing it, as the Messiah's arrival makes the old laws lose their meaning (*Homo Sacer* 57). The heart of Messianism is anti-law, because the Messiah reveals the law's authority as provisional by its own logic, thereby deactivating the notion of consistency in authority itself ("9/27"). In the case of the state of exception, the law is in force without significance (*Homo Sacer* 57). The state of exception has suspended the law; thus it is without significance. Yet insofar as *homo sacer* is still in an exclusionary relationship to the law, the law is in force. The coming of the Messiah marks the end of the law's being in force without significance, when "we have moved out of the paradox of sovereignty toward a politics freed from every ban" (59).

It is this politics beyond sovereignty that Agamben searches for and which the Messiah brings about. York labels the Christian anarchist approach as apocalyptic politics, explaining,

> An apocalypse is a revelation, and in the biblical sense it is that moment in which we see the world as it really is… This apocalyptic politic is not an alternative politic, it is the genuine politic by which other politics are measured. It is the politic of the in-breaking kingdom of God." 26,27

When does the kingdom of God break in? In a passage from Kafka's notebooks, mentioned by both Agamben and York, he writes, "The Messiah will only come when he is no longer necessary, he will only come after his arrival, he will come not on the last day, but on the very last day" (qtd. in *Homo Sacer* 57). As the Messiah's coming is the hope of a politics beyond sovereignty, it is a hope of the future, but also a hope available and able to be acted on in the present, as exemplified by the figure of Bartleby. Per York, "It is this day after the last day that Christians are called to embody in order that the world, and all her rebellious structures and institutions, may too be redeemed" (25). Christians are not only engaged in an apocalyptic politics of revealing the illegitimacy of the state and rendering the law inoperative, but they are also called to actively create those communities which embody the forthcoming redemption of the world, the revelation of the genuine politic, thereby making it a reality.

As individuals living in messianic times, embodying the politics of Jesus, the Messiah, Christians must further conceive of themselves as a community living within the colony of the world. Within the conversation of responses to the state, the next point of convergence of Agamben's work and Christian anarchism is the concept of exile through the refusal of participation and an abdication of rights. Agamben, in one instance in his discussion of the sovereign ban, examines the figure of the exile in Roman society. This exile was not forcibly cast out of the city, but instead was stripped of every right, including the right to water and shelter, thereby necessitating his physical exile ("9/29"). Christian anarchists describe the positionality of Christians in the world within this vein, as voluntary exiles. While this is not a physical exile, York calls on Christians to distance themselves from imperial seduction (24). Therefore, Christians must understand themselves as dual citizens of both God's kingdom and the kingdom of the world, while giving primary allegiance to God's kingdom. Yoder advocates for the

abandonment of nationhood as a form of peoplehood, through the creation of relatively independent counter-communities of exiles within a foreign nation (306, 300). In this sense, a peoplehood of exiles, not revolution, is prior to liberation (303). This voluntary placement of oneself in the subject position of the exile demonstrates a refusal of authority, what Agamben describes as a refusal to make operative the work of law and sovereignty (DeCaroli 214). Yoder recognizes the radical nature of this refusal of participation when he names the expectation of state violence in reaction to such a withdrawal (300). Positioning themselves as exiles, as *homo sacer*, exposes Christians to the unmediated violence of the sovereign state. However, it is this revelation of the inherent violence of the state that calls into question the legitimacy of the law and the sovereign as the sole bearer of the right to exert violence. Herein lies the true power of Jesus's violent crucifixion at the hands of the Roman state. Christoyannopoulos explains, "Jesus refused to support [the state] in [its] self-glorification. The unmasking of the powers is their defeat" (172).

While the role of the Church as a collective witness to the politics of Jesus the Messiah is indisputable, how to create a community which embodies the inbreaking Kingdom of God remains a central argument within Christian anarchist communities of practice and Agamben's political project. Agamben is often criticized for being overly pessimistic, for focusing more on individual identity rather than a communal politics (Vacarme). Understanding the constructedness of Western ontological categories is one thing, but moving past them is another. The search is for a *positive* political project that is lived out beyond just opposition to the law and individual acts of passive resistance. DeCaroli explains Agamben's political project of form-of-life as "the sustained practice of exposing the effects of this awareness… of the largely hidden attitudes that sustain juridical existence and determine the scope of what is valid within it" (228).

This practice, however, can only be sustained in a community of practitioners (227). Agamben chooses to engage in an in-depth inquiry into one specific Christian community: the Franciscan monastic order. Although it ultimately failed, this community had the possibility to demonstrate Agamben's concept of form-of-life, which he defines as a life "that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it (Agamben xi). The Franciscan form of life was modeled after the life of Christ, and was marked by a voluntary poverty. This material poverty was also a judicial poverty, as it appeared as an abdication of all rights, including the right to property.

The Franciscans, however, were unable to find "a definition of use in itself and not only in opposition to law," thereby only hinting at the possibilities of a form-of-life, but not fully deconstructing the relationship to law (DeCaroli 221). Agamben argues the Franciscans could have learned from a specific passage from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:20-31, which speaks of treating categories of the law, such as marriage, *as if* they do not hold force of significance. Agamben names this passage as a theory of use which entails "using the world as not using it or not abusing it" (Agamben 139). Elaborated by DeCaroli, "In its full and proper sense, form-of-life names the habit of putting into practice the Pauline [as-if] as a means of making visible what Olivi called our 'mental intentions' so as to deactivate the social status and privilege [sovereignty] sustains" (221). The work of the Messiah, to which Christians are called, is the work of rendering the law, and the sovereignty it holds over life, inoperative. When the Messiah comes, the same ontological categories will exist, but they will cease to be burdensome or definitive of life. Therefore, Christians must live as if they are not citizens of this world, even though they are. They must live as if the Kingdom of God covers the Earth, although it does not yet.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be drawn from the Franciscan monastics is the living

legacy of their attempt to live a life that is indistinguishable from the law through their refusal of

rights. This voluntary refusal of rights is the willing placement of oneself in the subject position

of *homo sacer.* The Franciscans were therefore an experiment in embodying a Christian anarchist

praxis based in the subject position of the exile, a form of resistance that moves beyond

revolution in the sphere of apocalyptic politics. Communities within the Christian anarchist

tradition continue to struggle and experiment together how best to embody the example of Jesus

Christ in their life together and in relationship to the world. Christian anarchists explicitly model

their understanding of politics and community after their Messiah's life. As an example, Jesus

proclaimed a new social order and proposed an alternative type of community to that of the

sovereign state, yet he did so not through force or power, but through "leadership by suffering

servanthood" (Christoyannopoulos 151). Speaking of example, Agamben noted, as summarized

by DeCaroli, "There is no separation between the example and the thing it exemplifies. The

example exercises a normative force without relying on law" (DeCaroli 214). Jesus' life is

therefore a form-of-life. Expanded by York:

> The Son of god did not come to alter or enhance our current modes of politics. The
> incarnation displaces not only what we think it means to be political, but the very
> category of politics itself. For Christians, Jesus does not have a politic nor is [he]
> representative of one, but as he is fully human and fully divine, Jesus *is* a politic. 30

The early Anabaptists were another such community that aimed to embody the example

of Jesus in their communal life. Although the form and specific theological emphases of

Anabaptist communities varied across geographic regions, the movement began in an attempt to

return to the example of the early Christian church (Snyder 18). These early Christians to whom

the Anabaptists aspired, as portrayed in the book of Acts and Paul's letters, were among the first

disciples of Jesus, a leader who proclaimed he had come not to destroy the Jewish Law, but to

fulfill it (Christoyannopoulos 114). The Messianic witness of Jesus "punched through the Torah to get to the Giver who stands behind it" (Eller qtd. in Christoyannopoulos 117). In this way, Jesus does not destroy the Law, but "reinterprets it beyond the strictures which contemporary interpreters had confined it to" (Christoyannopoulos 118). As discussed earlier, this Messianic modality marks the end of the law being in force without significance and points toward a "politics freed from every ban" (*Homo Sacer* 59). Yet have communities hailing from the Anabaptist tradition truly followed Jesus' Messianic example toward the end of law and sovereignty within the community?

Richard B. Hays names the Anabaptists and Franciscans as two communities that embody a radical call to discipleship (133). The specific contribution of the Anabaptist tradition that came out of the Radical Reformation is the centrality of life in community (133). While Agamben is at times criticized for his over-emphasis on the individual, the Anabaptists claimed true discipleship could only be lived out in community, and the community must be allowed to shape the trajectory of Christian doctrine and practice (133). These sectarian communities take Agamben's radical refusal of sovereignty to the communal level. Snyder claims the term "nonresistance" is inadequate to capture the full Anabaptist position, which preached nonresistance to the State/Church until the point it commanded actions which went against the teachings of Jesus (389), an ethic which fits within the Christian anarchist concept of subversive subjection (Christoyannopoulos 275). It was this disposition that drove Anabaptists to embody a radical alternative to sovereignty in their communities, creating an egalitarian sharing community, and conceiving of themselves as a people set apart.

