

THE MAURIN ACADEMY FOR REGENERATIVE STUDIES

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THE REGENERATIVE READER

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The Fullness of Catholic Worker Time? an Uneasy Essay by Spencer Hess

I recently read an old article from Catholic Worker Brian Terrell entitled, "Peter Maurin's Vision for the Catholic Worker, an Idea Whose Time has Come". He begins by noting how the farming side of the Catholic Worker movement has always been a sideshow to the running of soup lines and the protesting of warfare. That, "since its beginning in 1933, this aspect of its [co-founder, Peter Maurin's] original intentions was relegated to the margins of an already marginal movement."

This argument seems obviously true to me. As something of a Maurin-ite, I can't help but feel it a tragedy that the influence of Ammon Hennacy has been effectually far more influential on actually-existing Catholic Workers than that of Peter's.

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Ammon Hennacy

Intermountain Catholic



Peter Maurin

Marquette University Archive

But and so because I had previously identified Brian as a Worker more of the Hennacy-ite persuasion (granted many such people will say they're just genuine CWs following co-founder Dorothy Day's blessed example), I was somewhat surprised to hear him go on to articulate how, a.) important farming should be to the movement (For wouldn't a truly just society have to ultimately be founded on a radically different political-economy than the one we have now?), and b.) how, in spite of how he knows all this and how he and his wife run a farm, he struggles to do this very valuable work when he would really rather be off writing or protesting. To wit, "Some friends assume that my time on the farm is a respite from the stresses of activism, but the opposite is true. I love my home but often do not feel at rest there—the farm is the place where I feel most challenged and humbled and the city is where I go to escape."

What he's pointing to there is a profoundly important reality. He frames it as the angst of being torn between being a deracinated, over-intellectualized, cosmopolitan modern subject on one hand and yearning to be snugly embedded in an simple, organic, romantic traditional-natural order on the other. My experience finds it to be more about the bleak cognitive dissonance engaging in such activity reveals between the "nuts and bolts" of what you're actually materially accomplishing, and the type of institutions, community, and future you hope your labor is building up. It becomes increasingly hard to live in the gap between what is and what you want to be, especially when actually-existing reality is almost constantly raining (and sometimes hailing) on your parade towards paradise, you're always getting a little shorter of breath and one day closer to death, and there are ample means of escape to dissociate from being here now.

Terrel concludes his article by noting that if the CW Movement is ever to be “the dynamic revolutionary social force it was meant to be”, then perhaps the time has come for the farms to come into their own. He goes on: “If previous generations of Catholic Worker farms have measured in the end as ‘somewhat less than history,’ our efforts today must be of historic proportions, God help us, if we are to contribute to the continuation of life on earth.”

