

Creating a “Climate for Change”¹ in Catholic Higher Ed: Response to Cyril Opeil

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Cyril Opeil’s “Paradise Crowded” sets up a dialogue between the wisdom and observations of the physical sciences and theological insights drawn from *Laudato Si’* and Ignatian spirituality and practice. As a sociologist, I want to explore the social spaces between these dialogue partners—the hyphen between them. Specifically, what social relations need to occur at local, regional, national, and global levels to create a *climate for social change* that addresses the multi-layered threats that both he and J. Stephen Brown have articulated in their papers? Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist whose turn of phrase I honor in the title of this response, lays out eight theses to answer a preoccupying question of social scientists: why has there not yet been truly effective mobilization in the face of environmental degradation? He warns that the climate change discussion has been carried on largely as an elitist discourse without including the voices and imaginations of ordinary citizens and workers.

1 Ulrich Beck, “Climate for Change, or How to Create a Green Modernity,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27:2-3(2010): 254-266.

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British sociologist Anthony Giddens likewise calls for broadening the conversation and notes that the “billion at the bottom” of the global socio-economic ladder are the people whose lives are most vulnerable, have the least representation, and are often far removed from elites who are making decisions that affect their lives. This is a point of intersection that Cy Opeil underlines from *Laudato Si'*: Pope Francis’s insistent linkage of “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49). In the same article of the encyclical, Pope Francis makes a clear statement that “a true ecological approach must become a social approach.” In his paper, J. Stephen Brown explored an “anthropology of gift,” which in conversation we expanded to an embodiment of grace and gratitude. Indeed, Cy in “Paradise Crowded” stresses the need for our institutions to “develop a culture of sustainable practice” (p. 13). If we heed Beck’s critique, this cultural shift needs to involve everyone. As a social scientist, I’m intrigued by how sociological understandings of social change will contribute and how psychological wisdom and practice can help us transform the culture of fear that can paralyze our practice. But we need to make sure everyone is at the table: are our artists and writers inspiring sustainable practices and are business school personnel seriously formulating economic models that challenge prevailing notions of unlimited growth? Or is research that goes beyond the status quo marginalized? As potential agents of transformation, universities are in a privileged position. We already have a great assemblage of perspectives to draw on and the essence of our shared vocation is creating an enriched, healthy, and challenging growth environment for the next generation of business, political, educational, legal, arts, and humanitarian leaders.

In 1919, Max Weber, one of sociology’s founders, famously ended his essay “Politics as a Vocation” noting that politics, understood as the work of social change, is “the strong and slow boring of hard boards.”² We cannot get from where we stand to where we want to be in relation to “our common home” without the difficult, even “boring” work of applying the sustained and focused pressure needed to penetrate hardened layers of entrenched politics, lifestyle choices, and economic frameworks. Weber says it takes passion and perspective and describes his inspiring encounters with those who are “aware of a responsibility for the consequences of [their] conduct and really feel such responsibility with heart and soul.”³ We spent time in Roundtable conversation talking about changing hearts, and Cy underlines the need for conversion. How we explore both passion and perspective with our students—passion that fuels their agency and perspective which is inclusive, taking *others*, especially the vulnerable, into account in all decision making—can be a significant contribution that Catholic higher education can make in the face of climate change. Cy underscores Francis’s spotlight on Patriarch Bartholomew, calling for conversion from consumption, greed, and wastefulness

2 Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (original 1919) in *From Max Weber*, ed. by H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (NY: Oxford University Press, 1946), 128.

3 Weber, 127.

as a “way of loving, of moving gradually away from what *I* want to what God’s world needs” (*Laudato Si’*, 9).

In the early 1990s, Giddens shifted from his early focus on social structure to an analysis of the self in late modernity. I think it is telling that in 2009 we found him shifting focus again to *The Politics of Climate Change*.⁴ In this work his perspective is much less focused on the individual and more on proposing policy steps that will help move individuals to action. He observes that the levels of affluence we see in the twenty-first century have grown to a point that threatens human flourishing. But he acknowledges that the daily demands of every day catch people up such that their agency to attend to complex problems is inhibited. Giddens also invokes Weber, noting that passion is not enough—the cause for which one stands must be, as Weber poetically imagined, “the guiding star of action.”⁵

So what is our call in Catholic higher education to contribute to creating a climate for change? Less than 12 hours before I flew to Boston for this seminar, I was in the University of Dayton’s ballroom with no fewer than 400 of our students. We were listening to researcher and writer on citizen responsibility Paul Loeb, author of *Soul of a Citizen*. His title is suggestive: we are about cultivating hearts and souls—our own and our students’—that are big enough for true encounter with others and open enough that those encounters become incarnational. Encounters can’t be a collection of experiences to put on one’s résumé but need to have real implications—they nudge us to DO things. In his more recent edited book, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, Loeb includes an essay by Rabbi Arthur Waskow on the deep meaning of Sukkot as a time of vulnerability.⁶ Rabbi Waskow describes the Jewish practice of sharing meals and exchanging ideas in the huts built to celebrate the harvest. That is a wonderful image for the kind of accompaniment that we can give our students. Inviting them outside of the usual protective structures to engage new ideas and to encounter new people, to a time of vulnerability for conversion, and to sharpen and direct their passion so that laser-like, it becomes their, and our, “guiding star of action.”

4 Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009).

5 Weber, 115.

6 Arthur Waskow, “The Sukkah of Shalom,” in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, ed. by Paul Loeb (NY: Basic Books, 2014), 140-144.

