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Marvin T. Brown

A Climate of Justice: An Ethical Foundation for Environmentalism

 Springer

Marvin T. Brown
Climate of Justice Project (climateofjusticeproject.org)
Berkeley, CA, USA



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Advance Praise for *A Climate of Justice*

Marvin Brown has hit a homerun with his extraordinary new book. It goes to the heart of America's current crisis with a powerful summation that is both diagnosis and cure: we must change our social climate from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice. My fellow citizens, please read this book!

James Gustave Speth, author of *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy*, and former dean, Yale School of the Environment.

In this elegant interrogation of life as it is in the midst of a climate of injustice, Brown offers a deep and critical analysis of our historical sources and current social practices. His multi-layered approach to "climate change" from a toxic ethos to one of justice is highly original. He speaks with a compelling voice of authority and wisdom born of a lifetime of active involvement in civic engagements, thus drawing the reader into his narrative through vivid examples and stories. This is not only a book that accurately describes the landscape of our current crisis, but also a manifesto for addressing it. Brown offers practical directions for ways people can become participating citizens for change. This is a book of hopeful realism. His inclusion of Reinhold Niebuhr will make this book appealing to religious scholars and practitioners who are re-discovering Niebuhr for the twenty-first century.

Sharon G. Thornton, Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School, Professor Emerita

In *A Climate for Justice*, Brown develops the vision he set out in *Civilizing the Economy*. In this instance the word "climate" broadens from considerations of the social/economic environment to the ecological environment, as well. In the first case important emphasis is given to various historical lenses that causally situate a process in which personal identity is viewed culturally as economic self-interest that has its basis in viewing land as a commodity (these attitudes led to the theft of land from native peoples by colonial adventurers). In turn, these attitudes further led to the Atlantic Triangle Trade (slavery) and White Economics in which slavery develops into an attitude of white privilege and a false sense of superiority over those

Africans so enslaved. In the last section of the book “Empowering the Civic” a vision of hope is set out built upon empathy, the creation of a commons, and a feminist ethics of care. There is a lot in this book to productively engage scholars and to stimulate students enrolled in advanced classes in social/political philosophy. Highly recommended.

Michael Boylan, Marymount University. Author of *A Just Society* and *Natural Human Rights: A Theory*.

Preface

Where should we go to understand ourselves? I suggest that we go to the Atlantic Ocean. For Europeans, Americans, and Africans, the Atlantic commerce of people, land, and products created a social climate of injustice that has never been repaired. One is tempted to see Europe apart from Africa and America, or Africa apart from Europe and America, or even America as though it does not belong to the same Atlantic commerce as Europe and Africa, but these are all forms of social amnesia. If you want to know why we are in the mess we are in today, visit the Atlantic.

That was a long time ago, but it still haunts us because the injustices that were inflicted have not been corrected. Perhaps they could have been if the Reconstruction following the Civil War had continued, but it was strangled with violence, lynching, and terrorism. The 1960s civil rights movements ended Jim Crow, but was cut short of creating a just society. “Black Lives Matter,” the January 6 insurrection, and thousands of preventable Covid deaths particularly among communities of color provide more evidence than we need to understand that we still live in the wake of the Atlantic calamity.

Why have we not transformed our social climate? I think that when “push came to shove,” so to speak, those seeking change have always compromised with those resisting change for the sake of our national well-being or what I will call, “American Prosperity.” Genocide and slavery were not tolerated and even encouraged for nothing. They were for wealth and growth; for the development of what could be called “the American Empire.” Now, and this is relatively new, the trends of American Prosperity threaten our habitat itself: the Earth. American Prosperity is leading us into our own desolation wilderness.

Annie Leonard’s 2007 video, “The Story of Stuff,” displays for all to see how current consumption destroys nature, exploits workers, poisons families, and pollutes the biosphere (2007). As she says, for our current consumption to continue, we would need three to five Earths, and we only have one. This trend isn’t just economic. It’s a whole package of national identity, prestige, dreams, lifestyle, and self-worth. When President George Bush called on us to stand up for America after

the attack on the World Trade Center, he encouraged us to go shopping. American Prosperity, in other words, is the god that some worship by sacrificing others.

This book argues that we must change the unsustainable trends of American Prosperity to protect our habitat. We cannot do that until we shift our social climate from a climate of injustice to a climate of justice. Addressing issues of social climate has led me to engage in three types of thinking: conceptual, narrative, and strategic. The conceptual explores four elements of an interpretive framework: the Earth, our humanity, the social, and the civic. The narrative retells American stories based on the principle of coherence. The strategic explores how to enable changes in social relations through civic encounters between those who need resources—civilians—and those who have access to them—citizens. The goal is to suggest how to create a social climate—a climate of justice—that makes implementing good environmental policy possible.