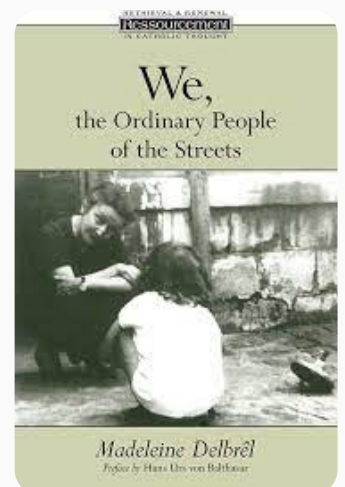
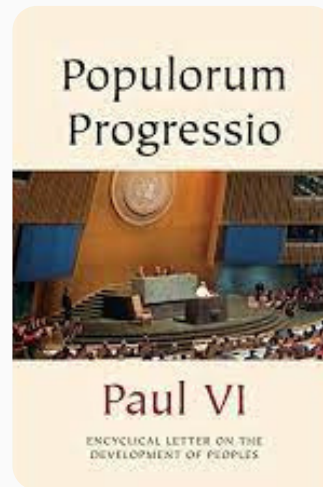
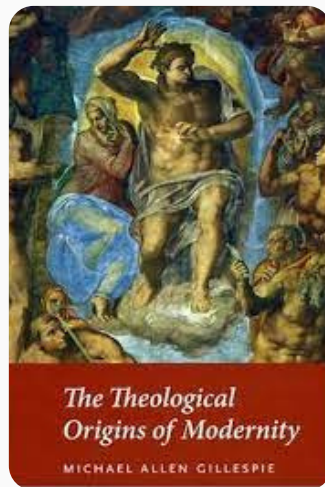
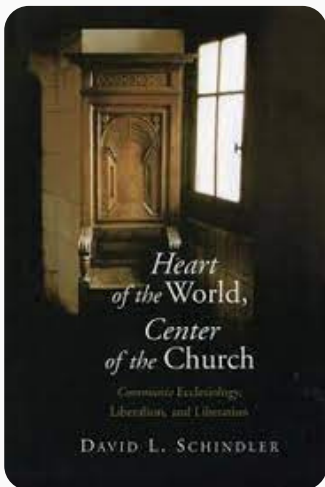
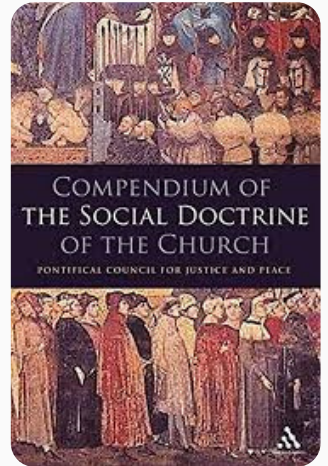
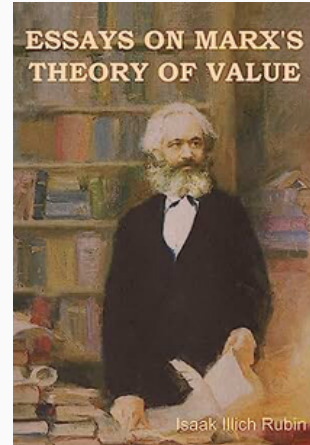
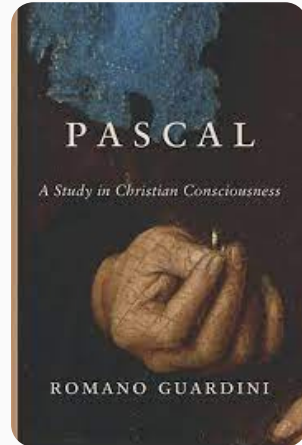
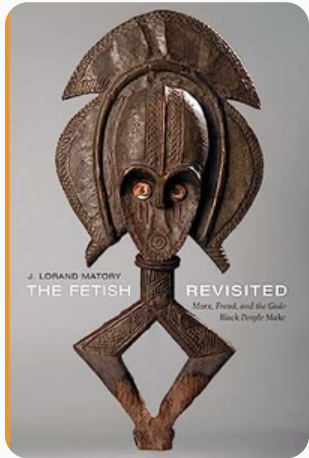
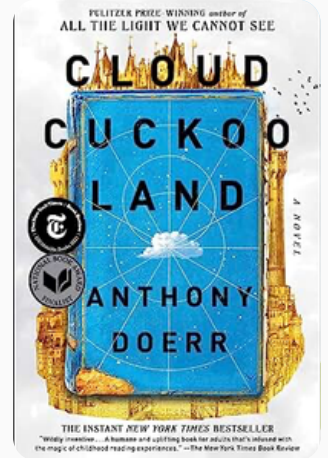
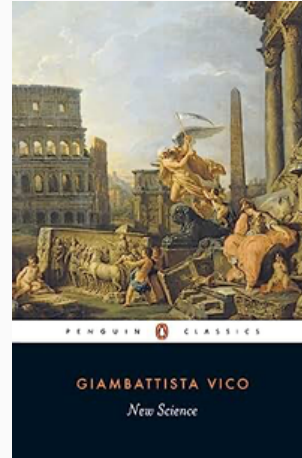
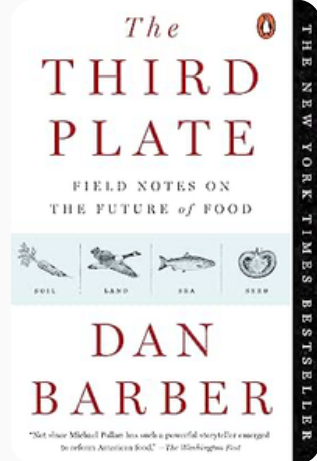


