

Review of Pope Francis', "Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality; On Care for Our Common Home." (2015)

"To Hear Both the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor"

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September 20, 2015

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To understand the importance of this work, it is necessary to put it in some context. In the United States, there are two major parties, one of which completely denies the reality of climate change, and therefore the need to do anything about it. (The other party officially recognizes the reality of climate change, but denies the need to do anything drastic; it does little to change anything.) The historian Timothy Snyder comments, "...The United States...is the only country where climate science is still resisted by certain political and business elites. These deniers tend to present the empirical findings of scientists as a conspiracy....The full consequences of climate change may reach America only decades after warming wrecks havoc in other regions. And by then it will be too late for climate science and energy technology to make any difference....America will have spent years spreading climate disaster around the world." (Snyder 2015; SR7)

It is in this context that Pope Francis' "letter" ("Laudato si' " in the original Latin) makes two major contributions. First, it strikes a blow at climate change deniers. "A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system....and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems...." (16-17) Francis is an influential person, the world leader of a religion with millions of followers. For him to assert that human-caused global warming is a reality, and that something must be done about it, shakes up popular consciousness and the political culture in the U.S. (where 25 % of the population is Catholic) and elsewhere.

Nor does he concern himself only with the catastrophe of global warming and extreme weather. He writes about pollution, the loss of clean water and other natural resources, the extinction of species (on land and in the oceans), the spread of desertification, and the general trashing of the environment. "We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation, and filth." (98-99)

His second major contribution is to tie the problems of climate change and ecological disaster to the social problems of poverty, oppression, inequality, and exploitation. "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the degradation of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet." (29)

Climate change falls heaviest on the poorer parts of the world. Without mentioning "imperialism" as such, Pope Francis writes, "A true 'ecological debt' exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources...to satisfy markets in the industrialized north...." (31-32)

The people of the poorer regions suffer from flooded coastlines and islands, the loss of food and water, the destruction of tropical forests and coral reefs, endless wars over natural resources, and the migrations which these all cause. The degradation of the world is associated with the world-wide increase in power and wealth of an irresponsible minority, the growth of inequality in every aspect of society. We need "to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." (30)

Some have previously made a similar connection, such as Naomi Klein (2014). But it has not been emphasized in the mainstream environmental movement. Rejecting market-based "solutions" which are popular with both liberals and conservatives, the pope has specifically condemned "the strategy of buying and selling 'carbon credits'...." (105). Only an integration of the

issues of the poor and exploited with those of ecological sanity, holding a vision which looks beyond the market, can lead to an integrated, international, mass movement of movements.

His Ecological-Communal World View

Pope Francis (originally Jorge Mario Bergoglio) has reached out as widely as he can. “In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.” (4) He addresses not only Catholics and other Christians, but people of all faiths and even non-theists. Philosophically and religiously, I am a humanist and naturalist, but not a “militant atheist.” (See Price 2009) I find much to agree with in what he says. He sees human beings as part of a world community, owing each other solidarity and support. He sees humans as part of a living, interactive, and interdependent “integral ecology”, with all plants and animals and the whole of nature. He insists that the natural world has its own value and does not exist only for our benefit, to be used and discarded for the sake of profit and power. “Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.” (26)

At the same time, he correctly rejects a “biocentrism” which overlooks what humans specifically contribute to nature, our consciousness and creative labor. The Judeo-Christian tradition claims that God “grants man ‘dominion’ over the earth.” (42) This has often been interpreted to mean the right of humans to destroy nature for our own short-term benefit. The pope rejects this interpretation, saying that “dominion” should mean “responsible stewardship.” (73) (He does not remark on the implications of the Christian claim that humans have souls, but not other animals.)

This is consistent with the opinions of the great anarchist and professional geographer, Peter Kropotkin. He criticized the view, prevalent in his time, that natural evolution was nothing but aggression, violence, and competition—“nature, red in tooth and claw.” Instead, he wrote, there was also a great deal of cooperation in the natural world, especially within species, which he called “mutual aid.” (Kropotkin 1942) His scientific views have held up well. (Gould 1991) Kropotkin traced the existence of mutual aid throughout human history. This gave hope for a free society based on cooperation.

Religion has basically shown two sides. On one hand, it preserves and even asserts the deepest values and yearnings of the human heart, as expressed by humanity’s greatest teachers. These include cooperation, equality, empathy, mercy, freedom, and, above all, hope. These values have been expressed not so much in rational linear thinking as in metaphors, symbols, ceremonies, and myths. On the other hand, religion, in its organized form, has generally been used to support existing social systems, teaching the people to passively accept their ruling classes and states (with rare exceptions when religion has been used to justify rebellion). These two sides also appear in the encyclical.

While I am in general agreement with the pope’s “integral ecology,” I find it a little too overflowing with harmonious sweetness. It is true that “all creatures are connected...all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.” (26) But part of this “connection” and “dependency” is every animal living only by killing and eating other organisms: plants or animals. (I am not sure how this arrangement fits in with the conception of a loving Creator.) This is aside from a certain amount of competition within even the most cooperative of species. Kropotkin wrote about mutual aid within species in order to counter the overemphasis on competition and aggression,

not to claim that there was nothing but cooperation. Similarly, he wrote of the history of human mutual aid, but was also a champion of the working classes in their struggles against the ruling class and the state. This is also a topic which never appears in this encyclical (see below).

