

free thinking for the world

Paris COP21: the worst deal in the history of global climate negotiations

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The role of technology in solving the climate change challenge was completely ignored by world leaders at the Paris conference.



Climate protesters in Paris, December 12, 2015. Demotix/ Jo Syz. All rights reserved.

Not long before the start of the Paris COP21 climate change talks, whose intended aim was to produce a comprehensive strategy for addressing and hopefully solving the "unchecked climate change" problem, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory released a study that is so shocking it should have made world leaders and delegates attending the conference lose sleep at night.

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A huge Greenland glacier "broke loose from a glaciologically stable position in 2012 and entered a phase of accelerated retreat". an unexpected and ominous development. The glacier "holds enough water to raise global sea level by more than 18 inches (46 centimeters) if it were to melt completely. And now it's on a crash diet, losing 5 billion tons of mass every year. All that ice is crumbling into the North Atlantic Ocean." Waleed Abdalati, a co-author and senior scientist at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Md. raised the level of concern about what is happening to our planet by adding that, "Other glaciers have thinned by over a meter a year, which we believe is too much to be attributed to melting alone. We think there is a dynamic effect in which the glaciers are accelerating due to warming."

What did world leaders do instead at the Paris climate change conference which was held from 30

November to 12 December 2015? They came up with an agreement which easily qualifies as the worst deal in the history of global climate negotiations. They drafted a pact which relies purely on voluntary action, thus representing a major step backwards from the Kyoto Protocol which imposes carbon emission limits on the parties that adopted and ratified the treaty. They produced a plan to keep rising temperatures at bay -- at a maximum of 1.5 celsius -- without providing financial assistance to poor nations so they can develop clean energy systems. Worse, they kicked the can down the road by not demanding any action until 2020.

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However, accustomed to manipulating public opinion, world leaders sought to create a state of euphoria about the outcome of the Paris climate talks by using not merely hyperbolic language but even outright lies. President Obama hailed the pact as a development signifying "a turning point for the world," while French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius described it as "legally binding." It is up to each one of us individually to decide which of the two leaders committed a greater insult to human intelligence.

As expected, the initial reaction on the part of the mainstream news industry was in strict adherence to the spirit of the statements made by leaders like Obama and others, describing the agreement as a deal representing, "the best chance to save the planet."

The Paris COP21 climate agreement is simply hot air. We are no closer to averting a catastrophic climate change scenario than we were before the start of the Paris talks. In fact, the Paris agreement ensures that the problem of climate change remains unchecked. For it is the height of political hypocrisy to believe that the planet can be saved through a voluntary agreement among nations to reduce emissions and keep global warming at bay. A voluntary agreement has no teeth by default. Moreover, it is certain that nations like India, concerned as they are about poverty and development, are not going to accept any climate change deal without some type of financial compensation. This was surely the connotation behind the use of the term "climate justice" used by India's Prime Minister Modi. And, sure enough, there is nothing in the Paris treaty about mandatory payments to poor nations

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The fact of the matter is that as long as poverty and unemployment remain severe problems for many countries around the world, let alone the existence of powerful interests represented by a fossil fuel-driven global economy, the struggle against climate change will naturally take a back seat. This is simply a fact, which some members and organizations of the environmental community refuse to acknowledge or accept.

The dynamics of national political culture also play a key role in our ability to avert or not a catastrophic climate change scenario. Indeed, a key reason as to why the Paris climate change negotiations shifted away from mandatory, top-down targets on carbon emissions output and adopted instead a voluntary approach to the climate change challenge is because a legally binding treaty that needed ratification by governments back home would have reduced substantially the chances of reaching any kind of an agreement. This is certainly the case for one of the world's biggest polluters, i.e., the United States. Any treaty on climate change that made its way to Capitol Hill would have been shredded into pieces by the Republican-controlled Congress. This is why Obama can claim the Paris COP21 agreement as a "turning point for the world" -- that is, because the deal does not have to go to the US Congress.

As time goes by and the euphoria about the Paris agreement evaporates, it is certain that more and more people will realize that the political compromise made in Paris over mandatory emissions comes at a great cost. Our ability to control rising temperatures caused by carbon dioxide accumulated in the air has been

greatly hindered.

But there is more. As the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report points out, carbon emission cuts are not enough any more to slow down global warming. According to IPCC, we are headed with certainty towards an increase in temperatures by three degrees Celsius by 2100. Using complex mathematical models of the world's climate system tested against past climate data, scientists have concluded that three degrees of warming would spell an "environmental catastrophe" of uncontrolled consequences.

So what should be done? How do we balance the need to tackle poverty and unemployment with climate change? The global economy is not going to change course overnight, if at all. Activism, in order to increase not only awareness but to force change is more needed now than at any time in the recent past. The task surely remains the same as when a radical German philosopher and political economist first captured the problematic in the dialectical relationship between thought and praxis: we need not only to interpret the world, but to change it!

Interestingly enough, the role of technology in solving the climate change challenge was completely ignored by world leaders at the Paris conference! In addition to drastically reducing emissions through mandatory limits and adopting clean energy systems, it is imperative that we do not hesitate to turn to technology as a potential ally in our struggle to save the planet from an "environmental catastrophe" of uncontrolled consequences caused by human activity.

Presently, there are negative carbon technologies to remove existing carbon dioxide from the air. As a recent article in The MIT Technology Review underlines, the carbon negative technologies in Silicon Valley, like those employed by Global Thermostat, which are fundamentally different from the now defunct carbon capturing and storing technologies, can offer a potential solution to the greatest threat facing the future of human civilization as we know it.

Such technologies, if fully developed and employed on a global scale, can be used to clean the air from carbon dioxide, acting like trees do! Moreover, they are quite cheap and offer the potential of financial rewards, thus making them an attractive incentive to investors and entrepreneurs since, again, the logic of the global economy is not going to change overnight and we certainly cannot wait for the materialization of the "ideal society" for the planet and the future of human civilization to be saved.

Urgent problems require radical solutions. And a solution to climate change can be achieved only when the political, financial and technological dimensions of the puzzle come together. Progressives, I would argue, have no alternative but to work in this direction.