I agree with him, it's just that the problem(atic)—it seems to me—is the following: what if it's not mere coincidence that the same movement that has so successfully run houses of hospitality and published and protested so much for peace hasn't produced many successful community-farms? What are the chances it's even harder to return en masse to the land now as techno-feudal surveillance-capitalism tightens its shackles around us? What if the efforts of "historic" proportions required for a network of local farms to thrive would require (among many other things) compromising on some of the until now pre-supposed sacred tenets of Catholic Worker-hood? What if it would require a different type of Worker? And at this late, increasingly hot date, where are all the greatly needed winsome workers willing and ready to take up this crucial but incredibly challenging and humbling task, anyway?

Holus bolus: what are the chances the times aren't over-ripe and a farming renaissance well-nigh destined to be stillborn? And who and what army is going to even dare try to overcome these odds?

God help us indeed; cf. Jeremiah 12:5/Matthew 26:41/Luke 23:31.

What we've been Reading



A Homo sapiens tells a joke at a funeral...

MIRIAM DOMINGUEZ

*Q: Why would you think this irreverent biological organism is in fact Homo sapiens? Is it because:
a) the individual was engaged in a death rite for another individual, or
b) the individual possessed the ability to tell a joke in the first place.*

A: Not included in the footnotes.

As a catalyst for a brief discussion of two ways in which we, as a society, ponder what it means to be human, consider two recent events reported in the science and arts sections of major papers:

- On June 5 of 2023, paleoanthropologist Lee Berger and colleagues announced their findings at the Rising Star cave system, near Johannesburg, South Africa, which revealed evidence that the fossil human species *Homo naledi* buried their dead, used fire as a light source and had produced engravings in the walls of the cave system (Berger et al. 2023a; Berger et al. 2023b; Fuentes et al. 2023). These findings of symbolic behavior in hominids who had a brain case a third of the size of *Homo sapiens*, and that lived between 335,000 and 236,000 years ago, are presented as momentous in paleoanthropological, anthropological, and evolutionary studies.

- On July 11 of 2023, Czech-French novelist Milan Kundera died. The titles of some of his literary production include: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *Immortality*, *the Joke*, *Identity*, *Ignorance*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, etc. In two of his books, most particularly, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1984), and *Slowness* (2002), Kundera sought the preservation of individual memory as a strategy to challenge authoritarianism and the convenient political forgetting instigated by the Soviet occupation of his native former Czechoslovakia.

Both lines of intellectual production seek, within their own disciplinary confines, what is human, what makes us human, and how we represent the human: For Berger and colleagues, it is in the material evidence of behaviors beyond subsistence, and for Kundera it is in the fictional lives of resistance and survival through remembering. Scientific and literary production, specifically in these two examples, will not be presented here as commensurate, coeval, or even paradoxical. The purpose of this essay is to consider two lines of intellectual production that explore what makes us “us”. Why do these species-centric reflections matter in the face of the immediate crises of the planet?



A Neanderthal father with his daughter. © Tom Björklund

Does the exploration of the question of what makes us human guide our principles, or do our principles direct the premises of our questions?

In the scientific search for our ancestors, researchers in paleoanthropology, archaeology, and genomics must rely on the fragmentary physical evidence that has survived the ravages of time. This most often comprises both human remains and associated materials that are accepted indicators of humanness (i.e., toolmaking, using fire, etc.). These indicators are not haphazard choices made by scientists but have been inductively derived from data accumulated through the analysis of very scarce and fragile remains and subsequently employed for hypothesis building (i.e., Is tool making a unique characteristic of humans?). This is the activation of the scientific process, which continues through testing the available data to assess the validity of the hypothesis. The following selections are informed by research generated in this manner.

