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Laudato Si', Civic Studies, and the Future of Democracy¹

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"Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation." Catholic Bishops of South Africa, quoted *Laudato Si'*¹

"We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened," wrote the poet Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*. "It is a great word, whose history remains unwritten."² It is time to reawaken the greatness of the word and to write more history.

In this essay I argue that Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, the climate encyclical, can help. The encyclical holds resources for a view of democracy as a way of life – far more than a trip to the ballot box, or even the associations and voluntary groups of civil society.³ To realize this potential, the encyclical and the body of Catholic social thought and organizing practices with which it is closely linked are usefully put in conversation with civic studies, the transdisciplinary field for which *The Good Society*, has served as the principal forum.²

I begin by observing the way in which the encyclical and civic studies both address the "crisis of democratic faith" through emphasis on "the priority of culture," against the grain of today's intellectual fashion. Culture, in this sense, involves settings and practices through which citizens develop civic agency, capacities for self-organizing work across differences to solve common problems, create common resources, and make a democratic way of life. The essay then takes up three value commitments shared by both the encyclical and civic studies -- agency, the primacy of culture, and public work.

I conclude with a discussion of why *Laudato Si'* and civic studies need each other. The encyclical develops a path-breaking critique of what Francis calls "the technocratic paradigm." It introduces into mainstream intellectual life an analysis of why and how humans' Promethean impulse, the drive toward mastery over people and things embodied especially in science and technology, is accelerating in the age of smart machines and Big Data. The technocratic paradigm, spreading across modern society, also erodes the

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²In 2007 civic studies was launched by Stephen Elkin, Peter Levine, Jane Mansbridge, Elinor Ostrom, Rogers Smith, Karol Soltan, and myself, brought together by *The Good Society*, long a leading forum for democratic currents of "realist" political theory. Though a long way from the mainstream of public intellectual or academic discussion, the field can scarcely be seen as intellectually marginal. The late Ostrom, former president of the American Political Science Association, won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2009 for her work on citizen governance of common pool resources. Jane Mansbridge, another co-founder, was subsequently APSA president. On realist roots of civic studies, see Harry Boyte and Blase Scarnati, "Transforming Higher Education in a Larger Context: The Civic Politics of Public Work," in Peter Levine and Karol Soltan, *Civic Studies* (Washington: AAC&U, 2014).

foundation of democracy in Catholic social thought and the community organizing which is a major vehicle for such thought: civil society where intermediate groups and voluntary associations put breaks on the impersonal logic of state bureaucracies and the depredations of uncontrolled markets.

In David Mathews' phrase, the "wetlands of democracy" are drying up.⁴ Civic studies, highlighting co-creative agency in every setting including government, business, and the professions as well as associations and voluntary groups, holds potential to broaden democracy to mean an agentic way of life which "secures the liberation of powers," in John Dewey's phrase.⁵

Addressing the crisis in the democratic faith

"The world is deluged with panaceas, formulas, proposed laws, machineries, ways out, and myriads of solutions. It is significant and tragic that almost every one of these proposed plans and alleged solutions deals with the structure of society, but none concerns the substance—the people. This, despite the eternal truth of the democratic faith that the solution always lies with the people." Saul Alinsky, 1946⁶

If the world of public discussion was "deluged with panaceas" in 1946, in 2016 many intellectuals have abandoned hope itself. Mark Lilla, writing in the *New Republic* about "why the dogma of democracy doesn't make the world better," captures a sense that intellectual life itself is exhausted. "Never since the end of World War II, and perhaps since the Russian Revolution, has political thinking in the West been so shallow and clueless. We all sense that ominous changes are taking place in our societies...Yet we lack adequate concepts or even a vocabulary for describing the world we find ourselves in."⁷

Some question hope as a serious proposition. "A writer wedded to 'hope' is ultimately divorced from 'truth,'" writes Ta-Nahesi Coates in the *The Atlantic*. Coates' despair is echoed by Tim Tyson, also in *The Atlantic*. "To tell a sunnier story is a slide toward futility and perhaps a kind of insanity, a march into a circus mirror."⁸

