

This Changes Nothing: The Paris Agreement to Ignore Reality

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ABSTRACT *At the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Paris, France, 30 November to 11 December 2015, an Agreement was reached by the international community including 195 countries. The Agreement has been hailed, by participants and the media, as a major turning point for policy in the struggle to address human-induced climate change. The following is a short critical commentary in which I briefly explain why the Paris Agreement changes nothing. I highlight how the Agreement has been reached by removing almost all substantive issues concerning the causes of human-induced climate change and offers no firm plans of action. Instead of substantive cuts in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as soon as possible, the intentions of the parties promise escalation of damages and treat worst-case scenarios as an acceptable 50:50 chance. The Paris Agreement signifies commitment to sustained industrial growth, risk management over disaster prevention, and future inventions and technology as saviour. The primary commitment of the international community is to maintain the current social and economic system. The result is denial that tackling GHG emissions is incompatible with sustained economic growth. The reality is that Nation States and international corporations are engaged in an unremitting and ongoing expansion of fossil fuel energy exploration, extraction and combustion, and the construction of related infrastructure for production and consumption. The targets and promises of the Paris Agreement bear no relationship to biophysical or social and economic reality.*

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Calls for more research, evidence and proof have delayed action on human-induced climate change for over a quarter of a century. In order to stop climate forcing, fossil fuel emissions

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must be severely curtailed, if not virtually ceased, and this must be done before greenhouse gases (GHGs) accumulate in the upper atmosphere. Everyone who takes the issue seriously understands this and knows the techno-optimists advocating some future miracle solution (e.g. geo-engineering, carbon capture and storage) are primarily concerned with maintaining business as usual regardless of human-induced climate change or any other environmental problem. The Paris Agreement is being hailed as a long overdue counter to this, but is it?

Failure to take action to date means atmospheric concentrations of GHGs have already exceeded the level expected to produce climate forcing of 2°C,¹ which supposedly the international community was committed to prevent happening. Even the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has stated that, if implemented, their plans for the 2°C target (i.e. stabilisation at 450 ppm CO₂ equivalent) are only meant to offer a 50:50 chance of avoiding the worst effects of climate change.² The 2°C target itself has been controversial, does not avoid the threat of significant harm and as such is not in accord with the requirements of the UNFCCC. The ultimate aim of the UNFCCC was meant to be the ‘stabilization of GHG concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system’ (Article 2), not the implementation of a policy offering a 50:50 chance of suffering the worst impacts.

The Paris Agreement now claims (Article 2) that the aim is to hold global average temperature increases ‘to well below 2°C’ and ‘pursue efforts’ to limit this to 1.5°C, in order to reduce the risk and impacts from climate change. Many are emphasising the mention of 1.5°C as a great success, but there are no plans to achieve this. There are also no mentions of the 50:50 chance being over, so now the world is headed towards an increasingly certain temperature rise well above 2°C. Rather than a set of planned and coordinated reductions, which would have targeted fossil fuel combustion and those responsible for creating GHGs, the Paris Agreement has ‘intended nationally determined contributions’. These intentions ‘are more in line with a total warming of 3°C’ (*The Economist*, 12 December 2015). Yet, many are still applauding because this failure to be anywhere near on target is actually admitted in the Agreement.

In fact, the Paris Agreement fully expects substantive impacts from human-induced climate change and has given up on avoiding all of them. This is evident in the provisions being made for adaptation. However, responsibility for forcing others to adapt is not something mentioned, and liability and compensation are explicitly excluded (Clause 52, qualifying Article 8). So the Paris Agreement maintains the prospect of dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system, deliberate harm of the innocent and enforced adaptation. Indeed, in contradiction of the UNFCCC’s own remit, it confirms the conversion of the international position from prevention to risk management. In Article 8, you can find the promotion of ‘Comprehensive risk assessment and management’ and ‘Risk insurance facilities, climate risk pooling and other insurance solutions’. As if fire insurance ever stopped a fire!

In addition, the whole of Article 2 is qualified by the phrase: ‘in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty’. Sustainable development is repeatedly emphasised in the Paris Agreement, occurring 12 times in the first 10 articles. Indeed, the Agreement cannot be read outside of the context of effective corporate business lobbying and the new agenda for growth under the guise of ‘sustainable development’. The very opening statements of the document emphasise the importance of the October 2015 UN Resolution A/RES/70/1 ‘Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, which itself promotes economic growth, technology, industrialisation and energy use. The specified target of Goal 8 of this UN Resolution is to sustain per capita economic growth at a rate of ‘at least 7 per cent gross domestic product per annum in the least developed countries’. The environmental

devastation this would entail is meant to be addressed by the ‘endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation’, which is meaningless unless undertaken in absolute terms and that is simply impossible for the industrial economy being promoted in Goal 9. Yet, hoping for technological miracles fits well with faith in a never-ending economic expansion of material and energy throughput.