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New Member Introduction

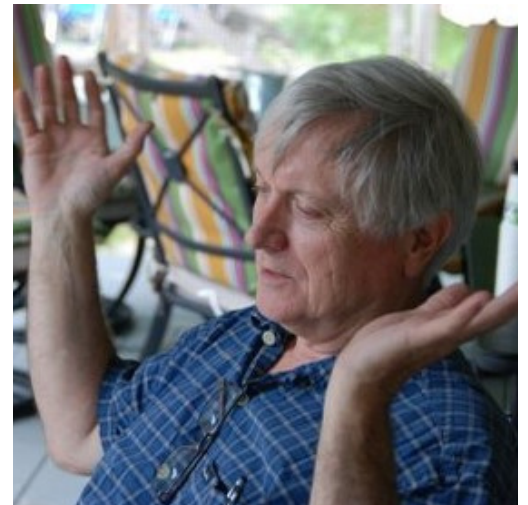
DEACON CHRISTOPHER MAY



I am a Catholic deacon living in Pennsylvania. I have placed my ministry under the patronage of St Lawrence, deacon and martyr, who cared for the poor in 3rd Century Rome. In my day job as the lead chaplain in a large inpatient psychiatric hospital I care for poor and outcast persons; I also serve my diocese and parishes in many other different capacities. My academic studies were concentrated in Philosophy, especially Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, when I studied under Hans-Georg Gadamer. That was some fifty-odd years ago; some of those years were indeed quite odd.

Over the decades I've allowed the Spirit to blow me hither and yon through a most interesting series of occupations and diversions, including: university philosophy instructor, dishwasher, social service case worker, residential aid in a psychiatric facility, civil service clerk, highway construction laborer, factory janitor, building manager, construction supervisor in the Alaskan bush, international book publisher, automobile mechanic, trade union organizer, and classical music host on an NPR station. There were probably a few more, but it was the 70s....

My interests include: the spiritual care of persons, especially those with mental illness, the life of prayer, the philosophical shifts of the late medieval and early modern periods, Catholic social teaching, and home vegetable gardening & preserving. I am celibate, with two adult children, and hundreds of Mason jars. I have buried my last dog. I am grateful for the opportunity to assist the Maurin Academy in Peter Maurin's project of making a world where it would be "easier to be good"



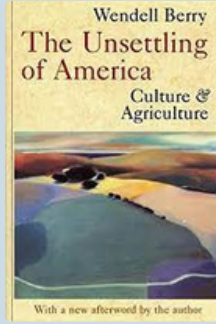
Maurin Academy Event Offerings

Maurin and Mondragon



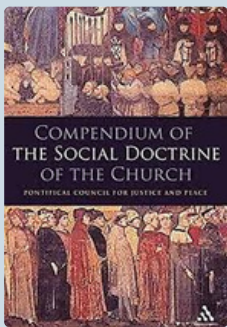
with James Murphy
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Live on Zoom

The Unsettling of America



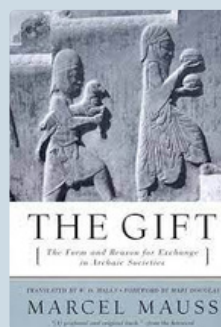
with Spencer Hess and Dr. Laurie M. Johnson
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Universal Destination of Goods



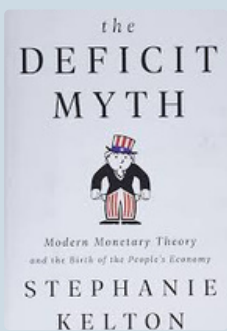
with Deacon Christopher May
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Gift Economy



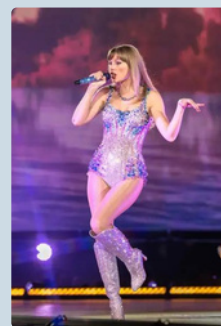
with Miriam Dominguez
Thursdays, January 11th, 18th, 25th, February 1st, and 8th at 7 p.m. US Central Time
Live on Zoom