Tyson, a distinguished civil rights historian, should know better. He writes, "When I march in a demonstration and begin to chant, 'The people, united, will never be defeated,' it makes me want to lie down in a puddle of tears. Historians might chant, 'The people – united, deluded, indifferent, bamboozled – have often been defeated.'" But Tyson's activism lacks precisely the sort of sober, self-reflective politics which Charles Payne unearthed as a strand in the freedom movement. Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* describes how activists in the 1960s freedom movement came to distinguish between "mobilizing" and

“organizing” politics. While the former, the politics of protest, included better known marches, Freedom Rides, and sit-ins, grassroots organizing took place in communities across the south on a large scale, forming a largely invisible foundation for the movement. “If people like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry tested the limits of repression, people like Septima Clark and Ella Baker and Myles Horton tested another set of limits, the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives,” he writes.⁹ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King’s organization, sponsored the Citizenship Education Program, CEP, transferred from Highlander Folk School. Directed by Dorothy Cotton, from 1961 to 1968 CEP trained more than 8000 people at Dorchester and Penn centers, who returned to communities and trained tens of thousands more.

The vision of CEP, drafted by Septima Clark, an early leader, was to “broaden the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepen the concept to include every relationship.” Such broadening involved a transformation of identity from victim to agent of change. Cotton tells this story in *If Your Back’s Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement*. “People who had lived for generations with a sense of impotence, with a consciousness of anger and victimization, now knew in no uncertain terms that if things were going to change, they themselves had to change them.”¹⁰ Cotton calls citizenship education “people empowering.”¹¹ Payne stresses *politicality*. “Above all else [educators] stressed a developmental style of politics, one in which the important thing was the development of efficacy of those most affected by a problem.” This meant that “whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives.”¹²

Such politics has taken root in what is called “faith-based (or broad-based) organizing” in the last generation, powerfully influencing Catholic social teachings including the climate encyclical.¹³ Though Pope Francis doesn’t refer explicitly to “democracy” in the climate statement, the encyclical emerges from a rich tradition of Catholic social teachings, overlapping with community organizing, in which democracy, understood as much more than free elections – today’s conventional wisdom – is central. Catholic thinkers have long argued that democracy includes a vigorous civil society organized around the principle of “subsidiarity,” the idea that power needs to be dispersed downwards to communities and institutions best suited to exercise it – locally run schools, housing, hospitals, municipal authorities. The “civic economy,” an allied concept, seeks to transcend debates between left and right about the market, arguing that the market must operate within a moral framework which puts the dignity of the person foremost and involves all stakeholders in deliberation about how to achieve the goal.¹⁴

This politics, what Payne called “a developmental style of politics” in the movement, is what the Catholic intellectual and community organizer Austen Ivereigh calls “citizen politics” in faith-based community organizing. It is animated especially by the “preferential option for the poor.” It aims at a more just, compassionate, loving and democratic society championed by civil society groups which cultivate the capacities for achieving it. “Catholic democratic theory has, in the main, focused on structural questions of participation, representation, voting rights, the rights of association and so forth,” says George Weigel, chair of Catholic Studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. “With these questions largely resolved, the focus must now be on the priority of culture: on the institutions of civil society and their capacity to form genuine democrats.”¹⁵

Jorge Bergoglio was closely associated with faith-based community organizing in Buenos Aires long before he became Pope Francis. In many countries such faith-based community organizing has wide Catholic participation. As Luke Bretherton has documented, the field was influenced by Catholic social teaching through Saul Alinsky.¹⁶ Catholics in London Citizens call such organizing “Catholic Social Teachings in Action.” Thus it is not surprising that Francis’ call for a “healthy politics” in *Laudato Si’* is like the “citizen politics” of faith-based community organizing. Ivereigh, with London Citizens, one of the world’s leading such community groups, describes citizen politics in *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organizing*, in ways closely paralleling the vision of Francis: “a great adventure ...to love and serve the world.” In Ivereigh’s terms, such organizing is “a deeper politics” addressing the unraveling of human relationships in society.¹⁷ Similarly, Francis contrasts healthy politics with the “power politics” which dominates today. “A politics concerned with immediate results, supported by consumerist sectors of the population, is driven to produce short-term growth...The myopia of power politics delays the inclusion of a far-sighted environmental agenda,” he writes. “Public pressure has to be exerted in order to bring about decisive political action. Society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments... unless citizens control political power...it will not be possible to control damage to the environment.”¹⁸

