

# A different kind of emancipation? From lifestyle to form-of-life

Luigi Pellizzoni (University of Pisa)

Preprint version

Published in *European Journal of Social Theory* 2021

DOI: 10.1177/13684310211027331

## **Abstract**

The modern outlook on emancipation has made its quest inseparable from a quest for endless enhancement, based on an ever-more intensive exploitation of the biophysical world. This accounts for how unsustainable ways of living are reiterated worldwide, in spite of evidence of their deleterious effects. The underpinnings of unsustainability, and a major impediment to conceiving alternatives, come from an account of the human as ontologically indeterminate, crushed on doing, both vulnerable and powerful towards the world. The impasse of such ambivalence hampers social theory critique, from post-humanist ontologies to the case for degrowth and lifestyle politics. The paper outlines a different take on emancipation. An account is provided of form-of-life as a doing tailored to being – not as a self-enclosed monad but as a result of the encounter between own ‘inclination’ and the world. This theoretical perspective discloses a research program on emergent mobilisations.

## **Keywords**

lifestyle politics, form-of-life, degrowth, imperial mode of living, everyday activism

---

As a concept, emancipation conveys the idea of achieving freedom and equality, breaking boundaries and ties, overcoming dependencies, constraints and lordships. Modernity has understood this as a political project (Habermas, 1996), aimed at ensuring that human beings be able to fulfil their desires, actualising or accomplishing themselves. In this framework, limitations are legitimate only if contingent or freely accepted as related to the need of reciprocal accommodation of individual expectations. Crucial to the project is an ontology of the individual as a self-standing agent faced with an open-ended, actionable, reality; a self-instituting subject, whose limits can only be self-established (Mbembe, 2003). Crucial to the project is also a method, namely reflexive application. At any stage, existing arrangements become the tradition from the constraints of which one has to disentangle. So, for Hobbes the Leviathan emancipates from the state of nature; for liberal thinkers the rule of law emancipates from absolutism; and participatory democracy is claimed to emancipate from the uneven political agency entailed by party and electoral systems (Della Porta, 2013).

Thus, modernity has conceived of progress as dialectical, or dialectic as progressive. At any stage the emancipatory thrust turns its gaze to itself, finding itself wanting according to its own standards. This spurs a move forward, in search of more accomplished realizations. In late modernity, however, this affirmative process seems to have turned vicious, in the sense of a self-undermining, rather than enhancing, dynamic. Examples are aplenty. Financial

derivatives undermine the logic of insurance on which they build, expanding, rather than reducing, risks and uncertainties (LiPuma and Lee, 2005). The capacity to manage enormous volumes of data increases, rather than decrease, the irrationality of decisions, behind the apparent objectivity of algorithms (Amoore and Piotukh, 2015). Geoengineering engenders more climate turbulence and uncertainty than it is able to reduce (Macnaghten and Szerszynski, 2013). And what Blühdorn (2017) calls ‘second order emancipation’ – growing disaffection with the reciprocal obligations that tie together the modern polity, seen as obstructive to relentless self-realisation – undermines its own grounds, the democratic state’s balance of rights and duties being premised on any aspiration to further achievements.

In addressing the issue one can distinguish its full-fledged expression from its beginnings and underpinnings. The latter, I will argue, reside in a certain understanding of the human agent, while the beginnings can be located around 1970, when the crisis of Fordist industrialism, the welfare state and political representation overlaps with mounting fears of energy scarcity and environmental threats and with the rise of ontologies of disorder and unpredictability, questioning the materially orderly and socially meaningful progress of reality presupposed by the narrative of emancipation, as especially emphasised during the *Trente Glorieuses* (Walker and Cooper, 2011; Nelson, 2015). Early evidence of the vicious turn of the dialectic of emancipation actually comes from the immediate reaction to the socio-ecological crisis – environmentalism. Its emergence coincides with the rise of a generation which could indulge in ‘post-materialist’ preoccupations thanks to an affluence that contradicted such very concerns, and which few were actually ready to give up.<sup>1</sup> The same contradiction is today at the basis of what Brand and Wissen (2018) call the ‘imperial mode of living’ (IML): the enduring attractiveness of western lifestyles, a worldwide consensus over the capitalist production and consumption model in spite of its unsustainability being increasingly acknowledged. This is not to say that *any* aspect of modern emancipation has a material counterpart. Freedom and equality may increase without a direct effect on resource and energy extraction, or waste production – think for example of family relations, democratic inclusion or access to information. Yet it can hardly be contested that, so far at least, the end result has been precisely this. Whatever its goods and bads (Fraser, 2016), the shift from the Fordist to the post-Fordist family structure (breadwinner/housekeeper vs. double income) has entailed an increase in consumption, from intensified urban mobility to increased use of industrially processed food. More political inclusion implies more demands to be accommodated, to which the straightforward response is by way of expansive policies. And as for information, its dematerialisation is proving largely illusory, given the resource and energy needs of ICTs and their rebound effects.

More in general, despite ecomodernists’ claims about ongoing or upcoming technological decoupling of society from its biophysical basis (Breakthrough Institute, 2015), any increase in energy and resource efficiency is regularly overwhelmed by depletion somewhere else in the ecosystem, the hype surrounding circular economy sounding suspect – performances are still modest (Haas et al., 2015) and prospects are more about business expansion than decisive results, not least because ‘economic processes employ “low-entropy” raw materials and discard “high-entropy” waste materials’ (Genovese and Pansera, 2020: 3). The vicious environmental dynamic of modernisation is denied by its capitalist (Breakthrough Institute, 2015) and anti-capitalist (Srniczek and Williams, 2015) supporters. Yet, it can hardly be contested that, more than just being its flip side, the ecological crisis increasingly undermines

---

<sup>1</sup> As an enduring, worldwide explanation of ecological mobilisations the post-materialist thesis has been contested (Meyer, 2015; Schlosberg, 2019). However, as an explanation of the rise of environmentalism in affluent countries between the 1960s and 1970s it ostensibly holds validity.

emancipation, impacting first and foremost on ‘disadvantaged’ people and locales, then, in an uneven but steady thrust, on any place and social condition. The Covid-19 emergency provides additional evidence of the close, intricate connection between the material and the immaterial aspects of emancipation – just think of how the limitations to mobility have reduced pollution yet increased dependence on privately owned IT platforms, differential access to the latter having exacerbated inequalities.