Modern Monetary Theory (MMT)



with Spencer Hess and Jakob Hanschu
Date(s) to be determined

Swifties as Symptom: Why We Don't Want to Grow UP



with Jakob Hanschu
Date(s) to be determined

Most of the earliest evidence of extinct hominin ancestors, dating back to 7 million years ago, lies in the African continent, along the East African Rift Zone and in the Southern African karstic cave systems. Around 1.8 million years ago the hominin *Homo erectus* explored the world beyond Africa.

Amongst researchers of human evolution, the phrase “out of Africa” inadvertently became a shorthand for marking the emergence of behavioral complexity (McBrearty and Brooks. 2000; Klein 2008). The phrase also was charged with the undercurrents of the colonial violence inflicted on the continent over the past five centuries. The behavioral diversity, resilience to the changing environments, ecological knowledge, and physiological changes, along with ostensible sociality, of *Homo sapiens*, who appears in the record around the Middle-Upper Pleistocene epoch (350 thousand years ago), was not thanks to their ancestors getting “out of Africa” 1.5 million years earlier but was in fact the product of their African history. Is being human to be behaviorally diverse or was the evolutionary career leading us in one set of directions? In the eroded tuffs of the East African Rift and in the caves systems of Southern Africa there is a sense of history beyond natural history. This history informed the ingenuity, survival, and low points of our ancestors that are associated with human uniqueness. That said, I encourage the reader to question these characterizations of human exceptionalism.



Print, Cavemen Chasing Elephants, plate 3 from the Venationes Ferarum, Avium, Piscium series; Designed by Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus (Flemish, 1523–1605); Engraved by Hans Collaert II (Flemish, 1560 - 1628); Published by Philips Galle (Flemish, 1537 - 1612); Netherlands; engraving on paper; 19.3 × 25.8 cm (7 5/8 × 10 3/16 in.); Gift of Mrs. A. W. Erickson; 1952-37-5

Among the earliest evidence of *Homo erectus* outside of Africa, a site in the town of Dmanisi, Republic of Georgia, provides compelling fossil evidence of this early dispersal (Lordkipanidze et al. 2005). One of the individuals from this context appeared to have survived a long final period of his life without consuming foods that required significant chewing. This edentulous fossilized skull (toothless with the alveoli of the teeth closed), probably survived by being fed soft foods processed by other individuals. Caring for others that are not one’s young may not provide a satisfying scientific explanation in terms of species survival, but from our current perspectives those actions can be reasoned through empathy, ethical thought, systems of religion, political systems, scientific research, etc. Any of those parameters or a combination of them, guide the premises of our inquiry into our humanness and direct our investigative gaze to behaviors such as caregiving, the ceremonial emplacement of the dead, and the search for companionship and comfort.

While the focus of this essay does not delve into human phylogeny, the sex lives of our ancestors here end up helplessly exposed. In genetics, these are explained as introgressive hybridization - the gene flow between species following hybridization and backcrossing (a cross between the hybrid with an individual of same genetic characteristics as one of the parents) – (Anderson 1949). The successful research program in genomics by geneticist and Nobel laureate, Svante Pääbo, and his team at the Max Planck Institute, revealed, with great fanfare, that interbreeding among Neanderthals, other archaic hominins, and *Homo sapiens* occurred in Eurasia between 44,000 and 65,000 years ago (See for example, Prüfer, et. al 2014). However, over a decade earlier, archeologist João Zilhão and his team identified the burial of a 4–5-year-old child that dates to 24,500 years ago, at the rock shelter of Lagar Velho in Portugal, buried with a pierced shell and covered with red ochre pigment. The morphological characteristics of the child’s skeletal remains presented characteristics of both species. This, along with the tender burial, suggested that there was no definite demise of Neanderthals in the wake of the arrival of *Homo sapiens*. The interactions between *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* in the Iberian Peninsula during the Late Pleistocene, as identified in the burial of the “Lapedo child”, revealed, in addition to the then controversial suggestion of Neanderthal-modern human admixture, the possibility that there were behavioral patterns that enabled these two groups to regard each other as possible mates, friends (Zilhão and Trinkaus 2002), and even foes.