Such organizing and its conceptual wellsprings generate the renewal of democratic faith of *Laudato Si’* and *The New Civic Politics*, framing statement of Civic Studies. “All is not lost,” Pope Francis insists. “Human beings, while capable of the worst, are *also* capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start despite their mental and social conditioning.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, the *The New Civic Politics* declares that “a better world is possible and we can create it.” It proposes that “there are credible big stories to be told about human history and human potential.”²⁰ Peter Levine’s *We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America*, bridges the organizing tradition of the movement (“We Are the Ones” has become the song

commemorating the citizenship schools, through Dorothy Cotton's constant pairing) with contemporary broad-based community organizing, which he treats at length.²¹ The field of civic studies also takes such public-capacity development to a more general level. "We seek to understand and promote civic capacities...and collective civic agency...democratic learning in multiple institutional settings," says *The New Civic Politics*.

Both also illustrate how a sober politics of organizing disputes not only fatalism and despair but also the Promethean fantasy that humans can escape the ironies and tragedies of history through technocratic modes of thought and action. "Proposed reforms are almost always flawed by limited information, ignorance of context, and downright arrogance," writes Peter Levine, co-teacher of the annual Civic Studies Institute at Tufts University, calling for humility. "In politics, as in medicine, the chief principle should be: 'First, do no harm.'" ²² Levine's call for humility, emerging from humanities and political philosophy, is paralleled by Francis' passionate, religiously-based challenge to human triumphalism. "What was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery of the world," Francis argues. "We need constantly to rethink the goals, effects, overall context and ethical limits of... human activity." ²³

Other shared value commitments of the encyclical and civic studies are important. I use the youth initiative Public Achievement as an example of "civic studies in action."

Citizen politics

A story from the youth political empowerment initiative called Public Achievement, or PA, a kind of "civic studies in practice," can be taken as a hologram for changes across the sweep of modern life which *Laudato Si'* intimates in its critique of the technocratic paradigm. It also suggests a citizen politics that has some differences with the politics of *Laudato Si'* whose citizen politics is located in civil society, based on the preferential option for the poor, structured around justice as the most important value with love as the goal.

PA is a youth empowerment and political education initiative which I began in 1990 in order to introduce young people to the sort of agentic experiences I'd had in the civil rights movement as a college-age young man, where I constantly saw the organizing approaches Payne identifies. I often watched as young African Americans – and poor whites, after I was assigned by Martin Luther King to organize in southern poor white communities – who were marginalized and invisible become powerful agents of change.

By the late 1990s PA had expanded to several areas of the United States outside its birthplace in Minneapolis and St. Paul, as well as to Northern Ireland. In 1999 Angela Matthews, a young adult leader of PA in Northern Ireland, visited the Twin Cities for a

conference. Angela gave a speech to about 150 young people from third grade through college, with faculty, teachers, college student coaches, school staff, parents, and community activists in the mix. Students came from a diversity of schools including St. Bernard's elementary school, where the principal, Dennis Donovan, sought to make PA a way of "doing education" that affected teaching as well as other work in the school. St. Bernard's was an early intimation that a politics of civic agency can transform institutional cultures and professions such as teaching as well as participants. In St. Bernard's students worked for several years to build a playground in a neighborhood which adults thought too dangerous because of gang activity. They turned around adult sentiment, negotiated zoning changes with the city, and raised thousands of dollars in contributions from local businesses. In another effort, third graders had involved hundreds of residents and church members in a peace march to commemorate sites of recent murders.

Angela began by asking a question: "How many of you like politics?" Without prompting, almost all raised their hands. Then she made her point: "You like politics because we're doing politics. It's not only something politicians do."²⁴

This exchange involves a "Copernican Revolution" in the way we think about politics, citizenship, and democracy.²⁵ In Public Achievement, politics revolves around citizens, not politicians. It occurs everywhere, not simply in and around government. As citizens do politics, they become citizen co-creators, making changes, solving problems, and creating things of lasting public value in their own environments, not simply addressing government or other external authorities. Politics includes productive as well as distributive dimensions. As participants do public work, they come to understand themselves as public problem-solvers and co-producers of public goods not simply consumers of services.

