

Michael Löwy on The Pope's Anti-Systemic Encyclical

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# Laudato Si – The Pope’s Anti-Systemic Encyclical

MICHAEL LÖWY

Pope Francis’s “ecological encyclical” is an event which—whether taken from a religious, ethical, social, or political point of view—is of planetary importance. Considering the enormous influence of the Catholic Church worldwide, it is a crucial contribution towards the development of a critical ecological consciousness. It was received with enthusiasm by the true defenders of the environment; however, it aroused uneasiness and rejection among religious conservatives, representatives of capital, and ideologues of “market ecology.” It is a document with a great richness and complexity, one that proposes a new interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a rupture with the “promethean dream of dominion over the world,” and a profoundly radical reflection on the causes of the ecological crisis. Many aspects of liberation theology, particularly that of eco-theologian Leonardo Boff, can be seen as a source of inspiration here, particularly the inseparable association of the “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor.”

In the following brief notes, I am interested in emphasizing the aspect of the encyclical that explains the resistance it has found in the economic and media establishment: its *anti-systemic* character.

For Pope Francis, ecological disasters and climate change, although they play a role, are not merely the results of individual behavior; rather they are the result of *the current models of production and consumption*. Bergoglio is not a Marxist and the word “capitalism” does not appear at all in the encyclical. But it is very clear that for him, the dramatic ecological problems of our age are a result of “the machinery of the current globalized economy,” a machinery that constitutes a *global system, “a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse”* (emphasis added).

What are, for Francis, these “structurally perverse” characteristics? More than anything they are those of a system where “the limited interests of businesses” and “a questionable economic mindset” take precedence, *an instrumental logic* that holds the maximization of profits as its only objective. However, “the principle of the maximization of profits,

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MICHAEL LÖWY’s most recent book is *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe* (Haymarket, 2015). The original Spanish-language version of this article will appear in the journal *Papeles*.



frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy. As long as production is increased, little concern is given to whether it is at the cost of future resources or the health of the environment." This distortion, this ethical and social perversity, is not unique to any one country, but rather is the product, in his words, of a "*global system* where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked" (emphasis added).

Other characteristics of the perversity of the system include: obsession with unlimited growth, consumerism, technocracy, the total domination of finance, and the deification of the market. Its destructive logic reduces everything to the market and "financial calculations of costs and benefits." However, we know that "the environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces." The market is unable to take *qualitative*, ethical, social, human, or natural values into account; in other words, "values that are incalculable."

As revealed in the recent banking crisis, the "absolute" power of speculative finance capital is an essential part of the system. The encyclical's commentary on this is blunt and demystifying:

Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price, foregoing a firm commitment to reviewing and reforming the entire system, only reaffirms the absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future and will only give rise to new crises after a slow, costly and only apparent recovery. The financial crisis of 2007–2008 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles, and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth. But the response to the crisis did not include rethinking the outdated criteria which continue to rule the world.

This perverse dynamic of the global system that "continues to rule the world" is what has caused all of the world summits on the environment to end in failure: "There are too many special interests, and economic interests that easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected." As long as the imperatives of powerful economic groups predominate "the most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented."



In this context, the encyclical develops a radical critique of the irresponsibility of “the responsible ones,” the dominant elites, the oligarchs interested in conserving the system, in relation to the ecological crisis:

Many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms, simply making efforts to reduce some of the negative impacts of climate change. However, many of these symptoms indicate that such effects will continue to worsen if we continue with current models of production and consumption.

Confronted with the dramatic process of the destruction of the planet’s ecological balance and the unprecedented threat that climate change poses, what do the governments, or their international representatives (IMF, World Bank, etc.) propose? Their proposal is the ever-pretentious “sustainable development,” a concept that has become more and more lacking in meaning, a real *flatus vocis*, as Medieval scholars would say. Francis has no such illusions of this technocratic mystification: “talk of sustainable growth usually becomes a way of distracting attention and offering excuses. It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of businesses often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures.”