The movement was met almost everywhere with a violent reaction by the powers that be, through banishment, torture, and execution. At the inception of the Radical Reformation,

Anabaptists themselves were the ones being banned and stripped of their rights, reduced to bare life and the unmediated violence of the state. While sectarianism is a characteristic that has come to define the Anabaptist tradition that survived, according to Snyder, "The strong 'separation from the world' ethic that pervaded later Anabaptism was not a *necessary* original component of Believers' Church[5] ecclesiology, but was a further theological interpretation that was encouraged, in part, by the encounter with a decidedly hostile world" (181). This persecution forced later Anabaptist communities to spread extensively over Europe and North America. The first Mennonites settled in North America in 1683, on land in Pennsylvania granted to them by William Penn (Dyck 197). In this utopian experiment of religious freedom, the Anabaptist and Mennonite tradition could progress and evolve without the defining pressure of persecution. Therefore those who worked to maintain strict community lines and a sectarian ethic did so from a place of theological choice, and no longer as a necessity for survival.

The community life of the Mennonite Church in North America represents the problematic of how to maintain a community set apart, distinct from the world, without reinforcing the ban and exclusion, the same tools of law that define sovereignty in the world. Since the inception of the movement, a defining, universal aspect of Anabaptist communities was the implementation of the ban as a form of discipline within the community. In order to unify the spiritual inner life of believers and the outer life in discipleship and community, community members aspired to *Gelassenheit*, a spirit of yieldedness of the individual to the community (Snyder 89). The ban was implemented in the extreme case of an individual's "refusal to be reconciled to the brother or to desist from sin," always with the intent to restore the relationship once the sinner had repented (92). However, Snyder claims the practice of the ban

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[5] Another term for the Anabaptist movement.

exemplifies the perfectionist/pietist tendency of Anabaptist communities, as later communities became more attuned to spiritual failure, not spiritual growth (385). Among Mennonite groups that immigrated to North America, an early split occurred between the Mennonites and Amish about the severity with which the ban should be carried out (MacMaster 192). The Mennonites of Dutch heritage and the Amish were the most extreme in their implementation of the ban, not only excluding the errant community member from church life, but even from contact with family (25). The severity of such a ban is reminiscent of Agamben's analysis of Roman banishment, which used social ostracization to strip the individual of all rights. Such a legalistic framework of community discipline recapitulates a state of exception and sovereign power, only on a smaller level than that of the state.

The inner/outer tension present in Anabaptist theology and practice translates directly into the tension between Spirit and Law. While certain aspects of Anabaptist theology stressed a fundamental reading of scripture, many early leaders diverged from Luther's tenet of "Scripture alone" to allow for revelations of the Sprit within the counsel of the community, apart from direct interpretations of the scriptures (Snyder 29). However, as the tradition progressed and moved out of the revolutionary time period of the Radical Reformation, the tradition evolved into a general tendency to limit pneumatic expression (380). The church and elders became the enforcers of divine law, and a definition of community boundaries became the norm for all surviving Anabaptist groups (380). This disposition led to a tendency towards division and schism within the tradition. The case of increasing dogmatism and legalism within the Anabaptist tradition begs the question of how a community born from revolutionary spirit is to remain in that radical potentiality, without exhausting it into actuality. Even in our imagination of a new community, our embodiment of the Kingdom of God on Earth, Christians are stuck in

the throes of sovereignty, employing imagery of the sovereignty of God and Jesus' primacy over all the powers, rather than deconstructing the concepts of sovereignty and power themselves. Snyder therefore challenges remaining Anabaptist communities to imagine "a Believers' church marked by love rather than law" (Snyder 387). Although the "heuristic principle of the law of the 'love of Christ' weakens visible, enforceable community boundaries," it acts as a call to follow Jesus' law of love as an example and form-of-life (381). It is a call to remember the redemptive work of the Messiah in the present; the dreams of the early Anabaptists have not been forgotten. It is a call back to a tendency towards spiritualism in interpreting scripture and the Spirit's work in the world, to recognize the voice of God who is still speaking, reinvigorating our imagination of possibilities not yet seen. It is a call that opens space for finding resonance of truth in other community experiences and traditions, outside of strict scriptural revelation, a posture that will be needed for the analysis in the chapters to come.

Through exploring the connections and overlaps between Christian anarchism and the work of Agamben, we can see clearly the powerful, creative, and redemptive potential of those who inhabit the place of the exile in society, and act through a third-way politics, a politics that renders the law inoperative. These traditions of thought can also be mutually informative in the transition from theory to practice. Agamben can learn from the primacy of community in the Christian anarchist tradition, which speaks of a peoplehood of exiles, in contrast to Agamben's focus on the individual figure of *homo sacer*. Agamben's theory of use is also important for instructing Christian anarchist communities in how to create a communal rule of life without reverting to dogma and the harshness of the law, a common pitfall among these types of communities, especially within the Anabaptist tradition. Christians may never perfectly embody a form of community life that completely disrupts the categories of law and sovereignty.

However, the actualization of this ideal is not the point. Through continuous striving, each act

made by faith, in community, and informed by history and theory, brings the day of the

Messiah's coming closer at hand.

Chapter 3

From Production to Creation: An Autonomist Marxist Critique of Work

The analysis thus far has examined anarchism from a distinctly Christian perspective, and its political project of the creation of an alternative political community, formed through exile from the world, that renders the sovereignty of the law inoperative. This chapter will question the possibility of exodus from a globalized, capitalist world order, by exploring the intersections of Christian anarchist, specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite, and Autonomist Marxist thought. Staughton Lynd and Andrec Grubacic argue in the book *Wobblies and Zapatistas* that we need both anarchism and Marxism: Marxism to understand the structure of society, and anarchism to prefigure a new society (xiii). Marxism provides an understanding of the composition of capitalism that structures our world and progresses its development, while anarchism imagines the possibilities of community praxis that can exist within those structures, pointing to a world where these structures no longer need to exist. Christian anarchism and certain communities within the Anabaptist tradition clearly center the project of prefiguring a new society, thereby bringing the Kingdom of God into being on Earth. What is missing from Anabaptist community practice, specifically economic practice, is a critical understanding of the role of capitalism in ordering the norms of the world from which they are attempting to withdraw. Once we turn this critical lens on the Anabaptist tradition, and the Mennonites in particular, it becomes clear that these communities have assimilated to the norms of capitalism and the ideology of work. If Christian anarchists are to refuse to participate in the violence of the state, they must also examine their role in perpetuating economic violence. The language of withdraw and non-conformity cannot just be framed in rhetoric, but must be accompanied by a willingness to suffer alongside the marginalized, seeing in suffering the generative potential of creation.

This chapter will provide a critique of the ideology of work from an Autonomist Marxist perspective. In her book *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks explains that because the idea of work has been so naturalized and goes unquestioned in the realm of politics, we must provide a context for why work itself needs to be questioned, not just the conditions of work. We need to first "render it strange" to be able to understand its impact on our lives (Weeks 43). Work has been privatized, depoliticized, normatized, and moralized. Work is understood as a part of the natural order, rather than a social convention, and so much of policy, social work, and education is based on making people work-ready (3, 7). According to Weeks, "Work is not just defended on grounds of economic necessity and social duty; it is widely understood as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation" (11). Because basic material necessity alone is not enough to justify hard work and long hours, this moralization of work is strongly influenced and maintained by the phenomenon known as the Protestant work ethic (44).

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is a foundational work by Max Weber that sets the parameters of the moral rise of capitalism. With the concurrent rise of Protestantism and capitalism in the outgrowth of the Reformation, work acquired more meaning as an act of signification than as an act of production. This meaning came to life through the ritualistic adherence to the discipline of ascetic Puritanism. Ascetic Puritanism sought to fashion a "life in the world, but neither of or for this world" (Weeks 48). Their disciplined work ethic and principled lives were not meant to better the living conditions of the world, but to bring about later glory in the afterlife. Through a focus on both productivity and a denial of consumption, these groups came by an "accumulation of capital through the ascetic compulsion to save" (48). Their otherworldly, religious asceticism was an integral factor in the accumulation of capital, the disciplining of productive workers, and therefore the development of early capitalism. While

Christian asceticism is most often associated with Puritan and Calvinist theology, Weber also outlines the development of the "this-worldly asceticism" of baptizing sects, such as the Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Quakers. These communities were known as sects, not as churches, because of their voluntary nature, which therefore contributed to the intensity of their asceticism (Weber 139). Membership within these sects was not ordained by the church-state, but was rather an inward choice, manifested in an asceticism of outward actions that set them apart from others in the world. Within these movements, salvation could not be found through works alone, but only through a sincere testifying to belief, which was manifested through a methodically supervised discipline of life that set the individual apart from "the style of life of the 'natural' human being" (139).