Thus, it is fair to say that, even though the modern emancipatory project was not concerned solely, or even primarily, with growth in material well-being, the increase in freedoms, rights, social and territorial mobility, education and welfare has gone hand in hand with an increase in societal tapping and sinking into the biophysical world. Is this inevitable? Is the rebound effect a curse or an indicator of a problem inherent in the modern project, for how it was born and has evolved? In the following, I explore a line of inquiry based on the notion of form of life.

I start with reflecting on how post-Fordism endeavoured to circumvent the threat of the limits to growth, without preventing it from resurfacing time and again, up to the most recent crisis, growing aspirations being confronted with increasing awareness of their unattainability. The grounds of the ‘exercises in simulation’ (Blühdorn, 2017) by which this contradiction is made bearable are argued to reside in an account of the human as ontologically indeterminate, hence both vulnerable and modest *and* powerful and arrogant. Such ambivalence affects social theory, undermining the capacity of conceiving an actual alternative to the IML. Evidence comes from post-humanism, degrowth and lifestyle politics. I contrast the latter with the notion of form-of-life, elaborating on Agamben’s take on the concept (which entails the hyphenation). If lifestyle means a being dependent on doing, with consequent vulnerability to the commodity system, form-of-life means a doing tailored to being. A being, however, that cannot be conceived (as Agamben does) as a self-enclosed monad, but as the result of the encounter between own ‘inclination’ and the world. This theoretical perspective discloses a research program which is outlined in the concluding section.

### **Emancipation and the ecological crisis**

Given the ontological and methodological grounds of the modern emancipatory project, it is hardly surprising that the socio-ecological crisis of the early 1970s produced a shock, testified by the disconcerted or angry reactions to the *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al., 1972). With the exception of radical ecologists and a handful of ecological economists (Georgescu-Roegen, Daly, etc.), the call for a drastic slowdown of economies was perceived as an attack on the emancipatory promise of modernisation. Significantly, the post-Fordist regime of accumulation that emerged from the crisis built on integrating the critique of the Fordist regime raised by social movements and intellectuals (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Their case for freedom, autonomy and creativity against hierarchy, planning and standardisation contained elements for a different understanding of individual flourishing and socio-material relations (Marcuse, 1964). Yet, the translation of such case into flexibility, networking, entrepreneurialism and permanent education was met with increasingly feeble complaints, as if the drive to growth as fundamental to emancipation took precedence over any urge to rethinking the meaning and forms of the latter. By placing at its centre competitive innovation, hence ever-growing resource efficiency, post-Fordism managed to transform the case for the limits to growth into a case for the growth of limits. With the promised increase in technical efficiency the finiteness of planetary resources receded into the horizon. Years after *The Limits to Growth*, and with post-Fordism steaming ahead, Habermas could reiterate, in a harsh critique of Adorno, that ‘it is obvious that for the sake of removing socially

unnecessary repression we cannot do without the exploitation of external nature necessary for life. The concept of a categorically different science and technology is as empty as the idea of reconciliation [with nature] is groundless' (Habermas, 1983: 108). In this account the dialectic of emancipation builds *by necessity* on a non-dialectical relation with the non-human world.

The ghost of the limits to growth, however, has continued to haunt global capitalism. It showed itself on the backdrop of repeated financial crises, monetary speculation being always readable as a result of limitations to the realisation of value through commodity production, to take a fuller figure in the phase inaugurated by the subprime crisis of 2008. Enduring financial, political and ecological turmoil has given the ghost a persistent, pervasive character, challenging the 'regime of the self' (Rose, 1998) that neoliberalism was able to establish – de-traditionalised (Giddens, 1990), liquid (Bauman, 1999), made of loose and contingent self-representations (Ferrara, 2009), committed to ever-rising goals of happiness, fulfilment and reward in a reality likewise depicted as fluid and contingent, hence actionable in full (Rose, 1998; O'Malley, 2010; Dardot and Laval, 2014; Anonymised). The clash between growing expectations in every department of individual and social life and mounting perceptions of shrinking possibilities of achievement – a pending 'involuntary degrowth' (Bonaiuti, 2018) – could not be other than dramatic.

The results are what Blühdorn describes as 'exercises in simulation'. The non-negotiability of an emancipatory thrust which is effectively fostering unsustainability is made psychologically and socially bearable by means of narratives of hope and related 'arenas for social practices in which the commitment to values of ecological integrity and social equality can be articulated and experienced without the values, achievements and further trajectory of second-order emancipation coming under threat' (Blühdorn, 2017: 54). This involves broad segments of the affluent North and extends to the global South, as the self-reinforcing character of the IML depends not only on the consistency between production and consumption modes and institutionalised forms of regulation, but on pervasive everyday practices and cultural patterns.