PA politics does not assume that the main goal is love – indeed kids often say that one of the things they like most is how to work with others "who are not their buddies." PA politics, in the vein of older understandings of politics and reflecting a reemerging democratic strand of the "realist" school of political theory that has recently taken shape, teaches skills and habits of understanding the views, interests, and power of those who may hold radically different perspectives to accomplish many public purposes, not simply love or justice.²⁶ Finally, such politics suggests an expanded meaning of democracy to an empowering way of life in a myriad of settings, not simply government and civil society.

In PA, young people, generally from grades three through high school, do public work in a team on an issue of their choice to make a "public contribution," chosen within the parameters of nonviolence and legality. Issues vary widely, from bullying, teen pregnancy, school lunches, or recycling to "saving the Amazon rain forest" and changing

school curriculum. Few sites have seen the extensive culture change that occurred at St. Bernard's, and are suggested by the work in special education, later described. But many evaluations have found that young people, as well as the young adult "coaches" who work with them, usually college students, develop political confidence, skills, and interests through this work – how to analyze power relationships, chair meetings, deliberate, research issues, understand others' points of view, negotiate diverse interests, speak in public, hold each other accountable, and write in clear prose, among others.

Though Public Achievement politics, like the politics of civic studies, has differences with the politics in *Laudato Si'* and faith-based community organizing, there are many similarities. In an elemental sense, both teach that politics involves learning to deal with "the world as it is," in all its complexity and ambiguity, conflict, different interests and views, not the world one would like it to be. It is worth sketching three other values: agency; the priority of culture; and work with public qualities and purposes.

Agency: Everyday citizens in both PA and *Laudato Si'* are valued as primary *agents of change*, developing power in settings which are often disempowering and tapping talents and energies often overlooked or discarded in conventional culture. I saw such agency in the Citizenship Education Program (CEP) of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Jorge Bergoglio developed a bottom up focus through his involvement with the Theology of the People movement, with its critique of both Marxist and "clericalist" strands of the church, and also its community organizing practices which empowered the poorest of people in the slums of cities like Buenos Aires.

A focus on agency highlights the immense untapped human potential for new beginnings, "natality" as Hannah Arendt put it. It also surfaces patterns of power – either overt, such as racism, or covert, such as domination by well-intentioned experts in schools – which stifle agency. For instance, in schools and many youth-serving organizations one-directional instructional and service delivery methods give little room for young people's initiative. Public Achievement depends on finding or creating "free spaces" for young people's efforts that develop agency.

John Carr, director of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, said that Pope Francis "looks at the world from the bottom up," on National Public Radio, shortly after the encyclical was published.²⁷ Indeed, *Laudato Si'* develops an extraordinary power analysis. Francis sees possibilities in new technologies and science but he also argues that these "have given those with the knowledge and especially the economic resources to use them...dominance over the whole of humanity. Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely,

particularly when we consider how it is currently being used...it is extremely risky for a small part of humanity to have it.”²⁸

The basis of hope is empowering civic action of the sort which he promoted as archbishop in Buenos Aires. This developed in the church over years. In 1979 Latin America bishops, developing implications of Vatican II with a new call for empowering the role of the laity, challenged infantilizing versions of Catholic decision making with the democratic perspective that “the poor should be agents and not merely recipients.” Jorge Bergoglio, when archbishop of Buenos Aires, developed a sharp critique of what he called “clericalism” which put clergy at the center of the Church and infantilized the people. “The Church is the entire people of God,” he told his friend Rabbi Skorka. “When the priest imposes himself, when...he says ‘I am the boss here,’ he falls into clericalism.” Bergoglio, like many bishops around the world, had experience that gave poignancy to such perspectives, often feeling infantilized themselves by Vatican officials.²⁹ This message of agency of the poor continues as a strong theme from Francis. Thus in a talk to popular movements in Bolivia July 9, 2015, Francis says, “The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize.”³⁰