For the early Anabaptists, the secular and the sacred were indistinguishable, as the validity of spiritual beliefs was revealed by their application in the material world (Thiessen 11). The inward beliefs of the Anabaptists were therefore applied in the aesthetic values of simplicity and mutual aid. Snyder reaffirms this Anabaptist connection to asceticism when he claims that the formation of Anabaptist community practice looked back to medieval social and ascetic economic ideals (227). Anabaptist economic reform was directed inward, toward the development of the "sharing community". Sharing communities were nearly universal across all forms of Anabaptism, and appeared as both voluntary and legislated communities of goods, which shared all property in common and practiced mutual aid (228). These communities posed a direct confrontation to early capitalist values within their own communities, but in other ways contributed to broader capitalist development in their veneration of the work ethic. While Christian asceticism first appeared in monasteries closed off from the world, such as in the Franciscan monastic tradition discussed in Chapter Two, contemporary Christians are made to

live a rational life *in* the world, while still remaining morally distinct from it (Weber 140). This is one iteration of the Mennonite value to be "in the world but not of the world". The effect of these societal forces is the creation of the myth of a distinctly Mennonite work ethic. Nafziger, a contemporary Mennonite economist, analyzes the Mennonite ethic through the lens of Weber's analysis, observing that Mennonites connect prosperity with righteousness, emphasize stewardship of wealth, and believe in the value of hard work and accumulation of capital when used for spiritual ends (Thiessen 65). As discussed in the first chapter, persecution forced early Anabaptist communities in most regions to adopt a separatist stance from the world. Others however, in areas such as Moravia and the Netherlands, were permitted to establish flourishing communities. This acceptance was largely motivated by economics, as these lands needed settled and Anabaptists were industrious and good for local economies (Snyder 182). A large portion of North American Mennonite immigrants are direct descendants of the Dutch communities and continue this industrious trend (Dyck 195).

The most prevalent conception of Mennonite identity throughout the latter half of the 20th century was articulated by Bender's essay "The Anabaptist Vision", and allowed Mennonites to integrate into the world while preserving a rhetoric of difference. Although Mennonites today remain, to some extent, withdrawn from the world in their identity and church, they have always been active participants in the economic marketplace. This participation has been guided by cultural norms that privilege agricultural work over other forms of business, reject the use of force and exploitation in labor relations, and emphasize the importance of a simple lifestyle with a loose hold on material possessions (Thiessen 11). However, Mennonite values have also led to great economic success for some individuals. In her study of three Mennonite-owned Canadian corporations, Janis Thiessen names the institutionalization of the Mennonite work ethic as

"Mennonite corporate mythology". According to Thiessen, Mennonite corporate mythology takes the already-existent work ethic within Mennonite culture and transfers it to the workplace through a combination of the language of religious humility and yieldedness (64). The use of religious vocabulary to frame economic behavior places the content beyond doubt or question, as sacred truth, not simply ideology (88). Far from signifying a withdrawal from dominant economic structures, Thiessen claims, "The creation of Mennonite corporate mythology – both conscious and unconscious – serves capitalist economic needs by promoting worker assiduity, loyalty, and deference, and reinforces class relations" (83).

The imposition of Mennonite values in the workplace is based in a static definition of Mennonitism that emphasizes the values of peace, obedience, and humility (Thiessen 83). Yieldedness, as translated from the Anabaptist concept of *Gelassenheit*, is a submission of the individual to both God and the community, which is lived out in the process of discipleship and mutual discernment (20). When employed as a value in the work place, yieldedness takes on a transcendent significance (83). For example, in a work place infused by this distinct Mennonite value, workers are coerced to submit to the will of the management in the name of yielding to the good of the community. Thiessen names this scenario as a form of paternalism, which discourages class consciousness through the promotion of the "illusion of community" (66). Greater trends in Mennonite communities also reveal a general sense of wariness of class struggle, due to the Biblical mandate to nonresistance and nonconformity. Many discourage union membership due to the prevalent use of "coercive methods and powerful maneuverings" (Vogt 140). Besides traditional agricultural activities, a 1980 study by Roy Vogt revealed a strong affinity among Mennonites to professional careers. These types of careers allow Mennonites to remain aloof from the class struggle between workers and management and

nurture a purity acceptable to God (143). The desire to withdraw from the world and its violent

economic systems is misdirected as a perceived withdraw from the class struggle itself through

an escape to professionalism (141). Overall, Mennonite work and business ethics undermine any

radical political stance their rhetoric might suggest by incorporating religious values to advance

capitalist development. Nonresistance to economic violence through an apathetic withdrawal,

rather than an active refusal, is simply an acquiescence to capitalist hegemony. Those who claim

the mantle of Christian anarchism must critically examine their current methods of withdrawal

and direct those energies to a place which most aligns with their rhetoric of resistance and does

not fall into apathetic integration.

The Christian anarchist mode of refusal, which rejects the authority of the state and

refuses to participate in the violence of law and sovereignty, can be further informed by the

Autonomist Marxist strategy of the refusal of work. Autonomist Marxism, also known as

autonomism, is an umbrella term for a diverse field of movements and thinkers which finds its

origins in the Italian New Left of the 1960s. During this time, American writers and activists of

the Johnson-Forest Tendency created a working-class sociology which outlined the ways the new

unions and workplace policies of autoworkers in Detroit were co-opted by management to

continue to exploit their labor in new ways. Inspired by this work, Italian thinkers such as Mario

Tronti and Antonio Negri began researching the working class and its autonomous power. This

initial movement, known as *operaismo,* or workerism, developed a theory of a cycle of struggles

which spoke to the power of the working class to shape the development of capitalism

(jimichangas). The autonomists focused less on labor and more on the refusal of work, not only

by factory workers, but by all others who contribute to the reproduction of capitalism but may

not be traditionally included in the working class, such as women, students, and non-waged

workers. Autonomism engages in an unorthodox reading of Marx, searching for the Marxist insight beyond just Marx's writings and their traditional interpretation. This movement also more closely resembles anarchism in its refusal of the hierarchy of a party structure and labor unions, a socialist state, and even reproduction itself. Autonomists focus on worker's own self-activity rather than on the representation of workers by parties or unions. For example, members of the United Automobile Workers union during World War II staged a series of strikes unauthorized by the party. Marty Glaberman records his experience during these wildcat strikes, saying:

> You've got to take workers as they are, with all their contradictions, with all their nonsense. But the fact that society forces them to struggle begins to transform the working class. If white workers realize they can't organize steel unless they organize black workers, that doesn't mean they're not racist. It means that they have to deal with their own reality, and that transforms them. Who were the workers who made the Russian Revolution? Sexists, nationalists, half of them illiterate. Who were the workers in Polish Solidarity? Anti-Semitic, whatever. That kind of struggle begins to transform people. Lynd and Grubacic 152

These strikes demonstrate the autonomist principle that it is the experience of struggle, not the ideological purity of a party that transforms the working class.

In order to understand the strategy of refusal, it is important to outline the Autonomist Marxist conception of the composition of the working class in struggle with the capitalist class. Marx primarily wrote about the composition of capital, not of the working class. The composition of capital is both organic and technical, a relationship between fixed capital (machines and technology) and variable capital (labor). Technical composition refers to the ratio of the use of capital to labor in the production process, and simply describes the configuration of the factory ("The Inversion" 4). Marx's concept of the organic composition of capital is concerned with factors outside of input prices that effect the ratio of capital to labor. A change in organic composition is usually due to a new technology which not only increases the

productivity of workers, but in the long-term also allows capitalists to exchange easily-controllable machines for less-easily-controllable workers. Marx describes this trajectory of capitalism, where "a rise in the organic composition of capital [tends] to lead to the displacement of workers, a rise in unemployment and systemic crisis" (5). Autonomists, however, center their analysis on the composition of the working class itself and its role in the development of capital, not only looking at how capital dominates, but also how workers resist ("Inversion" 6). This enrichment was their intervention into Marxism, using Marx and capital observation to understand the working class. The capitalist class is made up of those who provide the conditions of labor, while the working class provides the conditions of capital, bringing it to life through the valorization of their labor (Tronti 3). Capital cannot be understood as an outside force independent of the working class; it must be understood as the class relation itself (*Reading Capital* 66). The working class is therefore a direct political subjectivity that precedes capital and births the class struggle into being. This means the capitalist class is subordinate to and its existence dependent upon the working class, hence the need for exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class in order to keep its power (Tronti).

Autonomists are unique in their emphasis on the autonomy of the working class and the primacy of their struggle to break through the capitalist dialectic. Class struggle is traditionally viewed as a dialectical process in which two or more actors are engaged in a struggle with each other for recognition. In a dialectical relationship, they are opposed, but also mutually interdependent, as both actors are transformed through the process of opposition and synthesis. Capital expresses its objective through the subjective demands of workers (Tronti 11). In the ongoing process of composition, workers interact with capital and form a force from which to challenge it. This composition is then faced with the capitalist response of decomposition.

Because the existence of capital is dependent on workers, the capitalist class cannot destroy the working class, but it can adapt and institute new organizational forms that counteract this composition, through technology, management, or economic policy. Finally, the recomposition of these new organizational forms marks the start of a new cycle (jimichangas). The ultimate power of the working class to overthrow capital is grounded in its existing power to initiate struggle and force capital to reorganize and develop itself (*Reading Capital* 65). Instead of remaining in this dialectical struggle, autonomists ask how the working class can compose themselves in a way that breaks the dialectical relationship altogether. Autonomism advocates that in order to separate from the capitalist dialectic, the working class must refuse to resolve the contradictions of capitalism. They must refuse work.