### **The ambivalence of human potentiality**

Is there any way out of this impasse? Let's get back to the modern notion of individual agent. The reflexivity of the emancipatory project couldn't but invest also this entity. If individual means non-divided or non-divisible, imperviousness to attack and dismemberment, emancipation means intensification of individuality, liberation from fixed identities, unmodifiable features. This emancipated agent, whose profile transpires from the neoliberal regime of the self, may be akin to a pure will yet it is anything but a disembodied mind. Its underpinnings do not lie in Descartes but in a later ontology of the human. The western tradition, from Aristotle to Hobbes, regarded the state of nature, or human animality, as a counterfactual backdrop against which loomed history. Yet, the interrogation of human biological features has later become crucial to addressing political life, as with Marx's notion of labour. The separation of natural history and human history increasingly appears untenable, and inadequate to accounting for a power ever-more committed to the government of the living (Foucault, 2007a). Pivotal to this outlook is a description of human nature as marked by a dearth of specialisation, a lack of innate orientations, a peculiar biological indeterminacy. From early twentieth-century philosophical anthropology to Heidegger, from Deleuze to the debate over the historical meaning of the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2009), elaborations on this trope are countless. Such a description has an important implication. If the human is the animal with no predetermined task and milieu, then it *can* do everything but

*has not* to do anything. One can properly do only if one can *not* do (Agamben, 2011), actual potentiality presupposing and keeping within itself its negative side, *impotentiality*, as an always available option. However, modernity only got eyes for the positive side of potentiality. For Hegel, the becoming subject of the human entails separating from its animal part, struggling and working to transform nature into its world. Likewise, for Marx, human labour is the driver of humanity's self-creation, a process whereby first nature, to which humans belong, is objectified to be progressively transformed into a technical, socialised second nature; a claim to which ecomodernists, though hardly sympathising with Marx, whole-heartedly subscribe.

Reclaiming the relevance of the negative human capacity, the ability to leave potentials unrealised, to avoid harnessing oneself and the world to the bottom, is not a straightforward affair for at least two reasons. First, according to the received wisdom about emancipation such route corresponds to idleness, laziness, acceptance of power, injustice and inequality as they are. Negative potential, in other words, is equated to *negation* of potential. The modern is an ontology of operativity,<sup>2</sup> implying a politics of imposing and instituting that finds dangerous, unacceptable or pointless a politics of deposing and de-instituting (Newman, 2016; Tomba, 2019). Second, in the notion of potentiality lies an insidious ambivalence. Indeterminacy can be interpreted both in terms of lack, inner void or division, but also in terms of abundance, proliferation, inexhaustible flow of energy. A decentred, unspecialised, insubstantial subject can manifest itself as powerless, vulnerable, humble, open to being affected and effected by the world, hence caring about it. Yet, for the *same* reason, this subject can manifest itself as powerful, careless, arrogant, committed to endless self-enhancing. Not by chance has Deleuze been regarded as both a prominent exponent of post-foundational critiques of power (Marchart, 2007) and the ideologist of late capitalism (Žižek, 2004).

This ambivalence is reflected in social theory's attack on humanism. Against the latter's dualist ontology (mind/body, matter/language, masculine/feminine, active/passive, organic/inorganic, nature/culture) a case has been ever-more insistently made in recent years for agency as unrestricted, free-flowing, irrepressible in both the descriptive and the normative sense of the word, and possessed by humans and non-humans alike (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010). Such an account of agency, however, reproduces in an intensified way the traits of the modern individual, in turn a figuration of the humanist ontology. Anti- or post-humanist critique, therefore, does not follow the route of departing from this figuration, but of extending it to the non-human realm. The result is puzzling. On one side, appeals are made to the caring, affective orientation towards the world implied by the acknowledgment of a diffused agency (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). On the other, when identified with a 'geopower' comprised of physical and biological processes such as climate dynamics or viral and bacterial diffusion, such agency appears endowed with the traits of sovereign political power, or market dynamics – overarching, indifferent, unwarranted (Grosz, 2011; Povinelli, 2016). Above all, the political recipe drawn from the 'intrusion of Gaia' in human affairs (Latour, 2017; Stengers, 2017) resonates with well-known neoliberal mantras – preparedness and resilience, trial and error, flexibility and 'ongoing creative experimentation' (Clark and Yusoff, 2017: 18). Likewise, one is hard-pressed to say precisely in what the case for human enhancement according to a 'liberal eugenics' rationale (entrepreneurialism, market allocation, 'free choice': cf. e.g. Agar 2004) differs from the case

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Agamben (2013a), the origins of this ontology lie in Christian Trinitarian doctrine, which split creation and economy (administration) of life and consigned the historical world to the latter, leading to a conception of being as contingent on the effects it produces.

for the post-human as anti-capitalist overcoming of fixed identities and dominative binaries (Braidotti, 2013). Where, for example, lies the difference between a capitalist or anti-capitalist development of advanced prosthetics or reproductive technologies?

Current degrowth theory raises similar issues. The original case for degrowth built on the assumption that ‘the cost of any biological or economic enterprise is always greater than the product’ (Georgescu-Roegen, [1970]2011: 52). The call was for stopping growth, downsizing material/energy throughput. Second generation scholars, however, have given the argument a considerable twist. Drawing on Bataille’s theory of *dépense*, physical constraints are now deemed of secondary relevance. For Bataille (1988), scarcity is an invention of bourgeois economy, obscuring how in the economy of the planet there is always an excess of energy available, ultimately coming from the sun. Echoing him, the claim is that, though we live in a world of abundance, the backdrop of generalised, endless scarcity engendered by capitalist relations and culture spurs a limitless increase in value extraction and accumulation. The task, therefore, is to hollow out surplus, wasting it in unproductive uses (Romano, 2019); to do things that ‘burn capital out and take it out of the sphere of circulation, slowing it down’, for example by ‘spending in a collective feast, [...] subsidis[ing] a class of spirituals to talk about philosophy or leav[ing] a forest idle’ (D’Alisa et al., 2015: 217). Such ‘occasional release’ (Kallis, 2019: 116) of energy is to be counterpointed by everyday sobriety, a politics of self-limitation; a combination deemed less unlikely than it may seem, as ‘it is when we truly believe that the world is abundant that we will limit ourselves [according to] the type of world we want to create and pass to our children’ (Kallis, 2019: 119).