The Paris Agreement follows suit and claims that: ‘Accelerating, encouraging and enabling innovation is critical for an effective, long-term global response to climate change and promoting economic growth and sustainable development’ (Article 10). In fact, addressing climate change does not require new technology which, even when successful, takes decades to move from invention to innovation to implementation. That time frame is a luxury that has already been squandered by decades of inaction and fossil fuel expansion. The reduction of GHGs is necessary immediately using existing appropriate (not high) technology, changing infrastructure, systemic transformation and control of demand.

Therein lies the problem with the Paris Agreement; it is a fantasy which lacks any actual plan of how to achieve the targets for emissions reductions. There are no mentions of GHG sources, not a single comment on fossil fuel use, nothing about how to stop the expansion of fracking, shale oil or explorations for oil and gas in the Arctic and Antarctic. Similarly, there are no means for enforcement. Article 15 on implementation and compliance establishes an expert committee that will be ‘non-adversarial and non-punitive’, which means that it has no teeth and can do nothing about non-compliance. Then, there is Article 28, which offers the withdrawal option without any sanctions. Everyone seems to have already conveniently forgotten how Canada backed out of the Kyoto Protocol in order to frack on a massive and environmentally catastrophic industrial scale.

What is the point of trusting the governments who sign up to this agreement with one hand while investing ever more in fossil fuel extraction, combustion and consumption with the other? These are the same governments who know the world already has proven fossil fuel reserves that exceed the amount that can be combusted by at least three times,³ for an even chance of achieving 2°C, but continue exploring for more. They are the same governments promoting 7 per cent growth rates and the proliferation of industrialisation and modern energy infrastructure including advanced fossil fuel technology (UN Resolution A/RES/70/1). So, they give us promises of 1.5°C while constructing infrastructure and supporting production processes requiring massive fossil fuel expansion in an economic system built on mass conspicuous consumption and a throwaway fashion culture.

The divorce of economic and energy policy from the targets of Article 2 can only be seen as either total cynicism or total delusion on the part of the negotiators applauding in Paris. Perhaps they are all highly trained in the Orwellian art of doublethink. In any case, the aspirational targets bear no relationship at all to the reality of what governments, and their business partners, are actually doing today,⁴ or the other treaties the same governments are simultaneously signing. The economic system is already committed to continue exploiting resources as fast as possible in the race for ever-increasing material and energy throughput. Just look at the European Community’s Horizon 20:20 goals and their promotion of growth and competition and the ongoing push for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Apparently, economic growth is the priority to be protected and promoted above all else.

The contradiction at the heart of the Paris Agreement is actually unsurprising because the powerful lobbying for growth as the solution to climate change has for some time been orchestrated by corporate business and financiers using the rhetoric of a green economy. As I have noted elsewhere (Spash, 2014), this has involved the combination of arguments for growth

alleviating poverty with the necessity of environmental risk management, and 'green' technology promoted through trillions of dollars being directed towards 'entrepreneurs' (i.e. multinational corporations), to create a 'new economy'. Technology and innovation are key to this position with its neo-Austrian economics and 'free market' rhetoric. Climate change policy must be crafted accordingly to serve the capital accumulating growth economy, and so the latter becomes the solution to (not the cause of) the former.

Unfortunately, many environmental non-governmental organisations have bought into this illogical reasoning and justify their support as being pragmatic. Neoliberal language is rife across their reports and policy recommendations and their adoption of natural capital, ecosystems services, offsetting and market trading. These new environmental pragmatists believe, without justification, that the financialisation of Nature will help prevent its destruction. Thus, environmentalists promote carbon emissions trading but pay little attention to its dangers and failures (Spash, 2010). For example, Nat Keohane of the Environmental Defence Fund has noted on their website how they pushed in the corridors of Paris for 'an opening for markets'. The right-wing government of New Zealand, leading an 18-country lobby, also had its negotiators pushing for the same international carbon markets. However, you will not find emissions trading, markets, cap and trade or offsets, mentioned in the doublespeak of the Agreement, but rather the term 'internationally transferred mitigation outcomes' (clause 108 and Article 6), something Keohane applauds.

Doublespeak and wording that is strategically ambiguous is the high point of international diplomacy in the Paris Agreement. This is what made the Agreement possible and why it is so meaningless. Do not look for the words oil, natural gas, coal or fracking because they do not merit even one single mention. Nor indeed is there anything about addressing the sources of human GHG emissions, or the structures that promote them. Consider something as fundamental as energy use. The one sentence that mentions energy appears in the preamble and merely acknowledges the need to promote 'sustainable energy in developing countries, in particular in Africa'.