Some Mennonites may believe that withdrawing from class by escaping to professionalism is an act that removes them from the force and coercion that is inherent in the capitalist dialectic between managers and worker. One might argue this act is reminiscent of the autonomist strategy of refusal. This passive escape, however, begins to break down when seen in light of the pervasiveness of exploitable labor within the social factory. The social factory is a concept within autonomism that departs from a traditional understanding that work constitutes only the waged labor within the four walls of a factory. Tronti defines the social factory in the following way:

> At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation becomes a moment of the relation of production, the whole society becomes an articulation of production; in other words, the whole of society exists as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over the whole of society. qtd. in Cuninghame

Within the social factory, the question of who qualifies as a worker and who is part of the proletariat is problematized and expanded due to the increasingly invisible line between waged and unwaged labor. Within the social factory all social relationships and interactions can be

harnessed for the reproduction of capital and societal structures. To bring about liberation from the production of capital, the proletariat must engage in a diversity of demands which bursts through capitalist hegemony.

Anabaptists have a tradition of exiling themselves from the world by withdrawing into geographically distinct communities. Yet in a world dominated by the social factory, there is no longer a geographical outside. One cannot simply move to an isolated countryside to escape systems of power, because the social factory exploits every type of labor within society for the development of capital. Therefore, autonomists introduce the strategy of refusal as a possible mode of operation to withdraw from the dialectical struggle against capitalism. Two important aspects of this refusal are separation from the object of critique and antagonism. Weeks explains:

> Separation is conceived as something different from dialectical conflict; resistance born of separation is imagined more along lines of flight than lines of opposition. Its task is to organize struggles that neither take the form nor mirror the logic of what they contest. Separation is the path of difference, not an antithesis to be subsumed in a synthesis, but a singularity that might invent something new. 95

These lines of flight toward the invention of something new can also be labeled as exodus. Autonomists, as well as theologians of liberation theology, draw upon the Biblical theme of Exodus within their writings and rhetoric. While Exodus will be discussed further in the next chapter, it is important to note that Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder speaks critically of this use of Exodus imagery, as he sees it being used by liberation theologians to justify a violent overthrow of the state. While his choice of language differs, the way he describes the concept fits the autonomist definition of exodus. Yoder carefully specifies that the Biblical Exodus was not a takeover, but a withdrawal (Yoder 300). What must be understood, however, is that this withdrawal is not passive, because the autonomist separation holds an antagonistic logic. While dialectical contradiction is a system of objective categories, the struggle of antagonism

speaks to historical needs and desires in such a way that the contradiction is subjectivized. The struggle is not simply between the objective forces of worker versus capitalist, but the greater "conflicts between what we have and what we might want, between what we are and what we could become, between what we do and what we can do" (Weeks 96). It is this antagonism which challenges not only the means and conditions of production, but productivity itself.

What this separation and antagonism makes possible is a process of self-valorization. The autonomist project is not simply a negative project of the refusal of work, but a positive project of self-valorization beyond capitalist systems of value dependent on the exploitation of surplus. Self-valorization is originally a Marxist concept of capital, which speaks to the development of capital through technology and other projects to increase inherent value (organic composition), which diminishes the dependence of the capitalist class on the working class. Autonomists, however, use the concept of self-valorization of the working class, which "designates not the valorization of the self, but autonomous projects of value-creating practices" ("Subject" 108). It is at this point of a positive project that autonomism offers a new perspective. According to Cleaver, "all existing 'socialisms' fail to offer any real alternative to capitalist development" (Cleaver 2). Socialism is unable to constitute a true negation of capitalist development, because the socialist state critiques capitalist *control* of development, but not surplus itself. The socialist project fails to articulate any new positive content for a future beyond work, besides regaining control of the means of production. The autonomist project, however, involves the liberation of time and space from reproduction itself. This liberation is brought about by worker-led struggle, both negative (refusal) and positive (self-activity in new directions) demands, and a diversity that explodes capitalist hegemony. As Weeks explains, "the defection enacted through the refusal of work is not predicated upon what we lack or cannot do; it is predicated instead on our 'latent

wealth, on an abundance of possibilities'" (100). This is the point where Marxism can best learn from anarchist, prefigurative communities. While there is no universal project of self-valorization, these activities certainly must not reify capitalist relations. Alternative projects of value-creating practices can look like communes, gift economies, mutual aid, or even simply working less so as to have the time to cook our own food (Frayne). As Harry Cleaver tells us, in looking beyond work, the possibility of self-valorizing activities means a refusal of utopianism, in favor of an open-ended revolutionary project of invention. While utopia speaks to a predetermined end goal and is a teleological process, self-valorization "explodes all binary formulae… bursting the dialectical integument and liberating a multidimensional and ever-changing set of human needs and projects" ("Introduction" xxvi).

In order to synthesize the connections between Autonomist Marxism and Christian anarchist readings of the Bible, I will end this chapter with a discussion of *The Labor of Job* by Antonio Negri. With this book, Negri is speaking into a tradition of radical re-readings of Biblical texts, reading Christianity against the traditional grain of interpretation, just as autonomists read Marxism against the grain. The biblical book of Job tells the story of a righteous, wealthy man of God who loses his fortune and his family through a series of disasters at the hand of Satan, whom God has allowed to test Job's faith. Job remains distraught despite the attempts of his friends to console him with different justifications of the tragedies in his life, yet Job refuses to curse God. Seeing the faithfulness of God's servant, God restores Job to his former wealth and prosperity. Traditional readings of Job focus on a Job who is desperate and a blasphemer, affirming as the moral of the story "the total mercifulness of God, the gratuity of grace before the sinner" (Negri 13). Negri more directly draws from a second movement of interpretation that comes to a theology of liberation by showing "the scandal of the 'silence' of

God in the face of the suffering of man" (13). Negri walks alongside the intellectual work of

Ernst Bloch who suggests, "It is really in the Book of Job that the great reversal of values begins

– the discovery of the Utopian potency within the religious sphere… There is always an exodus

in the world, an exodus from the particular *status quo*. And there is always a hope, which is

connected with rebellion – a hope founded in the concrete given possibilities for new being"

(14).

Negri offers up the story of Job as an analogy for the story of the worker, in an attempt to

understand the value of labor and its creative procedures. Dialectics are impossible between God

and Job, just as in the autonomist view, dialectics are impossible between the capitalist and the

worker. Just as the existence of capital is dependent on the working class, God and man have a

constitutive relationship. "God and man form a relation that defines reality: a relationship that is

so profound as to be the condition of being. Divine omnipotence is relative for human existence.

(Is a God ever imaginable without someone to honor him?)" (Negri 20). The basis of this

analogy lies in immeasurability and an ontology of suffering. In Negri's conception of the social

factory, labor has ceased to become a value. Because it can no longer be measured, it becomes

evil. Labor is no longer one activity among many, but life itself (Negri 11). This immeasurability

of the value of labor contributes to the impossibility of a dialectical relationship between the

worker and the capitalist, or between Job and God. Just as the class struggle brings the working

class into existence, Job's protests against God establish a relationship that defines reality and is

the condition of being (20). "To suffer is to resist; it is to insist in ontology," Negri explains (26).

Ontological suffering is without measure or justification. There is no way to justify the pain in

the world with the existence of a good God, nor is there any ideology which can justify the

immeasurable pain of exploited workers.

The first key to liberation is *knowing* (25). In order to break the dialectical relationship between God and man, between the capitalist and working classes, there must be a constitutive tear, which is marked by the appearance of the Messiah (21). For Negri, Job is the symbol of the Messiah, "the discovery of the most abject misery that explodes toward the light" (12). Job refuses to hear talk of the transcendence and omnipotence of God's love, because human pain cannot be rationalized. Therefore, Job asserts it is necessary to go beyond the justification of pain to fully comprehend the practical transfiguration of pain. Insofar as the Messiah points to this *beyond*, the Messiah signifies the resurrection of the flesh. Similarly, within the realm of capital, the Messiah signifies the reconstruction of value in reverse, through the destruction of every fetish[6] (74). Through the Messiah, the power of man escapes from [divine] Power and frees itself from chaos without repeating Power's destiny (70), just as the autonomists and Christian anarchists aim to free themselves from the exploitation of labor by capital and the violence of the state, without using those same methods in their resistance. Negri explains that when power opposes Power (when Job opposes God, when the worker opposes the capitalist), it becomes divine. This power that creates has no measure of value, because all transcendence and exploitation has been destroyed, and there is no longer any master (75). This is the work of the Messiah in the world, but it is the work of creation, not of production or reproduction.