In this way both the positive and the negative side of potentiality seem to gain room. Yet, is this really the case? In the framework of *dépense*-cum-limitation consumption appears at once the problem and the solution, as unproductive waste or in the reverse version of self-restraint. However, can one tackle growth by drawing on its very imaginary? More to the point, can one tackle the IML while leaving unchallenged the regime of the self on which it builds? In the argument above, overeating is deemed dependent on perceived scarcity, and healthy eating on perceived abundance. Yet, this connection is hardly a social invariant. Non-modern cultures have linked sobriety with scarcity, up to devising ritualised controls of hunger to protect community from collapse; or have developed what westerners interpret as a balanced relation with their milieu thanks to an account of agency as distributed among humans and nonhumans yet hardly insubstantial and free-flowing – quite the opposite, actually, at least if one thinks of Amerindian cosmologies. These are ontologically thicker, not thinner, than western tradition: they do not conceive of one world populated by free-flowing, contingently embodied beings, but of different worlds pertaining to different types of beings (Viveiros de Castro, 2009). In short, not only the combination but the very ideas of *dépense* and self-restraint make sense only according to the modern notion of agency, world, and unrestricted choice. The simultaneous spread in our societies of starving and bulimia, anorexia and obesity, is a dramatic expression of the vicious dialectic engendered by this notion.

### **From lifestyle to form of life**

To recap, we find in current theoretical discussions relevant to a critique of the IML an ambivalent relation with the modern account of the self and its one-sided declension of potentiality, the negative side of which is either rejected or neutralised by drawing it to a matter of sovereign choice. This undermines the search for an alternative to ‘exercises in simulation’. Additional evidence is offered by the debate over lifestyle politics.

The latter is defined as the use of one's 'private life sphere to take responsibility for the allocation of common values and resources' (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013: 41); making choices concerning 'dress, diet, housing, leisure activities, and more' (Portwood-Stacer, 2013: 4), whenever such choices are regarded as sites of political expression and activism. The term circulates since at least the late 1970s (Bookchin, 1979). One of its main strategies, boycott, dates back at least to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, and the anarchist tradition has consistently fostered a micro-politics of change at individual and interpersonal level (Graeber, 2009; Portwood-Stacer, 2017). So, lifestyle politics is hardly entirely new. Yet, there is no denying its rise in relevance. Scholars generally account for that as a result of the crisis of political institutions and traditional forms of participation, and of governmental unresponsiveness to emergent needs and values (Della Porta, 2013). Some focus on political consumerism for its broad diffusion. Political action, they stress, is ever-more passing through individual behavioural choices, mediated by the market (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). Of no lesser relevance, for others, are collective initiatives like urban gardening or alternative food networks (de Moor, 2017). Still others claim that lifestyle politics should not be confused with other ways of doing politics through everyday practices, and namely with a new 'sustainable materialism' characterised by the collective and prefigurative<sup>3</sup> character of action and its radical political motivation – not just exerting pressures on capitalist flows but disentangling from them and reconfiguring socio-material relations (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016; Schlosberg, 2019).

This distinction is relevant to understanding whether an alternative to the IML and simulation exercises may actually exist. However, the difference can hardly lie in the type of activity carried out, as among 'new materialist' mobilisations are included initiatives, such as farmers' markets, alternative food networks, Transition Towns, urban gardening, community energy and various mutual aid arrangements, which others assign to lifestyle politics. Additionally, these initiatives are targeted with criticisms concerning their failure in exerting significant pressures on existing arrangements, or even the risk – sometimes perceived by activists themselves (Naegler, 2018) – of perverse effects, with efforts to disentangle oneself from capitalist relations producing new market niches (Mouffe, 2013; Bauwens and Pantazis, 2018; Bosi and Zamponi, 2019). In short, if any difference is to be found within everyday activism according to the capacity to challenge the IML, one should likely look not at *what* people do but *how* they do it.

The notion of form of life may put us on the right track. This notion takes different meanings according to its users; hence it is important to select and elaborate on a suitable one. A famous user is Wittgenstein. Though he does not provide a precise definition of form of life, he regards the concept as crucial to understanding how statements get meaning within language games, the discursive and non-discursive practices occurring in a certain social milieu. Wittgenstein does not invent the term from scratch. The notion of *Lebensform* had emerged in the German speaking context in the early nineteenth century and by the early twentieth century was diffused with both a biological and a cultural meaning. The latter refers to 'style of life' in the sense of the regularities of social, everyday life and, by extension, a

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Prefigurative politics' has been defined as a type of political action aimed at realising the desired future in the here and now, through means 'deemed to embody or "mirror" the ends one strives to realise' (Van de Sande, 2013: 230).

culture or world-view (Saidel, 2014). This, for example, is the way Oswald Spengler applies the expression in *The Decline of the West*.<sup>4</sup>

Such an account is echoed in the philosopher Rahel Jaeggi's recent elaboration. For her, form of life means 'attitudes and habitualized modes of conduct with a normative character that concern the collective conduct of life, although [...] neither strictly codified nor institutionally binding' (Jaeggi, 2018: 64). This definition puts the emphasis on collective routines and expectations based on widely shared goals or goods. This pragmatist account is then framed in a Hegelian view of history. Forms of life, Jaeggi claims, are ways of addressing collective issues as these take shape within ruling arrangements. Inefficiencies foster changes, which cannot but move from the existent. Thus, forms of life are historically located answers to historically emergent problems, in their turn criticisable for their inadequacies and contradictions.