What Does the Pope See as the Causes?

For Francis the basic problem is a set of wrong attitudes and beliefs. These include a belief in the unlimited expansion of production, in the power of technology to solve all problems, in the rightness of using nature to serve humans' short-term interests, and in the superiority of a wealthy minority which holds a faith in the supreme value of the market.

"Economic powers" are committed to "the pursuit of financial gain" making "the environment...defenseless before the interests of a deified market." (35) "...Nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain." (51) "The basic problem [...]...is...that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm." (66) Those who "take advantage of one another...treat[ing] others as mere objects, imposing forced labor on them" share a common "mindset." (76) "...The idea of infinite or unlimited growth...proves so attractive to economists, financiers, and experts in technology." (67) "The same mindset...stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse...global warming...[and] eliminating poverty." (107)

It is true that these beliefs (as an "idea," "mindset," or "paradigm") are widely held in our society. They are the dominant ideology of the ruling minority and much of the rest of society. Therefore the pope is correct in condemning them. His criticisms of these paradigms are good criticisms. But that is not enough. For "the basic problem" is that these mindsets are closely associated with institutions. The beliefs serve as rationalizations and justifications for the ruling institutions of our world—and for those who benefit from them, "the minority who wield economic and financial power." (126) To criticize their ideology without proposing a change in these institutions is to misdiagnose our ecological, economic, and political problems.

Nowhere in this encyclical does Francis mention "capitalism," the economic system we live under. Instead, he writes only of "the market." Despite the impression which some have gotten (both supporters and critics), he does not condemn the market or private property in the means of production. "The church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property..." (58) "Business is a noble vocation..." (80) But he thinks that private property and business should be—and supposedly could be—subordinated to moral ends. "...Profit cannot be the sole criterion to be taken into account..." (114) However, profit is allowed as one of the criteria.

His condemnation is of the unregulated market, the "deified market," and the market taken as the only value. He indicates that if the market were dominated by businesspeople, consumers, and political leaders who held the right ideas (about the values of integral ecology, community, etc.) then all would be well. Global climate change and other calamities could be averted. This is a fantasy.

Capitalism is driven by its fundamental competitive nature to accumulate more and more capital, to ceaselessly grow ever larger—what Francis condemns as "infinite and unlimited growth." This is directly in conflict with the need for a balanced ecosystem, which would develop the poorer nations in an ecologically-consistent manner. Humanity needs to work toward a steady-state economy which would "grow" only qualitatively, not quantitatively. Yet capitalism turns

all things into market commodities, reducing all their qualities to a common measurement of exchange value, denominated only as money-prices. Capitalism must treat the natural world as an endless mine of material to turn into money.

Just as it must be anti-ecological, so capitalism must create inequality and poverty. The capitalists are in it for the money. To them, inequality is not a problem. It is the point. Poverty and mass misery mean that wealth is not going to others but to them, the agents of capital. Capital is something created in the process of production. It requires exploitation—even the best-paid workers must produce more than the value of their wages. There must be an extra (surplus) value which goes to the owners of capital and their managers, to be reinvested. (In the state capitalism of the Soviet Union the managers were the only agents of capital accumulation.)

Similarly, throughout the letter, Pope Francis takes for granted the national states. Yet these states exist to maintain the very capitalism which is destroying the world, including by waging war. He calls for greatly increased popular involvement in political and social life, as part of an ecologically balanced society. But this is never counterposed to the bureaucratic-military-police machinery of the modern national state, serving a capitalist minority, and standing above and against the rest of society.

The pope writes eloquently about the evils of war. “War always does grave harm to the environment...” (35) Nuclear war would be catastrophically destructive. Yet he does not make a principled stand for the rejection of nuclear war by all states, including unilateral nuclear disarmament. (Without war-making, there would not be much left of the national states.)

Pope Francis rejects those who “propose a reduction in the birth rate.” (31) I agree with him that “overpopulation” is not the basic problem, contrary to many liberals. The U.S. and Western Europe have had a much greater impact on the environment than have Asian countries with larger and denser populations. The very wasteful “high standard of living” of the wealthier nations (and their misuse of technology) cause their people to use up far more resources than larger but poorer populations. And yet, while not the main issue, population is a real problem which slows down economic growth of “developing” nations and makes it harder to solve other problems. The pope correctly advocates an eventual limit to industrial growth. Then surely there should also be a limit to population growth (through such methods as the availability of birth control and the employment of women). But the Catholic Church opposes all forms of birth control! This makes it impossible for the pope to face the ecological problems of a constantly expanding world population on a limited planet, even if this is not the most immediate problem.