From this escape from the constitutive dialectic, springs the possibility of creation. Job has *seen* God; therefore God is torn from the absolute transcendence that constitutes the idea of him (96). Just as workers take full control of the means of production when the capitalist dialectic is destroyed, the human and the divine become ontologically linked in this moment of

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[6] The tendency to attribute to commodities (including money) a power that really inheres only in the labor expended to create commodities. (Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Marx: On Fetishism.*" Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Purdue U, 31 January 2011, http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/marxism/modules/marxfetishism. html. Accessed 15 April 2017.)

the death of God's transcendence (97). "The antagonism of life and death is resolved in favor of life… Creation is the going beyond death, Creation is the content of the vision of God. Creation is the meaning of life" (97). It is in truly seeing the pain and injustice of the world that humans see God. We bring the work of God into being in the world when we emerge from this place of immeasurability and incoherence, bringing forth the creation of something new. In this way, "pain is a key that opens the door to community" because it "overflows logic, the rational, language" (90). As Negri tells us, "power is established in pain, it is the power of non-being, it is the power of the community – an inconclusive essence within an indefinitely creative process" (90). This idea can act as a prophetic call for Anabaptist Mennonites to remember the voluntary suffering that was the foundation of the early movement. It is a call to renew our intention and resolve to join with all exiled and marginalized peoples toward the creation that marks the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God on Earth. As Mennonites we must understand our exodus from the violent economic structures of society not simply as a passive escape to professionalism and quiet pastoral life, but as an active refusal to contribute to capitalist development through an exodus from the capitalist dialectic itself. This work is a call to bring Mennonites out of our comfort and acquiescence to power, toward a nonconformity of radical engagement and the willingness to suffer, not only through our faith but through our works, or the refusal thereof. As Negri challenges, "Will we be able to lead our wretchedness through an analytic of being and pain, and from that ontological depth rise up again to a theory of action, or better still, to the practice of the reconstruction of the world?" (15).

Chapter 4

The Wisdom of God is Foolishness to the World: Mennonites, Blackness, and Nothingness

From rendering the law inoperative, to bursting the capitalist dialectic, the multifaceted role of the Messiah in the world also has the potential to destroy the world as we know it. This final chapter explores the unique perspective of Afro-pessimist thinkers to guide Anabaptist theology to a liberatory understanding of blackness. The work of Afro-pessimism is closely tied to Autonomist Marxist concepts of antagonism and refusal, but takes the argument of the refusal of work even further, toward an argument for the necessity of a refusal of civil society. Within the social factory, every type of labor is incorporated into the development of capital. Civil society can also function in a similar way to harness and redirect all work for justice and the strengthening of rights toward the perpetuation of antiblack violence. This chapter outlines the foundations of the intellectual work of Afro-pessimism and its conception of civil society and blackness. I then explore the possibility of a political project grounded in the refusal of civil society and the voluntary embodiment of blackness/nothingness. I connect this project to the themes of exodus and the liberatory power of blackness that are central to black liberation theology. By drawing preliminary connections between black theology and Anabaptism, I then present the case of Mennonites in the civil rights movement, the intervention of Vincent Harding, and the connections to Thomas Müntzer's theology. This exploration leads to a call toward higher spiritualism, suffering, and embracing the foolishness of the Kingdom of God.

Afro-pessimism is a field of thought which emerged out of the black studies movement and refers to the work of Frank B. Wilderson and Jared Sexton. These two foundational thinkers draw from a conversational lineage that includes important figures such as Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Orlando Patterson, Loic Wacquant, and Frantz Fanon. While these thinkers are

not Afro-pessimists, Sexton and Wilderson draw from this rich body of literature to form their theories. Afro-pessimism is based in the fundamental understanding that all attempts to configure a positive political project are misguided and oppressive when unaccompanied by an examination of the depths of antiblackness and gratuitous violence against the black subject in the United States. What first must be understood is the Afro-pessimist concept of the *afterlife of slavery*, a term which they borrow from Hartman. Afro-pessimists maintain a structuralist view that while the form and manifestation has evolved, the basic social relations and functions of chattel slavery remain unchanged. Loic Wacquant explains the relative permanence of these structures in American history though the categorization of four "peculiar institutions": slavery (1619-1865), Jim Crow (South, 1865-1965), the Ghetto (North 1915-1968), and the Hyperghetto & Prison (1968-) (Wacquant 42). The first three institutions "were all instruments for the conjoint extraction of labour and social ostracization of an outcast group," and all of these institutions continue to actively produce racial categories and divisions to support the function of the institution (44). Our current institution, the hyperghetto and prison, is "the practical revivification and official solidification of the centuries-old association of blackness within criminality and devious violence." However, this institution has shifted in social function from the exploitation of labor to the housing of what is now a surplus labor population (55). Even after the official institution of chattel slavery ended, the function of the figure of the slave within society has continued.

In Orlando Patterson's seminal book, *Slavery and Social Death,* he embarks on a structuralist analysis of the slave relation across all forms of slavery throughout societies in different regions of the world and eras of history. According to Patterson's study, the constitutive elements of the master-slave relation are the processes of social death and natal alienation. For

Patterson, property is not the key element in all forms of slavery. Rather, the master-slave

relation represents a social category and relationship, as there is no such thing as disembodied

service (25). This relationship is defined by the "permanent, violent domination of natally

alienated and generally dishonored persons" (13), where natal alienation is "a loss of ties of birth

in both ascending and descending generations" and "alienation… from any attachment to groups

or localities other than those chosen for him by the master" (7). In the cultural aspect of the

master-slave relation, natal alienation also cuts enslaved people off from a sense of the past as

heritage or collective memory (5). In this way, the enslaved person is a socially dead person. The

socially dead slave cannot be brought back to social life, even when slavery ends.

Another defining structure for Afro-pessimists is the construct of "civil society" and the

black subject's antagonistic relationship to it. The concept of civil society has a long history in

political philosophy. Hegel originally established the concept of civil society as a contrast to

political society, or the state (Hardt 28). For Hegel, civil society is the society of the organization

of abstract labor (29). Civil society plays both an economic and an educative role, and is the

entity which mediates the state of nature in its process of continual progression toward the

political sphere (28). Gramsci, however, stands this relationship on its feet, and argues that the

state's goal is its own end, or the re-absorption of political society within civil society (30).

Through a plurality of institutions, civil society will continue to expand until it becomes the

hegemonic force, where state elements will exist only as tools to serve civil society. Gramsci

claims that the hegemony of civil society poses a threat to the state and structures of capitalism,

because civil society is made up of revolutionary workers who challenge the wage slavery,

exploitation, and hegemony of capitalism (Wilderson Prison Slave Hegemony 27). The eventual

reign of civil society means self-government.

For Afro-pessimists, however, the work of Gramsci, Hegel, and even Marx fails to center racism as a foundational phenomenon in the structures of capitalism and civil society, because these traditional thinkers see white supremacy as a derivative effect of capitalism, rather than the base itself (Wilderson 231). In Marxist cultural theory, the base structure of society is the material relations of production that gives rise to the superstructure, which refers to the institutions, forms of consciousness, and political and cultural practices of a society (Williams 77). A change in the mode of production causes a social revolution that redefines all the aspects of the superstructure. Gramsci argues the superstructure can also impact what happens at the base; therefore, civil society is an appropriate place of intervention. In this traditional formulation, racism is simply an aspect of the superstructure, a result of the capitalistic relations of production. Afro-pessimists refute this formulation and place anti-blackness as the base of civil society. Wilderson claims, "The scandal with which the black subject position 'threatens' Gramscian and coalition discourse is manifest in the black subject's incommensurability with, or disarticulation of, Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness" (27). Afro-pessimists replace the worker with the black subject (the slave) as the subaltern figure, who is the subject in antagonism to civil society. While critiquing traditional Marxist analysis, Afro-pessimists in fact present an argument similar to Autonomist Marxists critiques of what Wilderson calls the "conceptual anxiety" of Marxism. The socialist project fails to question the values of productivity and progress, which leads to a "crowding-out scenario for other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness," or the refusal of work (226). Wilderson also echoes autonomist claims about antagonism when he says, "The black subject extends the demand and intensity of the antagonism (230)…While the worker calls

into question the legitimacy of productive practices, the slave questions productivity itself"
(231).

Another aspect of the black subject's antagonism is the impossibility of coalition-building with other oppressed groups for increased rights within civil society. This is the case, Afro-pessimists argue, because civil society is built upon black death. Similar to the autonomist thesis in Marxism that claims the resistance of labor drives capitalist formation, Moten explains that "black is a disordering, deformational force, but also indispensable to the dominant order" ("The Case" 180). Reformulated, white life finds its coherence through the incoherence of black death. There is no room for a dialectical relationship between the black subject and civil society, because the antagonism of the black subject threatens the very existence of the world as we know it ("The Subprime" 240). Other constituents of civil society can work within the system to create change by engaging with the codes of American discourse, while the black subject cannot. These American subjects generate historical categories and their integration presents no significant threat to existing structures. For example, Native Americans can bargain for equality through the language of sovereignty and rights, and immigrants through the language of the American Dream (Wilderson 236). However, leveled by the experience of social death and natal alienation through slavery, the black subject generates no historical categories and has no grammar through which to describe their suffering. Any attempt to work to increase rights within civil society only perpetuates and further develops a system based on the incoherence of black death. Therefore, the question that must be asked by those who seek black liberation is not "What does it mean to be free?", but "What does it mean to suffer?" (234).

For Afro-pessimists, blackness is positioned as the chaotic underbelly of civil society, as social death and nothingness. It is through the incoherence of black death that "whites gain their

coherence by knowing what they are not" (187). In a society where whiteness is superior,

blackness is always seen as pathology, as foolishness, as disease. In fact, any action of resistance

against the pathologization of blackness is seen as a symptom of that same pathology (Moten

187). Blackness is defined by disembodiment and non-being. One aspect of this disembodiment,

fungibility, refers to the characteristic of black bodies that defines them as a commodity due to

their replaceability and interchangeability (*Scenes* 21). While the worker is affected by the

modalities of exploitation and alienation of labor, the black subject is marked by accumulation

and fungibility, where the black body is expendable and a blank slate able to be used for any

purpose (*Red* 59). Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Subjection* explains, "The fungibility

of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the

projection of other's feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (21). This ontological reality functions

in a way that allows those in a position of power to experience the pleasure and terror of

blackness through an appropriation that reinforces the material relations of chattel slavery.