Humans are transgressors; we are constantly threatening our own well-being and, by extension, that of those in proximity.

In the archaeological record, there is a plethora of examples of violent, odd, and nonconforming behaviors. Glimpses of these behaviors in the archaeological record are rather elusive, hence such evidence has been subjected to broader interpretations. For example, Eudald Carbonell and colleagues (2010) identified in one of the archaeological assemblages of Gran Dolina (Sierra de Atapuerca, Burgos, Spain) evidence of human cannibalism among the species *Homo antecessor* (ca. 800,000 years ago). Although the researchers have maintained that this was nutritional cannibalism, not cannibalism under dietary duress or in an exceptional event, one must wonder about the social and personal effects of this practice among these early communities!

Explicit symbolic communication and aesthetic expression by *Homo sapiens*, in Upper Paleolithic European cave paintings, has been controversially termed the “Upper Paleolithic Revolution” (Mellars, Boyle, Bar-Yosef & Stringer 2007).

However, earlier modes of human creativity using different mediums have been identified in the African archaeological record. For example, in Blombos Cave, South Africa, where there is evidence of the use of pigments, engravings, and shell ornaments that date back to around 100 thousand years ago (Henshilwood 2007; Henshilwood et al. 2011),

archaeologist John Shea (2011) has argued that the idea of behavioral modernity, rooted in the Eurocentric perspective of cognitive modernity, has been misused to support racist agendas that seek, using biological evolutionary models, differences among living humans in terms of complexity.

These abuses and warping of scientific evidence obscure variation and diversity in behaviors developed in different contexts (Shea 2011:14).

The late anthropologist and social theorist David Graeber and archaeologist Max Wengrow (2015) asserted that explicit symbolic behavior marks diverse strategies, by different human populations – as moral and social beings –, to negotiate alternatives in social organization (Graeber and Wengrow 2015: 605-611). Moral, religious, and political systems cannot be reduced to either the product of environmental factors, or political self-consciousness, but to constant transformations and choices. Based on the fragmentary archaeological record, it appears that humans have been clever enough to generate systems of inequality that were at best varied and intractable (Graeber and Wengrow 2015: 613). Our recent history, through the lens of literature, can also steer us to a knottier understanding on what makes us human.

Milan Kundera, as a chronicler of the Soviet occupation in Central Europe, remained suspicious of the transitions toward free markets and democracy. In his novel *Ignorance* (2002), he

portrayed the longing and discontent of the characters: Irene’s memories of the culturally thriving pre-1968 Prague, in contrast to the tourist hotspot that Prague became, and Josef’s political critique of a post-Soviet situation that fails to grant the nascent nations with the ability to choose their political and economic systems. (Kovacevic 2006: 649). These fictional dialogues speak to the continuous negotiations involved in the search of an ideal that is not resolved: Oppressive regimes are reproachable, but is there only one alternative to counter oppression? In other words, is there an ideal way for human society to thrive?

"Our shared evolutionary history and creativity seem to point at the fickleness of our humanity. Our deep history shows that we can be both in denial and in contemplation. We have sought to overcome despair and loss, to survive in tender bodies, to accept and welcome the unknown, and to be stubborn in ignorance."

Kundera traced his intellectual legacy to Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and to the radical autonomy of his work [Kafka’s] (Kundera 1988: 98). The bureaucratic Kafkian ethos depicted the totalitarian state that Kundera confronted decades later. Kafka’s characters have been interpreted as representations of the desire for community and the willingness to overcome solitude. To Kafka, according to Kundera, solitude is not the curse of his characters, but the violation of their solitude (96). Kundera’s work elevates privacy, anonymity, and exposure in the face of surveillance by communist authorities and the Western media (Kovacevic 2006: 650). In our present time, exposure, via social media, is self-inflicted and is a means of subsistence for many. Milan Kundera was a private man who lived almost a century; likely, we will never know how he saw this diametrical shift in human aspirations.