A difficulty with this understanding of the notion of form of life is that its added value compared with others such as culture, world-view, historical formation, institution, socio-technical system – or lifestyle – is unclear. To pre-empt such objection Jaeggi develops subtle conceptual distinctions. However, in a dialogue with Nancy Fraser, she acknowledges the affinity between the latter's notion of capitalism as an 'institutionalised social order' and her own notion of capitalism as form of life (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). There is also a difficulty with Jaeggi's pragmatist outlook on the dialectical proceeding of history. The shift from 'problem-situations' – perceived inefficiencies of daily routines – to 'problem-framing' issues – struggles over what constitutes a problem, why it has or has not priority over others, and which types of answers are deemed reasonable to discuss (Foucault, 2007b) – is anything but straightforward. Jaeggi connects them by way of a classic idea of progress as growing efficiency in addressing questions, as these appear on the scene. However, social inefficiencies and efficiencies are often hardly self-evident, or neatly separable. For example, the vast increase in mobility enabled by fossil energy has enhanced individual autonomy, cross-cultural acquaintance and economic integration but also pollution, resource depletion and social exploitation. Furthermore, the problem with the IML is not that its downsides are denied, but that it persists in spite of these being increasingly acknowledged. Growing concentration of wealth in a framework of global economic decline, mass migrations, climate turbulences and insurgent pandemics are indicators of the dramatic drawbacks of late capitalism. Why is it that nothing seems enough to engender transformation? Where should one look for signs of its beginning? A quasi-functionalist account of form of life seems hardly helpful in addressing these questions.<sup>5</sup>

Another take on the concept is perhaps more promising. For Agamben, form-of-life (the hyphenation conveys the meaning) is 'a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life' (Agamben, 2000: 3–4); a life 'linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it' (Agamben, 2013b: xi). Behind this definition lies a complex elaboration, which here cannot be accounted for in detail, originating in Walter Benjamin's distinction between 'mere life' (*bloßes Leben*) and 'just existence' (*gerechtes Dasein*). Benjamin (1996) claims that violence and oppression

---

<sup>4</sup> The regularity of everyday practices depends not only on cultural patterns but also on material constraints. These increasingly stem from technical arrangements. Hence, socio-technical entanglements have also been labelled as forms of life (Winner, 1986; Papadopoulos, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> For critical appraisals of Jaeggi's theory cf. Allen and Mendieta (2018).



build on their unwarranted separation.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, for Agamben (1998), the fundamental operation of power in western history is the isolation of the biological element of human life from the cultural or political one, and its instrumentalisation to the latter – an operation which, in fact, transpires from how modernity has come to make emancipation dependent on material growth, power hinging on its ever-relaunched promise.

Poignant examples of what Agamben means by form-of-life come from monastic rules, and namely Franciscanism. The rule established by Francis was simple: take the life of Jesus as the paradigm for your life. Just imitate Jesus. As the rule addresses the whole existence of the Friars, all actions, thoughts and behaviours, then their whole life should coincide with this form. Middle-age debates over monastic rules drew a distinction between promising and acting according to the rule ‘from the moment of [the novice’s] conversion and in his form-of-life’ (Agamben, 2013b: 55). So, the poverty (=imitation of Jesus) to which Francis called the Friars is not a liturgy, an ensemble of gestures aimed at producing a certain result, but the attempt to make life and poverty one and the same thing. Thus, Francis could hardly expect that the rule produced its result like a magic spell. Rather, the monk would start following it, trying to improve step by step. Yet, if the rule produced its effects, at some point the monk would not be following it anymore; he would rather embody the rule – in full, with no remainder. He would start trying *to be by doing* but come to be *doing just what he is*. He would begin, we can say, with a lifestyle but end up with a form-of-life.

The latter’s peculiarity is therefore expressed by the relation it establishes between being and doing, which is opposite to the western tradition. In both the case of lifestyle and form-of-life a way of conducting oneself is meant to convey a way of being. Yet, if in order to be you have to do, this makes you vulnerable to capital’s operation. No matter how frugal, local, cheap or homemade your way of living is, the commodity frontier will move on to include it. You aim at a political gesture, but end up with a subculture, an innocuous play of distinctions. And, as you practice increasingly ‘alternative’ lifestyles searching for a difference that makes the difference, the commodity system will chase you with further diversifications, subtler forms of capture. If commodification is capitalism’s way of expanding and engulfing its adversaries, late capitalism has become ‘a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means’ (Agamben, 2007: 87) in the glowing web of communication. This increasingly undermines the ability of language and the material symbolism of things and the body to disclose an otherwise.

Yet, if in order to do you have to be, or, better, if doing fits being like a glove, then capture is hardly possible, as there is no form or style which, so to say, stands by itself, waiting for being worn. But what does it mean *to do what one is*? All depends on how we conceive of being. There are two risks here. One, admittedly quite theoretical in the historical condition of ‘second order emancipation’, is of revamping the western traditional ‘thick’ account of the self – the original source of socio-ecological problems. The other, more actual, is of restating in a disguised way the ‘thin’, free-flowing ontology of the subject that late capitalism shares with many of its critics. Consider how Agamben details his account of form-of-life.

---

<sup>6</sup> In Benjamin’s words, ‘The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life. [...] Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, any more than it can be said to coincide with any other of his conditions and qualities, including even the uniqueness of his bodily person’ (Benjamin, 1996: 251).

He claims that ‘every body is affected by its form-of-life as by a *clinamen* or a taste’ (Agamben, 2016: 231).<sup>7</sup> Form-of-life, therefore, is an ‘inclination’, a driving trait which, as such, one cannot properly choose but only recognise. Hence, it implies both the positive and the negative side of potentiality, as revealed in those moments when one says: *I cannot do otherwise*.