Hartman continues, "The dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's

body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and

dominion" (21). These dynamics show themselves even in the actions of those who attempt to

work against racist structures by empathizing with black suffering, a paradox Hartman names as

"the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" (18). She explains an example of a white abolitionist

who wrote vivid slave narratives to "reenact… the grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the

injustice of slavery and intended to shock and to disrupt the comfortable remove of the

reader/spectator," in order to, "rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery" (17,18). In

this experiment, he imagined himself and his family as enslaved, but soon came to feel more pain

for himself than for those actually enslaved. Hartman argues the ease with which he identified

with the enslaved is an example of the fungibility of the black body (Wilcoxen). These aspects of blackness define for Afro-pessimists the nature of the antagonism, nothingness, and non-communicability of the black subject.

Another field of thought concerned with the essential nature of blackness is black liberation theology. Even as we keep in mind the Christian anarchist critiques of liberation theology for its tendency to perpetuate the cycle of sovereignty through struggle for state power, I argue that black liberation theology is a crucial piece to understanding a path through Afro-pessimism to arrive at a political project, because it is a systematic theology that centers blackness. Black liberation theology, specifically as articulated by James Cone, emerged in the 1970's during the era of the Black Power movement as a way of situating the liberation of the African American community as central within Christianity. Cone, in his work *A Black Theology of Liberation*, follows this systematic foundation to articulate further that because God is unconditionally on the side of the oppressed, God is black. Blackness, for black theologians such as Cone, has both a physical and a symbolic meaning. The physical meaning of blackness is blackness as an embodied reality, such as the color of one's skin. Much more relevant to black theology is the symbolic meaning of blackness, which encompasses the moral implications of and social constructions placed upon the understanding of blackness. For example, Cone notes that in a white racist society, the symbol of whiteness represents everything good, placing blackness as its antithesis. Because God is unconditionally on the side of the oppressed, in order to find God and join in God's work, one must make the black condition one's own (Cone, ch. 1). Blackness is God's intention for humanity, not whiteness. God's revelation is God's movement *through* history on the side of the oppressed. Therefore, the Jesus-event in America is the *black*

event, as the black community throws off the chains of white oppression by whatever means necessary.

Therefore, the ultimate concern of black liberation theology is symbolic blackness and its liberating power, not physical life (ch. 1). In the overlapping conversation of the essential nature of blackness as both pathological and liberatory, Afro-pessimism and black theology have the opportunity to create a positive definition of blackness beyond its negation of whiteness. By moving through the critiques of Afro-pessimism, we can begin imagining a different type of political project. Even in the incomprehensible state of social death, Wilderson is still able to speak about the possibility of black life. "Obviously I'm not saying that in this space of negation, which is blackness, there is no life. We have tremendous life. But this life is not analogous to those touchstones of cohesion that hold civil society together" (Hartman and Wilderson 187). Blackness "gives the nation its coherence because [it is] its underbelly," but it also is an antagonism that poses a fatal threat to civil society (187). Fred Moten, whom some have deemed a black optimist, imagines a political project that works its way through the structuralist view of Afro-pessimism. Moten gives voice to the possibility that defining the black social life that exists in the space of negation could harness its disruptive power to create a "program of complete disorder" directed at the end of the world order as it currently exists ("The Subprime" 240). If blackness in the space of negation is not a non-being, then the question that must be answered is what black social life actually *is* and how it can bring about liberation.

The foundational liberatory motif in black theological thought is the Biblical story of the Exodus. This story reinforces the image of God as liberator, as God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and delivers them to the promised land. Exodus, however, must be re-examined and its radical potential positioned in light of Afro-pessimist thought. In his book *Is God a White*

Racist?, William Jones poses a challenge to black theology's claim of God as liberator by asking, "Where is the black Exodus?". According to the argument presented by Jared Sexton and other Afro-pessimists, Jones is asking the wrong question, focusing on the wrong liberative goal, because American slaves have no home or land to return to, and no "promised land" like the Israelites had. Due to natal alienation and social death, the slave "suffers the status of being neither the native nor the foreigner, neither the colonizer nor the colonized" (Sexton 41). The slave has no home to return to after being cut off from all family and history, and the slave also has no home to work towards in the current society, as the black subject is socially dead and outside of the workings of civil society. In this way, "what qualifies the condition of the slave is a suffering that not only wrecks the coordinates of any humanism but also, for the same reason, precludes the generation of a proper political demand at a definable object or objective" (47). In the Afro-pessimist view, the ontological totality of anti-blackness robs the black community of their search for the promised land, rendering the question of the black Exodus irrelevant.

Yet as Yoder reminds us, the Exodus was not a takeover of state power, but a withdrawal (300). Blackness is a kind of Exodus, because as an antagonism to civil society, a withdraw to blackness is a withdraw from the world. Moten begins his search for a positive definition of blackness by asking, "What if blackness is the refusal to defer to, given the withdraw from the eternal delay of, sovereignty?" (751). Instead of trying to create an ontology or meaning of life and being that is inclusive of black life within civil society, Moten suggests discovering the pathology and nothingness of blackness, and then entering it (746). This voluntary refusal of sovereignty and identification with the socially dead is within the same modality of Exodus as the refusal of work by the worker, and the refusal of rights by the voluntary exile. Sexton, however, specifically names the black subject as the figure of the unsovereign, and replaces the

figure of the refugee with the figure of the slave when he quotes Agamben, saying, "the only means to forge solidarity with the slave (for free and enslaved alike) is to 'abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subject of the political and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the [slave]'" (Sexton 216).

Moten makes a distinction between blackness and blacks (just as black liberation theology does), which "allows us to detach blackness from the question of the meaning of being" (750). In this paraontological condition, beyond questions of essential being, blackness can claim anyone and be claimed by anyone ("The Subprime" 240), and it is up to us "to structure an accurate sense of what nothing is" (Moten 752). Moten suggests the possibility that blackness is not only pathological, but also pathogenic; not only an illness, but capable of spreading its disease. He declares, "I bear the hope that blackness bears or is the potential to end the world" (Moten 739). When blackness and imagination interact, blackness no longer consents to be a single being, to be an undefinable negation to civil life (752). In this liminal space, Moten attempts to reinstate an attentiveness to eschatology, which in political thought has traditionally been displaced by "the teleological and appropriated by a retributive desire for a kind of finality and sentencing" (753). In other words, the process of defining and inhabiting blackness has the destructive potential to end the world, but this end of the world does not look like a finality or complete actualization. In practice, blackness in community life takes the form of improvisation, of constant movement and creation, of unending potentiality (756). This path is not without suffering, but it is the only possible movement through Afro-pessimist critiques to come to an understanding of a positive project. As Moten explains, "Choosing to be black implies paying the cost; it is a kind of ethical gesture to claim this dispossession, this nothingness, this radical

poverty-in-spirit. This is what Afro-pessimism performs, in and as theory—an affirmative

gesture toward nothingness, an affirmation of negation and its destructive force" (774). Joining

in blackness does not mean demonstrating an empathy that is imaginary or fantastical. It is not an

empathy that attempts to filter the experience of black suffering through a white lens in order to

make it visible and comprehensible. Instead, empathy, as can be concluded from Moten's

analysis, is allowing oneself to be claimed by the foolishness and pathology of symbolic

blackness, which black theology defines as the movement of God in the world. This willingness

to suffer is not a performative act to empathize with the black experience in America, but rather a

willingness to face the most-likely violent consequences of fully aligning oneself with the cause

of black liberation.

Indeed, Scripture itself names the divinity of this act of affirming negation, nothingness,

foolishness, blackness. In 1 Corinthians 1: 27-28, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in

Corinth:

> 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak
> things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and
> the despised thing – and the *things that are not* – to nullify the *things that are*.

Here, we arrive back at the original claim of black theology surrounding God's blackness, but

with a new-found significance. If God is the liberator and God is black, then God must liberate

the black subject through God's blackness. Blackness may be the antithesis of whiteness, but the

essential being of blackness is the movement of God through human history. It is this divine

movement that stands as an antagonism in direct threat to all structures of power and oppression.

Cone declares, "It is the biblical concept of the image of God which makes black rebellion in

America *human*" (ch. 5). The image of God in blackness provides the means to imagine a new

world order based not on black death, but on the embrace of blackness itself, a blackness with its

rightful symbolic meaning of life and humanity. This is the black event, the Jesus-event, in America. Blackness, as the foundation of the new world order, is not essentialized, but represents the full life-giving force of the presence of God. As Moten explains, blackness can claim anyone and be claimed by anyone ("The Subprime" 240). The oppressed lose their chains, as do the oppressors, when they let go of the evil of whiteness and immerse their whole being in the blackness that God intended for humanity.