Public Achievement, operating in everyday settings like schools or community groups, also seeks to put the future “in the hands” of young people at a level of molecular empowerment. Though the context is different than the freedom movement, we often see similar changes among young people in PA, who discover “that they have a role to play in creating change,” says Cara DiEnno, associate director of Denver University’s Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning which organizes PA in Denver.³¹

The priority of culture: Recent social history and political and social theory includes strands that constitute what can be called a “cultural turn,” drawing attention to humans as meaning-makers and story tellers involved in a continuing power-laden process of contesting, negotiating, and integrating interpretations of experience. The cultural turn includes sustained critique of the understandings of the “self” associated with positivist science, connected to the rise of modern states and markets, the drive to make legible societies in pursuit of rationalization and control, and mentalities associated with the idea of “mass,” implying ineluctable processes of homogenization and deracination.³²

Civic studies as a field, focused on agency and humans as co-creators of communities of different scale, also draws on this cultural lens. It disputes the sharp conventional disciplinary distinctions between empirical sciences (natural and social), normative fields (humanities), and action fields (the professions). As Peter Levine has put

it, academics *themselves* are citizens, and knowledge, including science, has the most important aim of increasing capacities to act collectively, wisely, effectively, and ethically.³³

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, the climate encyclical, can be taken as a brilliant translation of such themes into mainstream public culture and intellectual life. It combines an embrace of climate science with a trenchant critique of technocracy that clearly articulates the *limits* of scientific and technological modes of thought, emphatically stating the need to embed scientific and technological approaches and ways of thinking in a larger understanding of the public and human purposes and practices of knowledge-making. In the course of such treatment, Francis, drawing on a range of perspectives around the world, also unearths the power dimensions and damage inherent in a triumphalist treatment of positivist modes of thought. He describes the epistemological shift that prioritizes rational, informational approaches for dealing with human problems over relational and cultural approaches, a pattern which predominates across modern professional life. "The basic problem goes even deeper" than concentrated economic and knowledge power, he argues in the section, the Globalization of the Technocratic Paradigm. "It is the way that humanity has taken up...an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm [that] exalts the concept of a subject, who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object." This names the positivist theories of knowledge which have become the default, unself-conscious way of seeing. "Many problems of today's world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society." Technocracy like this always works in combination with power. "The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings."³⁴

Such insights about the damage caused to human communities by default positivism share similarities to civic studies and its feeder intellectual traditions. They also grow from strands of Liberation Theology in Latin America and a substantial theological movement, "Theology of the People," in Argentina. Bergoglio was schooled by and contributed to this movement, which shared with Liberation Theology a "preferential option for the poor" but developed a sharp critique of rationalist and reductionist elements in Liberation Theology. As the Argentine Jesuit Humberto Miguel Yáñez put it, the Theology of the People differs from "those who embraced aspects of Marxist thinking [and] saw elements like culture and religion as tools of alienation rather than liberation...In the more distinctively Argentinean strain, both philosophically and theologically, there was a strong appreciation of culture." Father Juan Carlos Scannone, perhaps the leading figure in the Theology of the People, elaborated. "People's Theology does not use a Marxist analysis, but a historical and cultural one. It pays attention to social structures, but it does not consider class struggle as the main

principle.” Scannone and others saw themselves as fighting the Eurocentric legacy of Argentinean colonial rulers which saw local cultures as “backward,” even “barbaric.”³⁵

Theology of the People, more than an intellectual or theological school of thought, is put into action by what are called “slum priests,” much like community organizers, whose numbers Bergoglio greatly increased as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. In the process of community organizing they developed a profound respect for popular culture, religiosity, and ways of life. Padre Pepe described how their experiences brought them to challenge “the misunderstood progressivism” of liberation theologians who arrived “from the outside to give lessons” and viewed popular culture with skepticism. The slum priests, in contrast, had “seen and followed the faith of the people, their way of living it, and expressing it,” and were profoundly changed by the process. “Liberation has to start with people, not an ideology and not with charity,” Pepe concluded.³⁶