Realising this blind-spot of actionability and seconding the pathway it indicates paradoxically corresponds to a peak in freedom, as in doing what one cannot but do one is true only to oneself, and nothing else. If monastic rule is emblematic of form-of-life, it is because it presupposes a calling, responding to which is at once the freest action and the farthest from the ‘sovereignty’ of the consumer who selects among a palette of equivalents.

However, Agamben also depicts form-of-life as an impenetrable monad: a ‘living of its own mode of being [...] [which] communicates with the others [only] insofar as it represents them in itself, as in a living mirror’ (Agamben, 2016: 232). Here resurfaces the late modern hyper-agential subject, who apprehends and addresses the world only on its own terms. Yet, can such a monad exist outside philosophical speculations – or ecomodernist power trips? The *clinamen* of a being has rather to be seen as resulting from the encounter with other beings, human and non-human, which affect and effect one another. This is not only a more realistic account of form-of-life but also the only capable of theoretically grounding the humble, caring, restrained attitude for which many scholars plead, effectively challenging the IML.

Elements for strengthening and detailing such an account can be found in a variety of authors. For example, the late Foucault, committed to excavating non-modern technologies of the self, conceived of freedom as a certain relation with oneself *and* with the world (Iofrida and Melegari, 2017; Missiroli, 2019); a self-styling crucially linked to the affections and effections exerted on, and received from, the latter. And Adorno (e.g. 2002), drawing on Benjamin,<sup>8</sup> insisted on the idea of humans’ reconciliation with nature, as neither a celebration nor a rejection of labour and technology, neither an opposition nor a reduction of the human to its biological element, but as the recognition that humans’ position of ‘first among equals’ – in the sense of the encompassing outlook enabled by the dialectic of theory and praxis, concept and action – gives them the task of helping nature to redeem itself from the condition of sufferance and injustice which they had sought to escape by way of civilisation and technology. If socio-ecological turmoil leaves any room for reformulating the modern emancipatory project, these are arguably the coordinates to follow.

### **Conclusion: for a politics of forms-of-life**

In this paper I made a case for an account of emancipation that departs from the received wisdom of modernity, in both its original and later, ‘thick’ and ‘thin’, account of subjectivity. We have seen that pointing to self-limitation and more in general to lifestyle politics is unlikely to effectively challenge the vicious turn of emancipation. The interest of the notion of form-of-life – for how I sought to develop it, building (up to a point) on Agamben – lies in

---

<sup>7</sup> As synonymous to *clinamen*, taste here has little to do with lifestyle, despite some commentator’s opinion (Prozorov, 2017). One can choose a lifestyle, but one cannot choose a taste.

<sup>8</sup> I am referring especially to the XI of the *Theses On the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin, 2019) and various passages of the *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 2002), where Benjamin stresses how human and non-human domination and exploitation are two sides of a same (capitalist) coin, leading to a corrupted conception of labour and a regressive type of technological progress, overcoming which will make it possible to develop a friendly relationship with the world – a kind of labour or technology ‘which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials’ (Benjamin, 2019: 203).

its distancing from an account of the self as fully sovereign of itself, capable of self-styling according to the desired way of being, in so doing opening avenues to the operations of power. Form-of-life means letting form fit being, according to the latter's 'inclination', as affected and effected by its meeting with the world. Such is the dialectic of emancipation suitable to our time.

This dialectic has an Adornian flavour. The 'negativistic' leaning that Blühdorn, Butzlaff and other contributors to this issue identify in current emancipatory thrusts is in Adorno's terms actually affirmative. It reproduces the modern drive to 'resolve' the disharmony of the world by drawing it to oneself, refashioning reality to one's image. Likewise Agamben, in his account of form-of-life as a monad whose capacity of doing or not doing is entirely in its hands and whose ultimate goal is self-appeasement, leans towards affirmativeness, of a desubstantialised, nihilist, sort, while subscribing to the anti-dialectical stance (the purely differential character of reality) one meets in much post-foundational thinking. For Adorno, instead, not only the struggle against domination cannot but be dialectical, but such dialectic builds on the constitutive friction of thought and things; of being with itself.

An account of emancipation in these terms no doubt needs further elaboration. Theoretical improvement and empirical testing should go hand in hand. One may consider, for a start, those cases where people tackle deadly dangers with no personal gain, just because they acknowledge they 'cannot do otherwise'. An inspiring example comes from rescuers of Jews from Nazis, researching on which has led to exclude not only any meaningful application of a rational choice framework, in terms of hidden interests, but also any oversized ego. For many, if not all, rescuers action stemmed from acknowledgment, often with genuine surprise, of a *clinamen* which they had to second to let their own form-of-life live on; a calling often reported as 'perception of the self as part of a common humanity' (Monroe et al., 1990: 117). Of no lesser significance, and indicative that the *clinamen* may point to more-than-human commonalities, are those activists who, again with no personal benefit, risk and in astonishing numbers lose their lives to defend land, ecosystems and indigenous groups against aggressive extractivism (Global Witness, 2019).<sup>9</sup>

Then, downscaled in drama (sometimes not so much), there is the terrain of everyday activism. I have argued that this may challenge the IML not according to the activity carried out, but how it is carried out; whether it shows indications of estrangement from the domain of the sovereign individual. We have seen that 'new materialist' mobilisations seek to establish at once different human and more-than-human relations, as if this double register of affection and effectation helped in building an alternative to the willing, choosing self. It is therefore in this field that one may expect to find significant attempts at a politics of forms-of-life. Among the examples worthy of attention are those experiences, such as permaculture, participatory plant breeding, 'just price' and other 'alternative value practices' (Centemeri, 2018),<sup>10</sup> that challenge the dominant grammar of goals, values and relations, replacing cost-effectiveness with the accommodation of a plurality of human and other-than-human

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, selfishness or greed is also a *clinamen* which however affects and effects the world without searching for, or opening to, reciprocity; and reciprocity is key to a recovery from socio-ecological devastations. Similarly, religious faith and political ideology can lead to tolerance or intolerance, dialogue or violence. Distinguishing between 'inclinations' is the task of the immanent critique Foucault (2007b) advocated.

