The Paris agreement … what does it really mean?

Can the weaknesses of Paris be understood as "institutional capture" by our economic system?

Undoubtedly the Paris agreement was an historic event, justly celebrated by its convenors and participants. But it was a strange victory with a remarkably polarised response from thoughtful and engaged people all over the world. Experienced observers and participants have been trying to understand what really happened ever since it concluded in December 2015. Perhaps no one captured this enigmatic quality better than George Monbiot shortly afterwards:
By comparison to what it could have been, it's a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it's a disaster.[1]

Being keen to understand it myself, I published an essay around Christmas time[2] but 1 pretty soon came to think it was a bit hasty. The following is an update.

A few years ago when the UN climate conference in Copenhagen failed, it provoked a lot of speculation about the limits of international cooperation, as well as the ultimate feasibility of a decent climate solution. Well, Paris has done the same. No one could call it a failure … and yet, many concerned observers of this long process are wondering out loud if the optimistic surface of the agreement might not conceal a stubborn core of something intractable. There's a way of reading Paris, they suggest, that tells us how our institutional responses are destined to be inadequate, tardy and self-centred. There is something resistant about the complex arrangements we call the economy, and the other system we call politics which makes them incapable of responding appropriately to the crisis. This would be pretty bad news if it were true - so is there any way to know?

In 2012, American historian William Ophuls wrote a little book explaining why it is that all civilizations fail - a kind of distillation of his lifetime's work.[3] He makes a compelling argument, with a sober conclusion: civilizations, just like organisms, pass through life-stages of growing complexity, before their inexorable decay. No single theme drives this cycle - Ophuls shows how ecological, economic, institutional, cultural, and psychological factors all make their contributions. What is arresting though, is his clear insistence that, although we can alter this trajectory in minor ways, it is not possible to avoid it. On his reading, the phase of decline is already far advanced in our own case, and the most useful things we can do are to try to understand this as thoroughly as we can, and to work towards a managed transition to whatever must follow, rather than a chaotic one.

This short treatise has been on my mind a bit since Paris. If it is anywhere near the truth, then we're obliged to see the Paris outcome very differently from those who think the agreement is the first step along the road to a genuine climate response. For if Ophuls is right, the climate problem is exactly the kind of thing that is insoluble under our existing systems - the ones that caused it.

Let us see if we can shed any light on this contest - between the normal view that a technologically powerful society has the means of avoiding and overcoming any obstacle or limitation it might meet - and its opponent, the view that the lives of societies are governed by something like a natural law which determines their thermodynamic behaviour, their interactions with physical environments, the patterns of their human and social development, and their responses to adversity. This is the way Ophuls puts it.

Modern civilization believes that it commands the historical process with technological power. Allied to capitalist markets that foster continual innovation, this power will allow it to … escape the common fate of all previous civilizations. No longer bound by the past, we think, our future is infinitely bright.
But, he says, this is false because
There is simply no escape from our all-too-human nature. In the end, mastering the historical process would require human beings to master themselves, something they are far from achieving.[4]

This is not a judgement against greed, lust and vainglory, but an admission that all our institutions, in their design and functioning, reflect both our creativity and our limitations. When we attempt to act as a collective, our fallibility will always be there, making foresight impotent, and navigation blind.

Now, it's a corollary of this view, that in a sense, people can't be said to be fully in charge of their institutions; there is a sense in which the organisations and structures we invent become sovereign over us. They develop movement, power and a kind of intention all by themselves. And this potency routinely overpowers and commands us. It is as if we become pawns like the sorcerer's apprentice, and in this way we do many damaging things we might not if we were acting as individuals with all our responsible faculties engaged. This is what Ophuls has in mind in his complaint about human nature - not that we ought be like angels, but that in our joint ventures, we easily become less than ourselves. One scholar put it like this:

By structuring, constraining, and enabling individual behaviours, institutions have the power to mould the capacities and behaviour of agents in fundamental ways: they have a capacity to change aspirations instead of merely enabling or constraining them. Habit is the key mechanism in this transformation. Institutions are social structures that can involve reconstitutive downward causation, acting to some degree upon individual habits of thought and action.[5]

It strikes me this idea - that human institutions make most sense when conceived broadly; and that they possess a species of agency with a complicated and subtle relation to their individual actors - can be a useful key to unlocking some of the significance of Paris. In what follows, I'll be taking the view that the economic "system" together with its twins, the various political ones, can be thought of as an institution in which we are all enmeshed in a great variety of roles - some coercive, like the big global corporations, and some more passive, like that of mass consumers - but all utterly interdependent, and all constantly and invisibly subject to the "downward causation" exerted by this immense and largely imponderable creation of ours.

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Look carefully at the Paris text and it isn't hard to find some curious anomalies. How, for example, are we to explain the hedging, the recoil from mandatory goals, the fairy-tale references to an unobtainable 1.5°C, the non-appearance of any commitment to progressive carbon pricing? And the absence of any reference to fossil fuels anywhere in the text? The negotiators must know that this agreement, so long in the making and so much desired, simply postpones the hard stuff for somewhere down the track - again. It gives a big green light to the new energy economy - which is great - but does nothing to guarantee the outcome that matters: correcting the planet's surface energy imbalance fast enough to avert severe damage.[6]

And how on Earth do we explain the flat contradiction between the emission reduction trajectory we need, and the formulae written into the agreement? Kevin Anderson, the scientist who understands this as well as anyone (and the most outspoken) has been asking us to focus on this puzzle for years. Cognitive dissonance, he calls it - scientists simply refusing to contemplate the implications of their own research when they come to advise governments. And policy makers refusing to subordinate economic imperatives to ecological ones, no matter how clearly inverted this priority is shown to be.[7]

If you harden your gaze just a little, you can see that the commitments made at Paris, while they look better than they might have been (and better than past agreements) are still full of escape clauses, limits and weakly defined promises. That's not what you'd expect if the parties really believed their lives depended on a decarbonisation path that must work, or if they really felt a responsibility to the people of the future. In fact, the most honest interpretation of Paris might be that it's just what you'd expect if the participants and their best intentions had hit a wall - some kind of barrier impossible to scale but separating us from the place we want to be.

If you are inclined to celebrate Paris, you can say these features are evidence of a process in its infancy. You will point to how far we've come. But shouldn't we be just as interested in why we need baby-steps instead of great strides. It's not as if the urgency isn't clearly understood, and it isn't the case that reticence can be explained by the collision of sovereign interests. No, it looks as if something else is going on - something resistant about the system for generating and distributing wealth. This system is capitalism - a set of practices designed to permit private accumulation of capital and private ownership and control of the means of production. It has created great wealth, in the few centuries of its existence, but also great destruction. It is presently in a position of complete dominance over the entire globe.

The question that has been bothering me since Paris, then, is this: could it be that the weaknesses of the agreement are signs that under capitalism, a climate solution (or any adequate response to the many ecological crises) is impossible? Could capitalism be the kind of self-destructive institution that worried Ophuls - a covert master which manages to get the worst out of its human slaves, leading them on a giddy ride to ruin?

Well, one clue sticks out a mile. Almost no one with executive responsibility, very few experts, and no policy-makers at all will deny that economic growth can and should continue for ever. And you can't blame them. The plain facts are that if and when growth slows or stops, capitalist economies are in big trouble. This system is now fully global and capable of converting almost anything into a commodity. Its reach is total, and if growth falters, it collapses. Why? Here is David Harvey's explanation:

The simplest reason is that capital is about profit seeking. For all capitalists to realise a positive profit requires the existence of more value at the end of the day than there was at the beginning. That means an expansion of the total output of social labour. Without that expansion there can be no capital. A zero-growth capitalist economy is a logical and exclusionary contradiction. It simply cannot exist. This is why zero growth defines a condition of crisis for capital. If prolonged, zero growth of the kind that prevailed in much of the world in the 1930s spells the death knell of capitalism.[8]

But this is surely a flat-out empirical contradiction. Perpetual growth cannot occur on a finite planet - not when the scope of the human economy is so vast and its throughput of all resources, and waste production are so enormous. If capitalism were to face this inconvenient truth, it would be obliged to retrench; so instead it denies that there are such limits. So politics and economics together conspire to pretend that any and all ecological constraints can be overcome by technological progress.

