

FROM THE GYGES CITIZEN TO THE COPENHAGEN CITIZEN: Can Transparency Become King?

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(Note: all italics in article are the author's)

“BARACK OBAMA STEPS INTO THE RING” boldly proclaimed the headline on Denmark’s website for the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference last fall, when hope still shone, however dimly, for a comprehensive global agreement.

But in traveling to Copenhagen to speak to delegates from 192 nations, President Obama was not so much stepping into a ring of battle as he was putting on a modern form of Plato’s “Ring of Gyges.” Finding a golden ring giving him the power of invisibility, Gyges makes his way to the Lydian palace where he uses his new power to seduce the queen, convince her to help murder the king, and ultimately become the King of Lydia himself. Gyges has chosen to wield his new power of invisibility for nefarious purposes. More recently, the global financial tsunami has slapped us up against a new high water mark for people who exult in secrecy as much as in gain.

Examples abound of the human drive toward grasping power by finding new ways of wearing (or perhaps we should say “retreating into”) the Ring of Gyges. Unless we understand this powerful, ancient, and all-too-human motivation, the movement to reduce the effects of climate change will fail.

When it comes to finding solutions to climate change, denial of scientific data and lack of technology are only temporary speed bumps. Lack of transparency – primarily from governments and corporations - is the real roadblock, an obstacle as resistant as it is invisible. As we learned from the recent global financial crisis, secrecy is often at the heart of malfeasance and fraud. The same is true for the current climate crisis inasmuch as a lack of transparency will result in poor enforcement and inordinate opportunities to ‘game’ the system—both of which constitute a greater threat than either technological or political barriers.

How can Brandeis University instill an understanding of the need for transparency? A principal task is to supplant *Gyges Citizens*, as I will denote them here, with a new type of activist whom I will call, albeit with residual hope, the *Copenhagen Citizen*. Only then will a new kind of global community emerge to break the rings of invisibility that impede our ability to grapple with climate change.

From Wagner's *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* to Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*, it bears noting that the insidious magic power of rings have found creative expression across cultures for centuries. Perhaps Harold Kushner sums it up best:

Someone once said that the measure of a person's moral seriousness is what that person would do if he were sure nobody could see him. . . . Socrates recounts the myth of the Ring of Gyges, a magic ring that has the power to make its wearer invisible. He asks how would an honest man behave if he were to wear it, or a dishonest man. Socrates' conclusion: If a person truly understood his own self-interest, he would not take advantage of his invisibility to do anything wrong. There would be nothing he could gain that would be worth the loss of his integrity.

But what is our own 'self-interest' in the climate change debate? And why are so many nations, corporations and individuals willing to risk the loss of integrity by retreating into the modern Ring of Gyges? Given our ancient human frailties, how can the Copenhagen Citizen supplant the Gyges Citizen, and what would such a person look like?

Is Invisibility Inevitable?

Too often, we have been willing to cede power to those who shun transparency and build their success on secrecy. Commentator John Dorbolo, writing in the immediate wake of the Enron scandal and the build-up to the Iraq War, notes that the Gyges Story "remains important to us today because it concerns what we expect humans to do with power over others. In politics, we give power to others, hoping that they will do what is right. If Plato's allegory of the ring is right, then we had better watch out. Anyone who gains power without accountability is liable to use it unjustly." And in light of Enron and the Iraq War, Dorbolo concludes that "*Secrecy is a form of invisibility, and for the purposes of power, as effective as a magic ring.*"

More recently, a similar theme could be found at the world's largest car company. "Secretive Culture Led Toyota Astray," declared the Wall Street Journal, which quoted the Japanese proverb: "if it stinks put a lid on it." Could there be a better exclamation point to mark the fetid intersection where denial of climate change meets the culture of secrecy? To be sure, secrecy can become enmeshed in one's culture for a variety of reasons. Yet incentives to take short cuts, or buy 'short' for that matter, become stronger the more one retreats into the Ring of Gyges. And the further one retreats into the ring, the darker it gets.

In proclaiming that "sunlight is the best disinfectant," Justice Brandeis made the critical connection between purification and transparency. Casting a bright light on landscapes – geographic, political, corporate and atmospheric - that would otherwise be invisible is the dynamic by which we eliminate corners both dark and dirty. Is this not the same goal, writ large across the face of our planet that stands at the heart of our efforts to ameliorate the impacts of climate change?