He asserts, “Concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification for abortion.” (75) He expresses no understanding that the issue about abortion (and birth control in general) is that of women being in charge of their own reproduction. (For this reason, compulsory abortions, as in China, must be opposed.) The issue is not so much that Pope Francis is against abortion, but that his church seeks to use the state—the legislature, the police, the courts, and the prisons—to enforce his opinion on all women, whatever their personal views.

The Pope’s Program

In the “Introduction” by Naomi Oreskes, she writes, “Some readers will be dissatisfied with this ending...” (xxiii) This refers to the weakness of the pope’s programmatic recommendations. He mostly provides vague and general goals: “planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture,

developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy,...promoting a better management of marine and forest resources, and ensuring universal access to drinking water..." (102) "...More balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth..." (69) "The development of poorer countries and regions...Integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace...to regulate migration....A true world political authority.... Diplomacy also takes on new importance...." (106–108) And so on.

At times in this encyclical there are suggestions of the Catholic program of "distributionism": the idea that property and power should be widely distributed, by promoting small businesses, family farms, and artisans' workshops, and by organizing larger enterprises as producer (worker-managed) cooperatives, while encouraging local democracy. "Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production." (79-80) "In some places, cooperatives are being developed to exploit renewable sources of energy which ensure local self-sufficiency..." (109) "New forms of cooperation and community organization can be encouraged in order to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from destruction." (111)

He cites "the principle of subsidiarity." (120) That is the principle that social functions should be as decentralized and localized as much as is realistically possible. It implies the creation of a more decentralist and democratic alternate technology, distinct from that which has been developed under capitalism. (Other writers on climate change have also advocated decentralization and community development; McKibben 2008.)

At its most radical interpretation, distributionism becomes the program of the anarchist Catholic Worker, and is close to the individualist anarchism of Kevin Carson (Price 2014). Anarchist-socialists, who advocate a decentralized federalism with a self-managed cooperative economy, can agree with much of it, if not its acceptance of a market. In places, Francis almost advocates a policy of participatory-democratic economic planning-from-below. This appears in his discussion of "environmental impact assessment" in the section on "Dialogue and Transparency in Decision-Making." (112–115)

However, the radical implications of decentralization, workers' self-management, community democracy, and the critique of profit and the market are never brought to completion by the pope. To do so would have put him outside of the "dialogue" with the centers of world power.

Who Will Make the Change?

The pope demands "a bold cultural revolution" (72) as well as "radical decisions" (107). But who shall carry out this revolution and make these decisions? Throughout the encyclical, he addresses himself to "everyone" and constantly refers to the errors "we" make and the corrections "we" should carry out. He praises individuals who use "less heating" and wear "warmer clothes" as caring for the world "through little daily actions." (130) Yet, he notes that individual actions, "self-improvement," will not save nature. "Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds." (134) But who will fill up these "community networks" and what shall they do?

The pope repeatedly condemns the insensitivity and smug blindness of the rich and powerful. They arrogantly ignore the "cry" of their fellow humans, as well as of the whole of nature. "...We continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they were

born with greater rights.” (56) But he makes no suggestion that this class of mighty parasites should be removed from power, their wealth taken away from them, their economic and political institutions dismantled, and they themselves forced to live and work like the rest of humanity.

Pope Francis writes eloquently about the suffering of “the poor and the underprivileged” of the world. (58) “...The excluded...are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people.” (30) But these people are all seen from the outside, as objects of poverty, oppression, exploitation, and the degradation of the environment. There is no suggestion that the poor themselves can do anything about this. They are not called on to rebel against their oppression, to change the world. Nor does he urge any other oppressed part of the population which he mentions (poor nations, women, migrants, indigenous peoples, etc.) to organize and fight for themselves and for a better world.

Thus he both raises up people’s desire for change but lets them down with no serious direction. This is another version of what I referred to earlier as religion’s two sides. By not urging on the struggles of the oppressed against the institutions of capitalism, the pope gives support to those institutions—even as he makes excellent criticisms of the ideology of capitalism.

Most significantly of all, he does not discuss the needs of the world’s working class (which is most of “the poor”). He refers to the need for employment and the possibility of work being an ennobling activity (rarely the case under capitalism). He does not advocate that the working class use its unique situation, with its hands (and minds) in potential control of the means of production, distribution, transportation, communication, and all services. The working class has a potential power which would make possible getting rid of the capitalist rulers and the capitalist system. It has the power to create an ecologically and humanly balanced society based “on care for our common home,” in the words of the encyclical’s subtitle.

Pope Francis has many good things to say. This work is particularly worth a thoughtful reading. He is what he is and can only give what he can give. It is necessary to go beyond his focus on the ideology of capitalism to see the role of the capitalist system: its market, its accumulation of capital, its ignoring of natural limits, its war-waging bureaucratic-military state, and its promotion of a self-satisfied and arrogant ruling class. These will have to go if the world will be saved from “climate change and inequality.”

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<http://anarkismo.net/article/28544>

Pope Francis' encyclical speaks both to global climate change and to global inequality and poverty, arguing that they are intertwined and require a common response. The strengths and limitations of his letter are discussed from an eco-socialist and anarchist perspective.

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