Bringing this conversation into the context of the Anabaptist tradition, Cone's black theology of liberation and Anabaptist theology as systems of God-talk have many foundational aspects in common. For example, both systematic theologies center the community as the primary meaning-making force in life. Cone states, "It is in community that values are chosen, because the community provides the structure in which our beings as persons is realized" (ch. 5). Therefore, all talk about God is tested against the norm of the community and the relevancy of it to that community's situation in society. Following this train of thought, sin is not viewed as individual impiety but as collective and systemic injustice. These theologies also share the belief that Jesus is "the point of departure for everything to be said about God, humankind, and the world" (ch. 6). This focus on God's revelation through Jesus, God incarnate, and God's involvement in human history, allows the traditions to confess a faith in concrete truth with concrete applications in today's world. Most importantly, these systems of theology envision a God who is on the side of the oppressed, the poor, the meek, the voiceless, the disinherited, the very least of these.

Influenced by the teachings of black liberation theology, some Mennonites have also observed the close connection between the two traditions. In 1976, Hubert L. Brown published

the book, *Black and Mennonite,* detailing his own formation in both traditions and his initial attempts to synthesize them. Brown writes:

> In American theological circles, black theology has a double perspective. It brings to theological reflection the particular and peculiar experiences of black people, and because that experience has been shaped in the vortex of oppression and persecution, it fundamentally relates to Anabaptist heritage. Anabaptist theology reflects the ethnic and social experiences that include themes such as conversion, faithfulness, and the relational quality of mutual aid and brotherhood. These are linked to the black experience of oppression. We have in common a history of suffering and a drive for liberation as God's elect. 94

While these commonalities exist between black liberation theology and the original Anabaptist movement, the way the tradition evolved has resulted in a somewhat disparate reality. Dr. Drew Hart has recently taken up the mantle set by Brown and others with his concept of Anablacktivism:

> That is Anabaptism + Black Theology + Activism. A theological discourse and praxis-oriented approach like this is capable of learning from both communities, while disentangling the problems of white dominance that have plagued many historic Anabaptist communities since landing in North America. Beyond white separatist Mennonitism or the cultural hegemony and white blinders of neo-Anabaptism, anablacktivism dares to allow two different Christian traditions both born on the underside of western Christendom to shape its vision of Christian life. "Join Greg Boyd"

Therefore, we must ask, what does Cone's black theology of liberation have to say to the contemporary Mennonite church in America? It seems that the more religious "freedoms" the Mennonite church gains, the more disengaged it becomes from the world, and the further it strays from God's true freedom, which Cone defines as a participation of the whole person in the liberation struggle. For example, the separatist ethic began as a tool for survival, but evolved into a cultural norm. Once religious tolerance was extended to them, the existence of Anabaptist communities ceased to be a resistance to the powers that be, and the only way to differentiate themselves from the world at large was to isolate into distinct communities with identifiable

ways of life and dress. The central conflicts in the community therefore become the style of music or the length of a woman's bonnet strings, rather than how to address the injustices in contemporary society. Therefore, black liberation theology acts as a prophetic call to the Mennonite church to renounce the false freedom of the world and embrace God's freedom by continually following God to the places of the oppressed. Indeed, Brown asserts that "Mennonites seeking to find themselves ought to look to black theology" (94). The church must re-identify itself not simply as the "peaceable kingdom" (Hauerwas), but as *black*. In order to do this, Cone tells us we must "cease being white by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God's intention for humanity" (ch. 1). Furthermore, the kingdom of God in black theology is not a separate community or existential reality, but a *happening*. According to Cone, "It is what happens to persons when their being is confronted with the reality of God's historical liberation of the oppressed" (ch. 6). In our contemporary context, "the black revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America" (ch. 6). God's gift to the Mennonite church in the 20th century is black (Brown 94). This radically different conceptualization necessitates that the Mennonite church identify itself with the particular struggle for black liberation in America in order to identify itself with the kingdom of God and the originary radical nature of the Anabaptist movement. As Brown tells us, "Mennonites will discover that to be a black Christian is in effect to be an Anabaptist" (95).

Tobin Miller Shearer's study of Mennonites in the Civil Rights movement in his book *Daily Demonstrators* provides an insightful account of how Mennonites tend to approach race relations. While most Mennonites were conspicuously absent from participation in nonviolent Civil Rights demonstrations, Miller Shearer argues Mennonites engaged in subtler, though perhaps no less disruptive "daily demonstrations" inside their homes and churches. Through

integrated church services and initiatives such as the "Fresh Air" urban-rural exchange program for children, white Mennonites allowed black people into their spaces under the banner of equality under God. While the white Mennonites expected a certain level of assimilation to their "superior" cultural values, the presence of these black individuals inside white Mennonite homes and churches, according to Miller Shearer, created a mutually transformative process. The daily disruptions of cross-cultural and interracial relationships, as well as strong leadership by black members, appeared to lead to greater understanding across difference and continually challenged the respectability of traditional white ethnic Mennonite cultural norms.

Afro-pessimists and other black scholars, however, critique this view of multiracialism as the solution to racism. The white Mennonites involved in these interracial relationships may have felt they were being transformed, but there was still an assimilation that was expected of the black individuals, bringing black people into the Mennonite community by expanding the hegemony of the Anabaptist church and their specific version of the civil society to come, the "Kingdom of God". bell hooks, in her essay "Eating the Other", names the desire for the Other, the desire for interracial relationships, to be a form of "mournful imperialist nostalgia" (369). She further explains, "The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection" (369). The desire of white Mennonites to incorporate black people into their communities stems from the need to separate themselves from the guilt of being associated with the racist American society, without recognizing their current and historical culpability in reifying those same violent structures within their own communities. hooks explains that:

> subject to subject contact between white and black which signals the absence of domination, of an oppressor/oppressed relationship, must emerge through mutual choice

and negotiation. That simply by expressing their desire for "intimate" contact with black people, white people do not eradicate the politics of racial domination as they are made manifest in personal interaction. Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. 371

The test of the white Mennonite community's commitment to a multiracial, integrated church is their willingness to confront the Mennonite church's own racism and tolerate the disruption of these structures and institutions that true relationship with the Other would require.

Indeed, black Mennonite leaders such as Vincent Harding found that white Mennonite tolerance for disruption could only extend so far. In reaction to his outspoken support of and involvement in Civil Rights demonstrations, once resulting in jail time, a prominent white Mennonite leader "criticized Harding for his flamboyance and showmanship, giving evidence of not only stereotypical thinking about black preachers but also of the conflict between Mennonite values of humility and the prominence of black leaders no longer willing to conform to values of respectability and humility" (Prophet Pushed Out 52). Harding, like so many other black Mennonites before and after him, eventually left the church, choosing from then on to focus "on the struggle *for* black freedom, rather than on white Mennonites' struggles *with* black freedom" (75). Miller Shearer notes:

Harding himself returned to his core vision in a 2012 Sojourners magazine article where he noted, "We have to take our lives away from the foolishness that the society wants us to be wrapped up in and to focus ourselves on the building of a new world." During his time with the Mennonites, Harding poured his energies into a community he hoped could be a part of building that new world. He had been attracted to Mennonites' ability to spurn some of society's folly, but he became deeply disappointed and disillusioned when he discovered just how extensively the community had internalized the foolishness of racism.

At this point, I want to offer up a theoretical conversation between Moten and the Anabaptist forefather Thomas Müntzer as a possible way forward for the Mennonite church,

through a return to original Anabaptist thought. While Müntzer was not himself an Anabaptist, his prominent teachings during the Peasant's War, directly leading up to the birth of the movement, provide insight into two crucial theological themes: the role of the Spirit and suffering. First of all, Müntzer believed the end times were near and therefore operated from an eschatological framework, just as Moten encourages. According to Moten, an attentiveness to eschatology centers the destructive power of blackness to end the world. Müntzer also believed in the hermeneutical role of the living Spirit, which was more mystical and spiritualistic than strictly exegetical (based in biblical interpretation) (Snyder 29). This emphasis on the "inner world" of the believer allowed for the possibility of direct, non-scriptural revelations. For Müntzer and his followers, true faith was not found in books, but in "poverty of spirit" – the same radical poverty of spirit that Moten claims is an ethical gesture toward the affirmation of blackness, and which Agamben posits as an act which renders sovereignty inoperative (Snyder 774). Again, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 speak to the role of the Spirit in this process of affirmation of what the world deems foolishness and pathology:

> 12What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. 14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