What the Paris Agreement tells is a bizarrely unreal story. Apparently, the cause of climate change is not fossil fuel combustion or energy sources but inadequate technology and the solution is sustainable development (i.e. economic growth and industrialisation) and poverty alleviation. As far as the current production and consumption systems are concerned, little needs to change. There are no elites consuming the vast majority of the world's resources, no multinational corporations or fossil fuel industry needing to be controlled, no capital accumulating competitive systems promoting trade and fighting over resources and emitting vast amounts of GHGs through military expenditure and wars, and no governments expanding fossil fuel use and dependency.

The unreality of this document is only matched by the unreality of the praise given to it by the media and others. This is a sign of how much strategic ambiguity and doublespeak have now become an accepted way for international politics to be conducted and reported. People can even applaud stating that the whole UNFCCC has failed for over 20 years and the planet is headed well beyond 2°C. The rhetorical flourish of successful agreement is meant to hide a total lack of substance. The Paris Agreement is at heart a document that consists of independent unilateral unenforceable targets but is being sold as a multi-lateral consensus with firm commitments.

In the final analysis, a simple test of the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement would have been a dramatic drop in the share price of the fossil fuel industry, which is loaded with toxic assets. That is, a serious agreement would have written-off all the fossil fuel reserves that cannot be

burnt without heading way beyond the already exceed 2°C target. This would have revealed the financial balance sheets that are bankrupt. Nothing happened to the stock market because the Paris Agreement is perceived by the fossil fuel industry, and financial markets, as no threat to business as usual, and possibly it is even a great opportunity for new financial instruments and ongoing economic exploitation of the planet, with trillions to come to the energy industry in subsidies for innovation and technology development.

In reality, the Paris Agreement is a compilation of nationally determined intended contradictions. The UNFCCC Secretariat advanced no plan of action and its latest Agreement is totally divorced from the operations of the current economic and political systems. Human-induced climate change can now conveniently slip off the political and media agenda until the time comes for the next major cop-out due in 2023 when a ‘stock-taking’ exercise is scheduled. By then few, if any, of the politicians responsible for this farce are likely to be in office, and neither they nor the bureaucrats and negotiators who have celebrated this great success will ever be held accountable. An acceleration of climate change impacts seems to be the only thing that will now alter the complacency of the global community.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

- 1 The 2°C target for global warming is associated by the UNFCCC with stabilising GHGs at 450 part per million (ppm) CO₂ equivalent. Their website’s facts page states this, but then misleadingly reports the current CO₂ alone (not equivalent) level as currently 398.58 parts per million. As of 2012, the total radiative forcing by all long-lived GHGs already in the atmosphere corresponded to a CO₂ equivalent concentration of 475.6 parts per million (World Meteorological Organisation reported on their website [http://www.wmo.int/pages/mediacentre/press_releases/pr_980_en.html]; accessed 3 May 2015). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration concurs with this, reporting the atmospheric concentrations in CO₂ equivalents as of 2014 to be 481 ppm, of which 397 is stated to be CO₂ alone (<http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/aggi/>; accessed 21 January 2016). The level of CO₂ alone was reported by the World Meteorological Organisation as first surpassing 400ppm in the atmosphere in 2012 (Howard, 2014). Concentrations are rising at approximately 3 ppm per year.
- 2 ‘A 2 degrees Celsius/Centigrade rise in global temperatures from pre-industrial levels is the highest rise we can afford if we want a 50% chance of avoiding the worst effects of climate change’ (UNFCCC [http://unfccc.int/essential_background/basic_facts_figures/items/6246.php]; accessed 8 January 2016). Note that this statement conflates the probability of achieving 2°C with the probability of the worst effects, that is, even achieving 2°C with certainty leaves uncertain the impacts that temperature entails.
- 3 The excess of three times is based upon large conservative estimates of the available remaining budget, namely 1400 Gt of CO₂, under a 50% chance of achieving 2°C (Raupach et al., 2014, p. 874). IPCC (2013) calculations are much lower, but even these have been criticised as neither up-to-date (referencing 2011) nor adequately taking into account non-energy emissions which reduce the amount left for fossil fuels. Doing so leads Anderson (2015) to estimate the remaining budget for energy emissions over the period 2015–2100, at about 650 Gt of CO₂ for a ‘likely’ (66%) chance of staying below 2°C. On this basis, the excess of reserves is over 6 times the available budget. Going down to 1.5°C and/or increasing the chance of achieving the target increase(s) the excess even further.
- 4 The commitments already made to exploiting new fossil fuel sources by 2012 were estimated as leading to the release of 300 Gt CO₂ equivalent between 2012 and 2050 (Meindersma & Blok, 2012). This is being added to the existing excess of unburnable stocks for the 2°C target (McGlade & Ekins, 2015); see also previous note.

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