Community organizers in the United States and elsewhere rarely raise their analysis to the level of a “cultural lens.” As I have argued previously in this journal, community organizing generally has taken the larger structures of cultural and institutional life as an unchangeable given, reproducing the fatalism of the late Saul Alinsky about change in knowledge-power based institutions.³⁷ But parallels can nonetheless be found. Saul Alinsky, the iconoclastic activist and philosopher of organizing commonly credited as being the dean of modern community organizing, argued in his first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, the necessity for popular organizations to be rooted in, and work through, local community life and culture. “The foundation of a People’s Organization is in the communal life of the local people,” argued Alinsky. Though organizers would often disagree with local traditions, efforts at democratic change must always be undertaken in the terms and histories given. “The starting of a People’s Organization is not a matter of personal choice. You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes, and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives...To understand the traditions of a people is . . . to ascertain those social forces which argue for constructive democratic action as well as those which obstruct democratic action.”³⁸

A few in the world of faith based organizing have begun to identify the power dynamics of knowledge-based systems like education and the professions in a more extensive fashion. Thus, the theologian and political theorist Luke Bretherton – himself long active in London Citizens -- notes that whether organizers and community leaders name the pattern or not, they encounter technocracy. As he describes in a review of two books on community organizing for change in schools, “What comes across time and again is the hostility ‘non-experts’ provoke... [P]ublic engagement with education challenges and demands a move beyond technocratic, top down, one-size-fits all, centralized and

procedural reform initiatives to draw on a wider variety of experience, knowledge, and a diversity of solutions.”³⁹

From the beginning of Public Achievement, we have had to deal with the challenge of technocracy, one way efforts to “fix” kids through expert-designed solutions and interventions. Special education is a striking case in point.⁴⁰ Those placed in special education often suffer lifetimes of trouble with mental illness, unemployment and incarceration.⁴¹ As Susan O’Connor, director of Special Education at Augsburg College, where we moved the Center for Democracy and Citizenship in 2009, put it, “Special Education generally still uses a medical model, based on how to fix kids.”⁴² O’Connor draws on the field’s internal critique, disabilities studies, which questions such a technocratic approach based on positivist science.⁴³ Dennis Donovan, PA’s international organizer, O’Connor, and Donna Patterson, another faculty member, partnered with Michael Ricci and Alissa Blood, graduates of the Special Education program to design an alternative class in the Fridley Middle School using a Public Achievement approach. Over three years “problem” students, mostly low-income and minority, who in many schools would be segregated, became public leaders on issues like school bullying, health lifestyles, campaigning against animal cruelty, and creating a support network for terminally ill children. In an evaluation of Public Achievement at Fridley for her master’s thesis, Blood conducted face to face conversations with five participants, combined with detailed observations of young people’s behavior. She found substantial impact on student self-image, sense of empowerment, and behavior. “They believed that they were more capable than they had ever thought they were in the past,” Blood writes. “The students believed that they could be positive citizens and that the people who believed differently about them were wrong -- a very powerful belief for any student in middle school.”⁴⁴

Ricci and Blood also changed their own views of teaching to emphasize development of young people’s agency, individually and collectively, as at the heart of education. “My role is not to fix things for the kids but to say, ‘this is your class, your mission. How are you going to do the work?’ Our main task is to remind them, to guide them, not to tell them what to do,” explains Ricci. As Margaret Finders, chair of the Department of Education at Augsburg, and I describe in our forthcoming essay “Liberating the Powers,” in *Educational Theory*, all faculty at Augsburg are now learning the civic and political skills of civic studies. This focus on agency, individual and collective, is also the central area of agreement which Deborah Meier, the great democracy educator, and I have found in our ongoing *Education Week* blog discussion, “Bridging Differences.”⁴⁵

An emphasis on the democratic dimensions of teaching raises a third value in Francis’ encyclical: recovering public purposes and practices of work.