<sup>10</sup> Permaculture is a well-known approach to subsistence agriculture as an integrated socio-ecological system. Less known is participatory plant breeding, where researchers and farmers collaborate in adapting varieties to local ecosystems, rather than the opposite. An example of just price practices is when buyers pay beforehand farmers a sum to support their work, in return for an agreed amount of product – or even variable, depending on harvest results.

standpoints, entanglements, orders of worth and efficiency criteria. Also land occupations, like the one against the Notre-Dame-de-Lande (Nantes) airport project, can be read through the conceptual lens of forms-of-life (Bulle, 2018), as they create *zones à défendre*, that is ‘places apart’ where everyday life is emancipated from the surrounding order based on proprietary relations with people and things (Rancière, 2017). Also worthy of consideration are failed but stubbornly resilient attempts faced with violent state reaction, such as those of Val Susa (Turin) residents against a high-speed railway project whose realisation proceeds despite official acknowledgments of its inconsistency (Chiroli, 2017).

These are clues to a research program. It is reasonable to expect that only a minor part of new materialist mobilisations is actually enacting a politics of forms-of-life, away from drives to self-sufficiency and free-flowing differentiation. Also, we have seen that form-of-life has to be understood as a process, a becoming, with its pauses, doubts, detours, setbacks, failures, all of which are worthy of investigation. The monk, we have reflected, responds to the calling by adopting a lifestyle, following a rule before properly embodying it. It is not unreasonable to think that something similar may happen with fearless ecologists, or squatters, or anyone who let their lives follow their inclination, imparting maybe a small turn, but a decisive one.<sup>11</sup> Rethinking the dialectic of emancipation in this key invites to search, in emergent social formations, the signs of a conversion towards a just life.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments to earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to the organizers and participants in the workshop ‘The dialectic of emancipation: transgressing boundaries and the boundaries of transgression’, WU Vienna, Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN), 14-15 November 2019, where the first draft was presented, for the wonderful conditions of intellectual exchange and friendly relationship they managed to create.

### **References**

- Adorno TW (2002) *Aesthetic Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Agamben G (1993) *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agamben G (1998) *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2000) *Means Without End*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agamben G (2007) In Praise of Profanation. In: Agamben G (ed) *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books, pp.73–92.
- Agamben G (2011) On What We Can Not Do. In: Agamben G (ed) *Nudities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp.43–45.
- Agamben G (2013a) *Opus Dei*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2013b) *The Highest Poverty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2016) *The Use of Bodies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agar N (2004) *Liberal Eugenics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

---

<sup>11</sup> It bears significance, in this respect, what Agamben says about a tale from the Hasidic tradition told by Benjamin to Ernst Bloch. According to such tale, in the world to come, everything ‘will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be just as it is now, just a little different’ (Agamben, 1993: 53).

- Allen A and Mendieta E (eds) (2018) *From Alienation to Forms of Life: The Critical Theory of Rahel Jaeggi*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Amore L and Piotukh V (2015) Life beyond big data: governing with little analytics. *Economy and Society* 44(3): 341–366.
- Bataille G (1988) *The Accursed Share, Volume I*. New York: Zone Books.
- Bauman Z (1999) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauwens M and Pantazis A (2018) The ecosystem of commons-based peer production and its transformative dynamics. *Sociological Review Monographs* 66(2): 302–319.
- Benjamin W (1996) Critique of violence. In: *Selected Writings, Volume I*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, pp.236–252.
- Benjamin W (2002) *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Benjamin W (2019), Theses of the philosophy of history. In: *Illuminations*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, pp.196–209.
- Bennett J (2010) *Vibrant Matter*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Blühdorn I (2017) Post-capitalism, post-growth, post-consumerism? Eco-political hopes beyond sustainability. *Global Discourse* 7(1): 42–61.
- Boltanski L and Chiapello E (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Bonaiuti M (2018) Are we entering the age of involuntary degrowth? Promethean technologies and declining returns of innovation. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197(2): 1800–1809.
- Bookchin M (1979) Post-scarcity anarchism. In: Perlin TM (ed) *Contemporary Anarchism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, pp.257–272.
- Bosi L and Zamponi L (2019) *Resistere alla crisi*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Braidotti R (2013) *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Brand U and Wissen M (2018) *The Limits to Capitalist Nature*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Breakthrough Institute (2015) *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*. Available at: <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto> (accessed 21 September 2020).
- Bulle S (2018) Formes de vie, milieux de vie. La forme-occupation. *Multitudes* 71: 168–175.
- Centemeri L (2018) Commons and the new environmentalism of everyday life. Alternative value practices and multispecies commoning in the permaculture movement. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* 59(2): 289–313.
- Chakrabarty D (2009) The climate of history: four theses. *Critical Inquiry* 35(2): 197–222.
- Chiroli R (2017) *Ora e sempre No Tav*. Milano: Angeli.
- Clark N and Yusoff K (2017) Geosocial formations and the Anthropocene. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34(2–3): 3–23.
- Coole D and Frost S (eds) (2010) *New Materialisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- D’Alisa G, Kallis G and Demaria F (2015). From austerity to *dépense*. In: D’Alisa G, Kallis G and Demaria F (eds) *Degrowth. A Vocabulary for a New Era*. London: Routledge, pp.215–220.
- Dardot P and Laval C (2014) *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.
- De Moor J (2017) Lifestyle politics and the concept of political participation, *Acta Politica* 52(2): 1–19.
- Della Porta D (2013) *Can Democracy Be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Ferrara A (2009) Authenticity without a true self. In: Vannini P and Williams P (eds) *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp.21–35.
- Foucault M (2007a) *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador.