Kundera brought into his stories a notion of history in which he condemned the modern confabulations between media, the dancing to the simplistic and complacent narratives produced by media, and the construction of history to the wide audiences. He considered the novel untranslatable to the language of media, as it is bound to lose its complexity in such translation (Kovacevic 2006: 652). Our current crises could also be considered untranslatable to the media manipulations if our purpose is to confront those crises.



State Museum of Prehistory, Halle, Germany. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images.

The markers of humanness to which I have drawn the reader's attention are not exclusive to *Homo sapiens* but represent the shared inheritance of our hominid ancestors. Some of these hominids coexisted with our *Homo sapiens* ancestors and some of them, as a result of their close interactions, are genetically coded in us today. Our natural history shows that many of our behaviors may have been maladaptive (i.e., dietary cannibalism, social media overexposure and isolationism), and perhaps those choices were as important in transforming our ethical thinking and the orientation of our history as much as the adaptive behaviors (i.e., care of the vulnerable members of our society, openminded and welcoming attitudes towards the unfamiliar), that allowed us to survive... so far. I cautiously maintain that there are no predictable frameworks that could explain, for example, the origins of kindness and callousness, or the motives for generosity and fear. At least, no explanation offered through science and technology should ignore the multivariate and quixotic nature of history. Our shared evolutionary history and creativity seem to point at the fickleness of our humanity. Our deep history shows that we can be both in denial and in contemplation. We have sought to overcome despair and loss, to survive in tender bodies, to accept and welcome the unknown, and to be stubborn in ignorance.

So, when we are at the funeral, we have the choice to tell or not to tell the joke, depending on the desired effect. We may also choose to read the news and seek the untranslated context behind the presentation of the media. But then again, that is a hard thing to do, and hopefully a choice that will still be made by humans.

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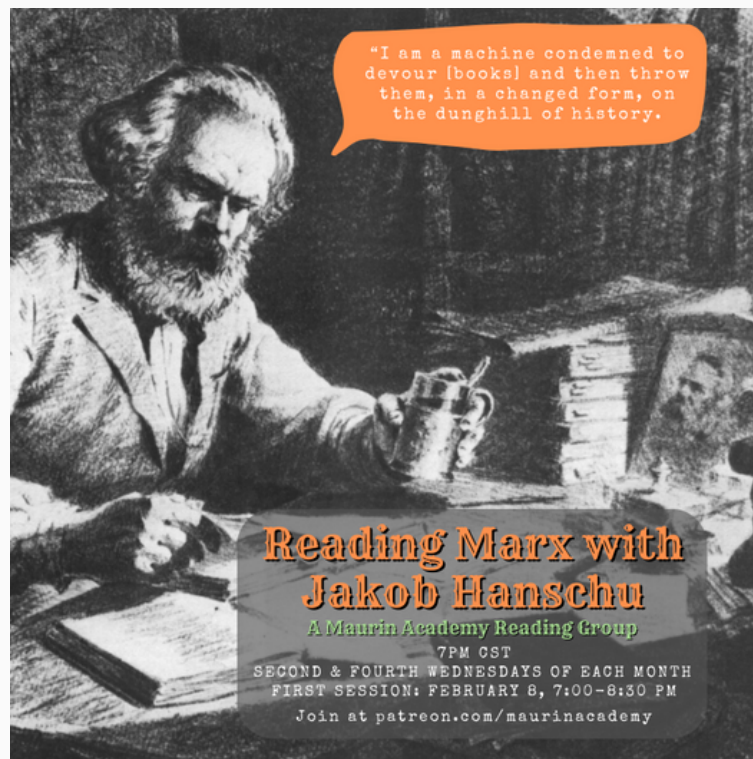
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Maurin Academy Event Offerings