Public work: Settings like universities, businesses, schools and government agencies now seen as static “bureaucracies” incapable of change can be reconceived as complex communities with stories, norms, power dynamics and complex interests, as Christopher Ansell shows in his recent *Pragmatist Democracy*.⁴⁶ And they can be reorganized and reconstructed in democratic ways through intentional public action. But daunting obstacles are in the way, growing from the radical erosion of work’s public and purposeful dimensions and their replacement with consumer identities. As Susan Faludi describes in her exploration of changing identities of men, from African American shipyard workers to television executives, athletes, porn stars and evangelicals, men at the threshold of the 21st century lived “in an unfamiliar world where male worth is measured only by participation in a celebrity-driven consumer culture.” Older ideas of “contributing to communities or building the nation” were in shards, and men, in Faludi’s depiction, resembled Betty Friedan’s “trapped housewives” of the 1960s.⁴⁷ As Thomas Spragens has detailed, since the New Deal the left has seen a significant erosion in respect for work and workers.⁴⁸

In Public Achievement, we regularly see that young people want to “put their signature” on their neighborhoods and the world through productive labor, as one former gang member, building a park called “victory over violence” in Milwaukee, told me. Cara DiEnno calls it “agitating them to be their best selves,” a theme poignantly reflected in one of the PA Denver teams last year which had a “I am greater than” campaign with dozens of messages like “I am > test scores”; “I am > my skin color”; “I am > my family’s income.” On a larger scale but in a similar vein, the leading community organizer and theorist of organizing Gerald Taylor observes the enhancement in significance when people highlight the public work dimensions of their efforts. “Thinking about community organizing as public work helps people think of themselves as builders of cities.”⁴⁹

Pope Francis brings the depth of Catholic social teachings and the weight of church authority to the growing crisis of *work* across the whole of modern societies. *Laudato Si’* challenges the ways in which work is increasingly seen as a means to an end – people work “to live” – dictated by the narrow imperatives of profit taking. Here he builds on Pope John Paul II’s *On Human Labor*, whose affirmation of the meaning work and the dignity of the worker, the subjective side of work, and the participation of humans as co-creators in the labors of creation helped to birth the Polish Solidarity movement.

As Francis puts it in *Laudato Si’* “the biblical texts need to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they keep to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world. Tilling refers to cultivating, ploughing and working.”⁵⁰ In his Latin American trip in July, 2015, Pope Francis, in a speech to the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador, expanded on this point by stressing the intricate tie between care *for* the world and co-creation *of* the world.⁵¹ “God does not only give us life,” he said. God also “gives human

beings a task...to be a part of [God's] creative work... 'Cultivate it! I am giving you seeds, soil, water, and sun. I am giving you your hands and those of your brothers and sisters...the space that God gives us to build up with one another, to build a 'we'." The work also creates the connection. "As Genesis recounts, after the word 'cultivate,' another word immediately follows: 'care.' Each explains the other. They go hand in hand. Those who do not cultivate do not care; those who do not care do not cultivate."⁵²

Laudato Si' especially emphasizes work that builds the commonwealth. "Society is also enriched by a countless array of organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment, whether natural or urban," Francis argues. "Some... show concern for a public place (a building, a fountain, an abandoned monument, a landscape, a square), and strive to protect, restore, improve, or beautify it as something belonging to everyone." Such work creates relationships which reverse privatization. "A community can break out of the indifference induced by consumerism. These actions cultivate a shared identity, with a story which can be remembered and handed on."⁵³

Citizen politics of public work

In *Laudato Si'* Francis offers building blocks for an alternative understanding of democracy and its politics by emphasizing human particularity in contrast to reductionist strands of philosophy and politics.⁵⁴ Francis also asserts an understanding of the centrality of work with public purpose, which contributes to recognizing the importance of the democratic possibility of work.⁵⁵ Yet the encyclical's citizen politics is too limited for the scale of transformation in cultures and society which Francis calls for. Like faith-based organizing it resides in civil society groups. As Derek Barker has detailed, civil society itself has been increasingly "colonized" by the technocratic dynamics which the statement so powerfully illuminates.⁵⁶ While Catholic social teaching's paramount ends of love and justice are hugely important in a world increasingly inured to injustice, inequality, and the devaluation of human life, they are not sufficient to activate the broad range of purposes and interests needed to create a substantial movement for democracy as a way of life. Many other kindred stirrings of democratizing citizen politics in addition to faith based community organizing are beginning to appear, with different ends and interests that need to be integrated into the mix.