- Foucault M (2007b) What is critique? In: *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), pp.44–82.
- Fraser N (2016) Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review* 100: 99–117.
- Fraser N and Jaeggi R (2018) *Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Genovese A and Pansera M (2020) The circular economy at a crossroads: technocratic eco-modernism or convivial technology for social revolution?. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. Epub ahead of print 18 May 2020. DOI: 10.1080/10455752.2020.1763414.
- Georgescu-Roegen, N ([1970]2011) The entropy law and the economic problem. In: Bonaiuti M (ed) *From Bioeconomics to Degrowth: Georgescu-Roegen's 'New Economics' in Eight Essays*. London: Routledge, pp.49–57.
- Giddens A (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Global Witness (2019) *Enemies of the State? How Governments and Business Silence Land and Environmental Defenders*. Available at: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/enemies-state/> (accessed 21 September 2020).
- Graeber D (2009) *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Grosz E (2011) *Becoming Undone*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Haas W, Heinz M, Krausmann F, et al. (2015) How circular is the global economy?. *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 19(5): 765–777.
- Habermas J (1983) Theodor Adorno: the primal history of subjectivity – Self-affirmation gone wild. In: Habermas J (ed) *Philosophical-Political Profiles*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.99–110.
- Habermas J (1996) Modernity: an unfinished project. In: Passerin d'Entrèves M and Benhabib S (eds) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.38–56.
- Iofrida M and Melegari D (2017) *Foucault*. Rome: Carocci.
- Jaeggi R (2018) *Critique of Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Kallis G (2019) *Limits*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Latour B (2017) *Facing Gaia*. Cambridge: Polity.
- LiPuma E and Lee B (2005) Financial derivatives and the rise of circulation. *Economy and Society* 34(3): 404–427.
- Macnaghten P and Szerszynski B (2013) Living the global social experiment: an analysis of public discourse on solar radiation management and its implications for governance. *Global Environmental Change* 23(2): 465–474.
- Marchart O (2007) *Post-Foundational Political Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Marcuse H (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*. London: Beacon.
- Mbembe A (2003) Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40.
- Meadows DH, Meadows DL, Randers J, et al. (1972) *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.
- Meyer J (2015) *Engaging the Everyday*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Missiroli P (2019) Soggetto e immanenza: sul 'vitalismo' di Foucault. In: Di Pierro M and Marchesi F (eds) *Almanacco di filosofia e politica I*. Macerata: Quodlibet, pp.203–216.
- Monroe K, Barton M and Klingemann U (1990) Altruism and the theory of rational action: rescuers of jews in Nazi Europe. *Ethics* 101(1): 103–122.
- Mouffe C (2013) *Agonistics*. London: Verso.
- Naegler L (2018) 'Goldman-Sachs doesn't care if you raise chicken': the challenges of resistant prefiguration. *Social Movement Studies* 17(5): 507–523.

- Nelson S (2015) Beyond the limits to growth: ecology and the neoliberal counterrevolution. *Antipode* 47(2): 461-480.
- Newman S (2016) *Postanarchism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- O'Malley P (2010) Resilient subjects: uncertainty, warfare and liberalism. *Economy and Society* 3(4): 488–509.
- Papadopoulos D (2018) *Experimental Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Portwood-Stacer L (2013) *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Portwood-Stacer L (2017) Micropolitics. In Frank B, Jun N and Williams L (eds) *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*. London: Routledge, pp.129–141.
- Povinelli E (2016) *Geontologies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Prozorov S (2017) Living à la mode: form-of-life and democratic biopolitics in Giorgio Agamben's *Use of Bodies*. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43(2): 144–163.
- Puig de la Bellacasa M (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière J (2017) *En quel temps vivons-nous?* Paris: Fabrique.
- Romano O (2019) *Towards a Society of Degrowth*. London: Routledge.
- Rose N (1998) *Inventing Our Selves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saidel ML (2014) Form(s)-of-life. Agamben's reading of Wittgenstein and the potential uses of a notion. *Trans/Form/Ação* 37(1): 163–186.
- Schlosberg D (2019) From postmaterialism to sustainable materialism: the environmental politics of practice-based movements. *Environmental Politics*. Epub ahead of print 8 March 2019. DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2019.1587215.
- Schlosberg D and Coles R (2016) The new environmentalism of everyday life: sustainability, material flows and movements. *Contemporary Political Theory* 15(2): 160–181.
- Srnicek N and Williams A (2015) *Inventing the Future*. London: Verso.
- Stengers I (2017) Autonomy and the intrusion of Gaia. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116(2): 381–400.
- Stolle D and Micheletti M (2013) *Political Consumerism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomba M (2019) *Insurgent Universality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van de Sande M (2013) The prefigurative politics of Tahrir square: an alternative perspective on the 2011 revolutions. *Res Publica* 19(3): 223–239.
- Viveiros de Castro E (2014) *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Minneapolis: Univocal.
- Walker J and Cooper M (2011) Genealogies of resilience. From systems ecology to the political economy of crisis adaptation. *Security Dialogue* 4(2): 143-160.
- Winner L (1986) *The Whale and the Reactor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Žižek S (2004) The ongoing soft revolution. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 292–323.