The difference between a climate of injustice and of justice is fairly easy to describe. In a climate of justice, people expect social relationships to be repaired, the vulnerable to be protected, and for everyone to get a fair share. There are expectations of fairness, of reciprocity, of reparations, and of negotiations. One can witness a climate of justice when people give their opponents the benefit of doubt, when people ensure that everyone is included, when those who have been wronged are taken seriously and the wrongs addressed, and when the Earth itself is shared and protected. Many of us have witnessed such acts, but we have also witnessed broken relationships without repair and people who act with impunity. Separating children from their parents at our southern border is only possible in a climate of injustice that gives officials permission to treat others as though they were less than human. It's a similar attitude that allows global warming to remain unaddressed .

In order to confront the legacy of the climate of injustice, we need to work together with the vulnerable communities who have suffered from American injustices. At the same time, I want to turn the spotlight on what I call the white man's world: a world created and maintained by the collective actions and attitudes of white male individuals, who themselves have been created by this world. This world continues to foster a climate of injustice and uses military force when necessary to maintain it, which prevents us from even listening to those who know what needs to be done as well as working together to do it.

To change the course of American Prosperity toward a viable future, we must face the paradoxical truth that those who are vulnerable from the perspective of American success are the groups who are essential for changing course. They are essential not only because they belong to our communities, but also because they know the limitations and limits of American Prosperity.

That doesn't mean, of course, that vulnerable communities necessarily know the right thing to do or the correct way forward on complex issues. This book is not about policy recommendations, but rather about the social condition or climate that is necessary for developing such recommendations. A climate of justice is necessary, but not sufficient for turning American Prosperity toward a sustainable future. Still, if those of us who live privileged lives listen and work with vulnerable civilians, we

can learn how to respect their humanity, and to respect our own, which will promote a climate of justice: an ethical foundation for environmentalism.

To participate in the development of this work, visit: www.climateofjusticeproject.org.

Berkeley, CA, USA

Marvin T. Brown

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Acknowledgments

I recently shared at a dinner party that for me “mindfulness” was a good way to acknowledge all the ideas that I had learned from others. My mind was filled with their ideas, stories, writings, and conversations. The “references” at the end of the chapters list some of them.

There are also colleagues and friends whose questions and comments have helped me to clarify all the things I am trying to accomplish in this book. It’s rather ambitious, but then so are the current challenges. That group includes Sharon Thornton, Georges Enderle, Nancy Southern, Elizabeth Doty, Neal Gorenflo, Tom Cavanaugh, Rebecca Mason, Michael Boylan, Gus Speth, Stan Buller, Lisa Brown, Marcello Garzo Montalvo, John Moyer, Rebecca Mason, Eddie Blyden, Caitlin Harjes, Josh Harjes, Donald Carter, and Susan Clark, who edited an early version of the text.

Thanks also to Michael Torre and Marjolein Oele of the Philosophy Department at the University of San Francisco for arranging a retirement symposium for me in 2019 that included reviews of part of the book by Ronald Sundstrom and Amanda Parris, and the honor of receiving a Lifetime Service Award.

A special acknowledgment to Mark Brown, who has served as a sounding board for those of my thoughts that seemed to have potential and those that did not. To Kirsten Brown for showing me how empowering others is possible at work, and to Erdmut, my wife, editor, critic, and even copy editor. Her support has been essential in following the internal development of my own journey with the various perspectives included in the book.

Michael Boylan, the editor of this series, has been an early and consistent supporter. I am grateful for his encouragement and his shepherding of the text through the publication process. Also, thanks to the reviewers at Springer and the Springer staff who participated in creating the final manuscript.

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About the Author

Marvin T. Brown, Ph.D., has been teaching and consulting in social, business, and organizational ethics for almost 40 years. Early in his career, he focused on the challenges of creating the right conditions for good conversations among different and diverse groups. This led to years of teaching business ethics, ethics consulting with organizations, and giving presentations on what he named “an ethical process,” (*The Ethical Process, Third Edition*, 2003) a dialogical process that teaches people with opposing positions to listen to and learn from each other. His most recent rendition of this process is *Learning through Disagreement* (2014).

Over the years, the context for describing this process has expanded from the workplace (*Working Ethics*, 1990) to the corporation in society (*Corporate Integrity*, 2000), to civic systems of provision (*Civilizing the Economy*, 2010), and now to this book that focuses on the current dilemma of our social and environmental climate of injustice.

In 2019, Marvin Brown received a Lifetime Service Award from the Philosophy Department at the University of San Francisco, where he taught business and social ethics. He has also taught social and organizational ethics at Saybrook University, Alliant International University, and JFK University, all in the San Francisco Bay Area. Brown has also served as an ethics consultant for Levi Strauss and Company and the Northern California Automobile Association. He has given presentations at international conferences in Germany, Poland, Argentina, Venezuela, and China, as well as at meetings of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics and the Society of Business Ethics. His essays have appeared in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, *The Next Systems Project*, and *Catalyst: Strategic Design Review*. His books have been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, German, Polish, Italian, Korean, and Chinese. Marvin has a Ph.D. from Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, an M.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a B.A. from Nebraska Wesleyan University. He has also received a Faculty Service Award from the University of San Francisco, and an Alumni Achievement Award from Nebraska Wesleyan University.