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Climate Terror From Paris Could Endure for Generations

By Patrick Bond
December 25, 2015



Durban, South Africa.

Paris witnessed both explicit terrorism by religious extremists on November 13 and a month later, implicit terrorism by carbon addicts negotiating a world treaty that guarantees catastrophic climate change. The first incident left more than 130 people dead in just one evening's mayhem; the second lasted a fortnight but over the next century can be expected to kill hundreds of millions, especially in Africa.

But because the latest version of the annual United Nations climate talks has three kinds of spin-doctors, the extent of damage may not be well understood. The 21st Conference of the Parties

(COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) generated reactions ranging from smug denialism to righteous fury. The first reaction is ‘from above’ (the Establishment) and is self-satisfied; the second is from the middle (‘Climate Action’) and is semi-satisfied; the third, from below (‘Climate Justice’), is justifiably outraged.

Guzzling French champagne last Saturday, the Establishment quickly proclaimed, in essence, “The Paris climate glass is nearly full – so why not get drunk on planet-saving rhetoric?” The *New York Times* reported with a straight face, “President Obama said the historic agreement is a tribute to American climate change leadership” (and in a criminally-negligent way, this is not untrue).

Since 2009, US State Department chief negotiator Todd Stern successfully drove the negotiations away from four essential principles: ensuring emissions-cut commitments would be sufficient to halt runaway climate change; making the cuts legally binding with accountability mechanisms; distributing the burden of cuts fairly based on responsibility for causing the crisis; and making financial transfers to repair weather-related loss and damage following directly from that historic liability. Washington elites always prefer ‘market mechanisms’ like carbon trading instead of paying their climate debt even though the US national carbon market fatally crashed in 2010.

In part because the Durban COP17 in 2011 provided lubrication and – with South Africa’s blessing – empowered Stern to wreck the idea of Common But Differentiated Responsibility while giving “a Viagra shot to flailing carbon markets” (as a male Bank of America official cheerfully celebrated), Paris witnessed the demise of these essential principles. And again, “South Africa played a key role negotiating on behalf of the developing countries of the world,” according to Pretoria’s environment minister Edna Molewa, who proclaimed from Paris “an ambitious, fair and effective legally-binding outcome.”

Arrogant fibbery. The collective Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) – i.e. *voluntary* cuts – will put the temperature rise at above 3 degrees. From coal-based South Africa, the word ambitious loses meaning given Molewa’s weak INDCs – ranked by ClimateActionTracker as amongst the world’s most “inadequate” – and given that South Africa hosts the world’s two largest coal-fired power stations now under construction, with no objection by Molewa. She regularly approves increased (highly-subsidized) coal burning and exports, vast fracking, offshore-oil drilling, exemptions from pollution regulation, emissions-intensive corporate farming and fast-worsening suburban sprawl.

A second narrative comes from large NGOs that mobilized over the past six months to provide mild-mannered pressure points on negotiators. Their line is, essentially, “The Paris glass is *partly* full – so sip up and enjoy!”

This line derives not merely from the predictable back-slapping associated with petit-bourgeois vanity, gazing upwards to power for validation, such as one finds at the Worldwide Fund for Nature and Climate Action Network, what with their corporate sponsorships. All of us reading this are often tempted in this direction, aren’t we, because such unnatural twisting of the neck is a permanent occupational hazard in this line of work.

And such opportunism was to be expected from Paris, especially after Avaaz and Greenpeace endorsed G7 leadership posturing in June, when at their meeting in Germany the Establishment made a meaningless commitment to a decarbonized economy – in the year 2100, *at least fifty years too late*.

Perhaps worse than their upward gaze, though, the lead NGOs suffered a hyper-reaction to the 2009 Copenhagen Syndrome. Having hyped the COP15 Establishment negotiators as “Seal the Deal!” planet-saviours, NGOs mourned the devastating Copenhagen Accord signed in secret by leaders from Washington, Brasilia, Beijing, New Delhi and Pretoria. This was soon followed by a collapse of climate consciousness and mobilization. Such alienation is often attributed to activist heart-break: a roller-coaster of raised NGO expectations and plummeting Establishment performance.

Possessing only an incremental theory of social change, NGOs toasting the Paris deal now feel the need to confirm that they did as best they could, and that they have grounds to continue along the same lines in future. To be sure, insider-oriented persuasion tactics pursued by the 42-million member clicktivist group Avaaz are certainly impressive in their breadth and scope. Yet for Avaaz, “most importantly, [the Paris deal] sends a clear message to investors everywhere: sinking money into fossil fuels is a dead bet. Renewables are the profit centre. Technology to bring us to 100% clean energy is the money-maker of the future.”

Once again, Avaaz validates the COP process, the Establishment’s negotiators and the overall incentive structure of capitalism that *are the proximate causes of the crisis*.

The third narrative is actually the most realistic: “The Paris glass is full of toxic fairy dust – don’t dare even sniff!” The traditional Climate Justice (CJ) stance is to delegitimize the Establishment and return the focus of activism to grassroots sites of struggle, in future radically changing the balance of forces locally, nationally and then globally. But until that change in power is achieved, the UNFCCC COPs are just Conferences of Polluters.

The landless movement Via Campesina was clearest: “There is nothing binding for states, national contributions lead us towards a global warming of over 3°C and multinationals are the main beneficiaries. It was essentially a media circus.”

Asad Rehman coordinates climate advocacy at the world’s leading North-South CJ organization, Friends of the Earth International: “The reviews [of whether INDCs are adhered to and then need strengthening] are too weak and too late. The political number mentioned for finance has no bearing on the scale of need. It’s empty. The iceberg has struck, the ship is going down and the band is still playing to warm applause.”

And not forgetting the voice of climate science, putting it most bluntly, James Hansen called Paris, simply, “bullshit.”

Where does that leave us? If the glass-half-full NGOs get serious – and I hope to be pleasantly surprised in 2016 – then the only way forward is for them to apply their substantial influence on behalf of solidarity with those CJ activists making a real difference, at the base.

Close to my own home, the weeks before COP21 witnessed potential victories in two major struggles: opposition to corporate coal mining – led mainly by women peasants, campaigners and lawyers – in rural Zululand, bordering the historic iMfolozi wilderness reserve (where the world's largest white rhino population is threatened by poachers); and South Durban residents fighting the massive expansion of Africa's largest port-petrochemical complex. In both attacks, the climate-defence weapon was part of the activists' arsenal.

But it is only when these campaigns have conclusively done the work COP negotiators and NGO cheerleaders just shirked – leaving fossil fuels in the ground and pointing the way to a just, post-carbon society – that we can raise our glasses and toast humanity, with integrity. Until then, pimps for the Paris Conference of Polluters should be told to sober up and halt what will soon be understood as their fatal attack on Mother Earth.