Reading Marx with Jakob Hanschu

JAKOB HANSCHU, CO-FOUNDER

Reading Marx with Jakob Hanschu is a Maurin Academy Reading Group focused on the works of Karl Marx. The name for the group is a play on the widely popular “Reading Capital with David Harvey” course/video series on YouTube. (Disclaimer: Jakob’s beard is not as rad as Dr. Harvey’s, nor does Jakob possess Harvey’s level of expertise). The purpose of the group is to learn from, question, struggle with, and appreciate Marx’s texts together. A dash of humor and some introspection mix to develop a fresh look at what Marxian thought can - and cannot do - for our world today and tomorrow. While each session will build on the other, each can stand on its own and provide a launching point for new participants. Join Jakob at 7 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursdays of each month.



Political Philosophy: Monthly Chats with Dr. Laurie Johnson Previously Known as Pints With Plato

LAURIE JOHNSON, PRESIDENT AND CO-FOUNDER

This series of first Thursday talks will focus on foundational ideas in political thought, chosen by Laurie for their historical and contemporary importance. This year, she's focusing on the history of Western Political Thought. The focus in this first year is to traverse the great political thinkers of the Western tradition via a modified Straussian lens, including insights from Marxian economics, political psychology, and Christian theology. My main goal is to give folks an abbreviated “Master Class” this year in the ancients/moderns comparison because it is very useful for understanding where we are today. If you want to get more informed on influential ideas in political philosophy over time without making yourself crazy, this might be just the right fit for you. Grab a pint (or a cup of tea) and join for an interesting hour-long conversation! Join me at 7 p.m. CT by registering on Eventbrite, or supporting the Maurin Academy on Patreon.



Dustbowl Diatribes: Season Three Overview

LAURIE M. JOHNSON AND SPENCER HESS

For season three we're covering the various theories about Techno-Feudalism and looking into the current state of the Catholic Worker movement. In short, our hypotheses are that the coming period of capitalism can be accurately characterized as quasi-feudal and that the Catholic Worker movement is currently hamstrung by a radical split between those adhering to Peter Maurin's comprehensive vision for constructing a Christian social order and those adhering to Ammon Hennacy's Tolstoyan/Radical Liberal vision for protesting our way towards social justice. We're seeking to explore the people and ideas, question our priors, and learn what we can along the way.



Communio Study Circle

THE MAURIN ACADEMY

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A Kansas City based gathering to discuss Christian theology, Every Third Saturday of the month 4-6:30PM CST

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*Heart
of the World,
Center
of the Church*

*Communio Ecclesiology,
Liberalism, and Liberation*

DAVID L. SCHINDLER

COMMUNIO
International Catholic Review

This group will focus on Ressourcement theology and how it can change our understanding of the world and our own way of life. Ressourcement means returning to the original, authoritative sources of Christianity and bringing them to bear on our own times.

We'll meet monthly on the third Saturday on Zoom to discuss a supplied (electronic) book, article or other selection, and once per quarter we will discuss the latest issue of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, focusing on one or two articles. This group is Catholic-weighted but not exclusively so, because Ressourcement theology is of great interest to many Protestants and people of other faiths. Our sessions will meet for approximately two hours, starting at 4 p.m. US CT. We will record for those who have to miss a meeting.

You can sign up for this group by joining our Patreon, Salt of the Earth, tier patreon.com/maurinacademy, or emailing us at maurinacademy@gmail.com. The first session is June 17 at 4 p.m. US Central Time. Our first book will be *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* by David L. Schindler, Eeerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.



Photos from John Paul II Catholic Worker Farm



Membership

JAKOB HANSCHU, CO-FOUNDER

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- Rational (?) Economic Actor (\$1/month)
 - Access to all podcast content, our newsletter, reading lists, occasional essays, and announcements.
- Salt of the Earth (\$5/month)
 - Access to Laurie's monthly live sessions "Pints with Plato," our growing course content archive, and all previous content.
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