The Rise of the Copenhagen Citizen

The Copenhagen Citizen desires to fundamentally redirect the energy of the Ring of Gyges in order to deprive the Gyges Citizen of his power. Rather than retreating into a world where secrecy becomes the coin of command, the Copenhagen Citizen marches into the sunlight with transparency as the new language of commerce.

On the political front, the Gyges Citizen focuses on fear; the Copenhagen Citizen seeks solutions. He supports candidates and corporations who rally us to climate change initiatives on the local, state, federal and international stage. He actively exposes public figures who refuse to acknowledge that human beings play a key role in climate change. Just as AIDS activists laid down their bodies to shed light on an invisible virus in the '80's, the Copenhagen Citizen must now make his protests visible, memorable and, when necessary, disturbing. Because climate change is more than "an inconvenient truth," exposing the facts will take more than polite discourse over an organic latte.

In a world where the personal meets the planetary, the Copenhagen Citizen is deliberate where the Gyges Citizen is avoidant. The Copenhagen Citizen reviews his daily life to see where he can 'reduce, reuse and recycle.' He knows that individuals in every generation possess the power of agency. The Copenhagen Citizen makes choices about which products to buy, which funds to invest in, whom to vote for, what to wear and eat, which causes to support, which bicycle (or car) to buy, where to work and how to vacation.

The Copenhagen Citizen is skeptical. In a recent headline story rich in premonition, *Harper's* describes the emerging generation of global gangsters who 'game' the carbon trading business. Such gaming takes place in a world where secrecy and manipulation cling together in a tight embrace, cloaked in a new, but nascent Ring of Gyges.

Ultimately, transparency tracks straight to greater freedom while invisibility invites us to live in shackles. Whereas the Gyges Citizen accrues power by operating in secrecy, often alone while pretending to be aligned with compatriots, the Copenhagen Citizen commands power by working transparently as part of a larger community. The community girds him for battle and prods him to constantly consider new solutions.

Brandeis Becomes the Sunlight

What can the Brandeis community do to encourage the creation of the Copenhagen Citizen? Just as Brandeis served as the National Strike Center during the Vietnam War, I believe that our university has a greater role to play in the unfolding drama of climate change. One can only feel proud to see solar panels atop the Gosman Center and read about the activities of the Campus Sustainability Initiative. Might these important steps gain even broader support if Brandeis became the first university in the country to make a course on climate change mandatory?

That would be a helpful start, but Brandeis should go much further in creating powerful symbols to draw attention to powerful issues. For example, during the Cold War, the world found it difficult to ignore nuclear threats because of the Doomsday Clock. Just as

Transparency International sheds light on corruption through its country corruption index, why not charge Brandeis with becoming the global center for monitoring transparency on climate change?

Such an activity would bring together the energies and expertise of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, friends and administrators. Surely Brandeis possesses the broad range of skills, passion and commitment to social justice that are necessary to make this a reality.

Brandeis would not seek to procure primary data (access to much of this information is readily available), but rather to assemble information that others have gathered in a format that leaps out to the average person and conveys a sense of urgency. The graphic image of the Brandeis Climate Change Transparency Project – whether it is a tree or planet or seed – could be an outgrowth of this process and a symbol to the world of Brandeis' commitment to monitoring progress and urging positive action. At a time when the Brandeis community seeks a renewed sense of unity and purpose, such a project could be a healing force at the same that it promotes better understanding of our changing world.

Such a transparency index would constitute a critical addition to other work on increasing transparency in the climate change arena. This includes Bill Gates' investment of \$4.5 million into geoengineering research with an emphasis on transparency in climate change, the World Meteorological Organization's decision to collect more precise temperature data and the SEC's Carbon Disclosure Project, which has begun providing greater clarification on the reporting of material risk associated with climate change. All of these point to the rise of a powerful wave of transparency that could carry us to safer shores in the years ahead. Why shouldn't Brandeis ride the crest of this wave?

Exiting the Ring of Gyges will require more than a hop, step and a jump. Like an Olympic long jumper, it will take all of our energy to leap into the world of the visible, to claim the path of clarity that Copenhagen teased us to follow. It seems to me that you can't talk about global warming or carbon trading or CO₂ emissions unless universities like Brandeis have the foresight to promote transparency, unless we have the courage to live within our means in order to further our ends, and unless we speak out and build frameworks dedicated to transparency – in the academy, in the corporation, in the political sphere and in our personal lives. It is time to create these communities, beginning, of course, with ourselves.