To cite a few examples, pressure from the increasing complexity and scale of problems in modern societies to tap new sources of civic energy and talent is beginning generating sometimes large-scale democratic change reflected in themes such as "empowered participatory government" and "catalytic governance."⁵⁷ Carmen Sirianni details initiatives within government, from local levels to federal agencies, which integrate themes of broad-based organizing in order to generate more productive, collaborative

work with citizens.⁵⁸ The thousands of democratic “New Schools” called *Escuela Nueva*, originating in Columbia in the 1970s and now in 40 societies, suggests the capacities of innovative democratic organizers to operate on large scales, against the grain of disempowering schools.⁵⁹

In another case, addressing public problems effectively prompts attention to the civic dimensions of professions, where professionals learn to work *with* other citizens, rather *on* them or *for* them. Theoretical foundations of civic professionalism found early expression in the work of John Dewey, who stressed the educative dimensions of “all callings [and] occupations.”⁶⁰ Albert Dzur details how professionals’ work can be catalytic and energizing when they “step back” and practice democratizing approaches. He chronicles democratic trends in the areas of medicine, law, the movement against domestic violence and elsewhere that enhance the authority and efficacy of lay citizens, adding multiple cases of what I call public work.⁶¹ William Doherty and his colleagues at the Citizen Professional Center have pioneered in the practices and theory of such citizen professionalism, and we have seen growing receptivity to such concepts and practices in fields such as education and nursing at Augsburg.⁶²

Finally, there are many democratic stirrings in education, in the vein of *Escuela Nueva*, and in fields of humanities and science. The main education research group, the American Education Research Association, now is led by Jeanne Oakes, a leading democratic theorist of education, and its conference focus in 2016 is democracy and education, commemorating the 100th centenary of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. The collection I edited, *Democracy’s Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities*, includes powerful stories of democratic innovation in higher education, sometimes on significant scale. The National Science Foundation in 2014 sponsored a workshop on “civic science.”⁶³

We need a citizen politics with an enlarged vision and understanding of democracy that can integrate such stirrings into a new democracy narrative. In such a context, *Laudato Si’* provides rich resources for awakening democracy. It also generates a politics of hope.

- 1 *Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis, on Care for our Common Home* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), quoted p. 14.
- 2 Quoted from Harry C. Boyte, "The Fight for America's Soul," BillMoyers.com December 16, 2015.
- 3 See Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller, *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015), 42.
- 4 David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).
- 5 John Dewey, Collected Middle Works, *Democracy and Education*, p. 93.
- 6 Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1946), 40.
- 7 Mark Lilla, "The Truth about our Libertarian Age," *New Republic*, July 18, 2014.
- 8 Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Hope and the Historian," *The Atlantic* December 10, 2015; Tim Tyson, "Can Honest History Allow for Hope?", *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2015.
- 9 Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1965), 68.
- 10 Dorothy Cotton, *If Your Back's Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Atria/Simon & Schuster, 2012), 135.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Payne, 68.
- 13 Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); for analysis of the differences which result from "mobilizing" versus "organizing," see Hahrie Han, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also Harry C. Boyte, "A Commonwealth of Freedom: Response to Beltran," *Political Theory* Vol. 38, No. 6 (2010), pp. 870-876; and Harry C Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work: Organizing the Literature," *Political Theory* Vol. 39, No. 5 (2011), pp. 630-660..
- 14 For treatments of broad-based community organizing and its relationship to Catholic social thought, see Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst, *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), and Austen Ivereigh, *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organizing* (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 2010).
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- 16 See Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of the Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 17 *Faithful Citizens*, p. 13.
- 18 *Laudato Si'* p. 99.
- 19 *Laudato Si'*, 113.
- 20 "A New Civic Politics," Framing Statement of Civic Studies, <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/civic-studies/summer-institute/summer-institute-of-civic-studies-framing-statement/>

21Peter Levine, *We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

22Peter Levine, "Civic Studies," *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2014), p 31.

23*Laudato Si'* pp. 68, 75.

24This story is taken from Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics* (Philadelphia: PennPress, 2004).

25Harry C. Boyte, "Reconstructing Democracy: The Citizen Politics of Public Work," April 11, 2001, University of Wisconsin, https://www.academia.edu/15043852/Citizen_Politics_of_Public_Work

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38Alinsky, *Reveille*, pp. 76-79.

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