The concrete methods proposed by the techno-finance oligarchy, the so-called “carbon markets” for example, are perfectly inefficient. Pope Francis’s scathing critique of this false solution is one of the most important arguments contained in the Encyclical. Quoting a resolution by the Episcopal Conference of Bolivia, Bergoglio writes:

The strategy of buying and selling “carbon credits” can lead to a new form of speculation which would not help reduce the emission of polluting gases worldwide. This system seems to provide a quick and easy solution under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require. Rather, it may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.

Passages like this explain the lack of enthusiasm for *Laudato Si* in “official” circles, and among supporters of “market ecology” (or “green capitalism”).

Always connecting the ecological question with the social question, Francis insists on the necessity of radical measures and profound changes in order to confront this double challenge. The main obstacle to this is the “perverse” nature of the system: “the same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty.”



Interestingly enough, the Pope invited Naomi Klein to speak at a conference in June 2015 on *Laudato Si* in Rome. It is probably the first time a “secular Jewish feminist,” as she was described by the Church’s official press, was invited to a discussion at the Vatican. Commenting on the significance of the encyclical, she writes: “If one of the oldest and most tradition-bound institutions in the world can change its teachings and practices as radically, and as rapidly, as Francis is attempting, then surely all kinds of newer and more elastic institutions can change as well.”

While *Laudato Si*’s diagnosis of the ecological crisis is impressively clear and coherent, the actions it proposes are more limited. It is true that many of its suggestions are useful and necessary, for example: encouraging “new forms of cooperation and community organization...in order to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from destruction.” It is also very significant that the encyclical recognizes the necessity, in more developed societies, of “containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even re-tracing our steps before it is too late”; or in other words, “the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth.”

However, it is precisely these “drastic measures” that are lacking at present, as Naomi Klein points out in her latest book *This Changes Everything*. She calls for a break, before it is too late, with fossil fuels (coal, oil), leaving them in the ground. It is hard to think of a transition that goes beyond the current, perverse structures of production and consumption without a combination of anti-establishment initiatives that call private property into question, with the fossil-fuel multinationals (BP, Shell, Total, etc.) as an example. It is true that the Pope speaks of the need for “larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society,” but this strategic aspect is one that is not well-developed in the encyclical.

Understanding that “the current world system is unsustainable,” Bergoglio looks for a global alternative, that he entitles “ecological culture,” a change that “cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and spirituality which, together, can generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.” However, there are few signs of a new economy, a new society that corresponds to this ecological culture. We are not asking the Pope to adopt eco-socialism, but his future alternative remains very abstract.



Pope Francis endorses the “preferential option for the poorest” of the Latin American churches. The encyclical lays it out clearly, as a planetary imperative: “In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

However, in the encyclical, the poor do not appear as protagonists of their own liberation, which is the most important part of liberation theology. The struggles of the poor, peasants, and indigenous groups in defense of forests, water, and the land against multinationals and agribusiness are themes that are largely absent from *Laudato Si*. Francis recently organized a meeting, the first in the Catholic Church’s thousand-year history, with social movements: an event of historical significance. Nevertheless, in the encyclical there are few references to the social movements that are the principal actors in combating climate change, such as Via Campesina, Climate Justice, and the World Social Forum.

Of course, as Bergoglio pointed out in the encyclical, it is not the Church’s task to substitute for political parties, proposing a program of social transformation. With its anti-systemic analysis of the crisis, connecting the inseparable social question with the protection of the environment, “the cry of the poor” to “the cry of the earth,” *Laudato Si* is an invaluable contribution towards the ideas and the actions necessary to save the natural world and humanity from catastrophe.



“Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?”

The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other—and among the philosophers, Hegel, for example, this creation often becomes still more intricate and impossible than in Christianity—comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belonged to the various schools of materialism.

These two expressions, idealism and materialism, primarily signify nothing more than this; and here also they are not used in any other sense.

—FREDERICK ENGELS, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 21