Müntzer emphasized that the inner birth of the Spirit comes only through suffering. Led by the Spirit and the constant movement of God in the world, Muntzer's theological praxis is an example of Moten's praxis of improvisation as a form of community life. In the course of daily demonstrations and disruptions, white and black Mennonites in the Civil Rights era appeared to have a transformative, mutual impact on one another, a true dialectical relationship. Afro-pessimists, however, remind us of the antagonism of the black subject, who is not an equal in the

relationship and cannot be communicated with in the standard terms of civil society, thereby rendering dialectics impossible. Harding and Brown both name the fakeness of Mennonites claiming to be "Anabaptists" in this way ("A Prophet", Brown 95). Anabaptism, as I have shown throughout this paper, is by definition a radical embodiment of the refusal of sovereignty, capitalism, and civil society. Anabaptism is an antagonism to the powers that be. While at the inception of the movement, in their historical context, Anabaptists were themselves the poor and marginalized, that is obviously no longer the case in contemporary American society. We have assimilated, withdrawn to our isolated communities, maintaining our cultural distinctiveness only in rhetoric. This desire of Mennonites in the Civil Rights era to differentiate themselves from the world and critique mainstream movements for equal rights under the law has a strategic basis, according to Afro-pessimist critiques of civil society. However, Mennonites cannot passively withdraw from society and expect others to assimilate to our communal acquiescence to power. Mennonites must become black, must join in the blackness of the movement of God in the world, just as the early Anabaptists did from the beginning. This willingness to join in the suffering of blackness does not look like simply bringing black people into our communities, thereby maintaining the supremacy of the white ethnic Mennonite church as God's chosen people. Instead, the message of Anablacktivism is a call to align the church with the true movement of God in the world, the movement toward black liberation and the end of all forms of oppression. It means rupturing the false dialectic between white and black by joining the black subject through a willingness to suffer. Following Vincent Harding's call to reject the "foolishness" of white racism, Mennonites must instead embrace what Moten calls the foolishness of blackness, harnessing the affirmative power of blackness to end the world as we know it. The Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 3: 18-23 provides a powerful conclusion:

18 Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness" [a]; 20 and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." [b] 21 So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, 22 whether…the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

And God is black.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this research, I set out to trace the lines of connection between Christian anarchism, Agamben's philosophy, Autonomist Marxism, and Afro-pessimism. Along the way, I have come to understand more deeply the implications of this conversation for the future of the Anabaptist tradition, the Christian church, and the very definition of political community. The Anabaptist tradition started with radical roots, but over time has become complicit with the violent worldly systems that surround it. From its inception during the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptist movement was a movement of the poor and marginalized, to address their economic and political needs, as well as their spiritual hunger. This formation of community put into practice the Christian anarchist ideals of refusing the authority of state and church institutions, as well as becoming voluntary exiles to the world, eschatological witnesses to the world yet to come. Due to their anti-institutional values and their resistance to the development of proto-capitalism, Anabaptists faced violent backlash from the state. Yet through their willingness to embrace and even celebrate suffering and persecution, the Anabaptist movement lived on.

Through its evolution over the past five centuries, the Anabaptist movement has spread geographically across the globe and splintered off into various sects. The Mennonite church in North America is a collection of communities whose practices differ in their level of engagement with the outside world. Some communities maintain strict boundaries and are legalistic in their enforcement of communal conformity. Others are more integrated into the broader culture, working in all types of professions, which at times further the exploitation of capitalism through their adherence to transcendent religious values. Although professing a desire for racial equity, the Mennonite church overall continues to struggle with valuing the preservation of white ethic

cultural values over the disruption that would be caused by a full commitment to black liberation. The mandate of the Mennonite church is to be "in the world but not of the world." As Jesus declares in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." It is this middle road that Jesus's followers are called to, Jesus' Third Way: refusing the violence of the world while creatively transforming it, bringing the Kingdom of Heaven into being on Earth. The threads of connection between Agamben's philosophy, Autonomist Marxism, and Afro-pessimism provide an intervention that enlivens the radical potential of Anabaptism, by challenging the church to deeper refusal and critique (negative politics) while also embodying an alternative (positive politics).

The work of these fields of thought, which decenter the state as the primary political community, finds the seeds of a new system in the figure of the marginalized, whether the exile, the refugee, the worker, or the slave. The cast-out and marginalized have become the center, and this process transforms everything. To borrow biblical language, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of a new world order (Psalm 118:22). They also describe the positionality and actions required to bring about this break from a dialectical relationship with power: voluntary exile, the refusal of rights, the refusal of work, and the destructive force of blackness. The task at hand is to "organize struggles that neither take the form nor mirror the logic of what they contest" (Weeks 95). In this formulation of political action, "there is always an exodus in the world, an exodus from the particular status quo. And there is always a hope, which is connected with rebellion – a hope founded in the concrete given possibilities for new being" (Negri 14). The true church operates through apocalyptic politics, as an eschatological witness to the way the world was meant to be and will one day be again.

Such a withdraw from the world is accompanied by the willingness to suffer the consequences of these actions, whether due to state violence or social upheaval. The question at the heart of black liberation is "What does it mean to suffer?" (Wilderson 234). Thomas Müntzer speaks of the inner birth of the spirit through suffering, and Negri names pain as the key to community. In this affirmation of suffering, this "affirmative gesture toward nothingness, an affirmation of negation and its destructive force" (Moten 774), the Messiah works to redeem suffering for the creation of something new. It is in truly seeing the pain and injustice of the world that humans see God. The Messiah appears in the constitutive tear, which breaks humans away from the violence of power and sovereignty and allows us to walk a new path. The Messiah is the one who fulfills the law, thereby transgressing it, as the Messiah's arrival makes the old laws lose their meaning. The Messiah "transforms temporality itself, enabling 'another world and another time' to make themselves present in this world and in this time (*Homo Sacer* 320)". Christians are called to act in this messianic modality as they follow the example of Jesus as their form of community life.

From this escape from the constitutive dialectic, springs the possibility of creation. For Negri, "Creation is the going beyond death, Creation is the content of the vision of God" (Negri 97). The creation that springs from suffering is the formation of a political community outside of the law, beyond the current formations of Western political ontology. This community moves beyond the idea of revolution, embracing a politics beyond sovereignty, free from every type of ban. The new political community embraces projects of self-valorization, which present a diversity of demands that burst through capitalist hegemony, liberating time and space from reproduction itself. Improvisation becomes a form of community life, in constant movement and

creation, in unending potentiality. We are left with an abundance of possibilities, because the

kingdom Jesus proclaims will not take the familiar hierarchic form of a state.

As an educated, white, Mennonite, queer, cis-woman, I recognize that the research and

resulting political vision I present here is challenging in many ways, whether due to its

unfinished nature or my own positionality. At the very least I aim for this research to be a

challenge to the comfortable existence of much of the Mennonite church in North America. As

Kathi Weeks recognizes,

> When what is to be destroyed is the world that makes us possible, the world in which we
> can exist as legible subjects, the task of creating a new world can be a frightening, even
> dystopian, prospect…Cultivating utopian hope as a political project of remaking the
> world is a struggle to become not just able to think a different future but to become
> willing to become otherwise. "What," Brown asks, "sustains a willingness to risk
> becoming different kinds of beings, a desire to alter the architecture of the social world
> from the perspective of being disenfranchised in it, a conviction that the goods of the
> current order are worth less than the making of a different one?" (2005, 107). The project
> of hope as conceived here requires the affirmation of what we have become as the
> constitutive ground from which we can become otherwise…Thus the project of hope
> must struggle against both the resentment of what has come to be and the fear of what
> might replace it, not because the future is settled – on the contrary, it could be a
> catastrophe – but because a different and better world remains a possibility. 203

My hope is that this research convicts and encourages those that read it to continue questioning,

to never remain static or tied to identity, and to be willing to change. We as a church must

imagine ourselves as a community beyond institutions and beyond dogma, constantly recreating

and imagining new forms of community which refuse to remain complacent in the face of

injustice. To truly be in the world but not of it, this is the stance we must take: actively joining

with the cause of the oppressed, while refusing the hierarchy and authority of the state, the

sovereignty of the law, and the hegemony of capitalism and civil society. This movement makes

possible a community of perpetual creation, which brings the Kingdom of God into being on Earth.

But what does this theoretical vision look like in practice? That is a question for the church to pick up and run with, as we discern in community with one another. Translating theory into practice is fundamentally an exercise in imagination. I see this research as but one example of an act of imaginative labor. Throughout this journey, I have enlivened my own faith and theological perspective by engaging with social theory and finding new meaning in my heritage and sacred texts. This same exercise could be taken up in community to determine the living call of the Spirit and new ways to do Kingdom work in our local settings. For now, as one final exercise in imagination, I return to the original Christian anarchist manifesto, the Sermon on the Mount, by adding to it my lingering questions and thoughts as I conclude this year of research.

Matthew 5: 1-12 (Revisions in italics)

Jesus said:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
  for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
The poor in spirit embrace an antagonism of nonbeing that is the potential to end the world.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
  for they will be comforted.
Pain and suffering are the key to community and creation.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
  for they will inherit the earth.
Not by violent, flashy revolution, but through quiet, active refusal and the potential not *to be.*

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
  for they will be filled.
They strive not for utopia and final actualization, but for a process of perpetual creation.

7 Blessed are the merciful,
  for they will be shown mercy
Only love can construct and reconstruct the world.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart,
  for they will see God.
In seeing God, they tear the dialectic of transcendence and become equal partners in the redemption of the world.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers,
  for they will be called children of God.
They not only refuse the current world order, but build a new future of abundance.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
  for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Those without rights, without control, without being: they show us the seeds of the new creation to come.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, *when you suffer*, because of me. **12** Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven *WHICH YOU HAVE BROUGHT TO EARTH TODAY*, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. *Remember those ancestors, and walk faithfully the path they marked for you.*

Blessed are those who are in the world, but not of the world,

for they will destroy the world, continuously reconstruct it, and live in a new community marked by the law of love.

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