It seemed to me on reflection you can see this fantasy underwritten in the Paris agreement. If you doubt me, try comparing the Paris text with the Pope's encyclical, issued a couple of months before. Look for hints of diagnostic formulae in both. You won't find anything in Paris about reducing the size of the economy of consumption, because that's politically impossible. Everyone who signed this has agreed that whatever we do about the climate, it must not retard the free operation of capitalism. The system that got us into this mess is supposed to be able to deliver us out of it again. Trouble is, this is just faith. Nobody has the slightest reason to believe this. We assert it because it is much less frightening than its contradiction.

Here's another puzzle: the agreement in Paris acknowledges that pledges already on the table are not enough to stop warming at two degrees. It provides explicit measures to revise targets, and a sort of 'honour system' of follow the leader to raise signatories' ambition over time. But scientists know quite well the rate of emission reduction we need to get to this goal - it is something like 10% annually from 2025, with a reduction in carbon intensity of the global economy of about 13%.[9] But these estimates aren't in the agreement; in fact there's no mention of any economic pain at all. Furthermore, the text studiously avoids saying anything about curtailing the production of fossil fuels - only their combustion products. But why? If we intend to stop putting CO_2 into the air, shouldn't we be strongly focussed on how to steer the economy through that rough time when we have to give up the whole vast fossil fuel industry?

This adjustment must be made. It will be unimaginably difficult, and very disruptive. Altogether, fossil fuels are the core of the world economy - by far the biggest enterprise

ever seen on Earth. Proprietors are not going to just let it go, and political will to mange the transition is nowhere to be seen - certainly not at Paris. You can account for these omissions using the 'one-step-at-a-time' argument - and this is fine, as far as it goes. Compared to what went before, Paris looks like a bold first step - until you compare it with what it needs to be.

This difference, between the Paris achievement, and the inflexible geophysical facts, must make us pause. We have to decide, if we can, whether the timidity recorded there is evidence of a global community emerging in its own good time (in which case we would have to reconcile to its leisurely schedule) or a sign of indubitable opposition - the kind that Ophuls wrote about, that comes from the systems we have organised rather than from the perversity of human actors - the delegates and leaders who approved the text. Because, for anyone who cares about the climate problem, that decision commits us to one of two fundamentally different projects.

If we think Paris is the long-awaited beginning of a truly international response to the climate, then what we're going to need is massively strengthened political will - which is just a way of saying, lots and lots of people wanting it enough. If, on the other hand, we think Paris shows how capitalism trumps everything, then, besides political will, we need to invent something to replace it. That's going to be quite a job. No one has any idea what it might be. Capitalism has been so successful, and we've lived with it so long, we would have to figure out if there is another way of doing things that could sustain comfort, if not prosperity, and spread it around better than it has been, and at the same time, live within our planetary income - which we are clearly not doing now. Plenty of people have seen this, and there are plenty of suggestions about how it might be done - just no fully credible ones.[10]

In a perceptive essay on the Paris outcome, Oliver Geden discusses why policy makers prefer to set emission targets decades in the future, rather than specify how to make them happen immediately - which is what we really need. Unsurprisingly, it's politics. Politicians must try to keep as many stakeholders happy as they can. It's only natural, in difficult cases, to frame a solution as a distant goal, leaving the tricky implementation to be figured out by specialists. *"So far"*, he says, *"setting ambitious long-term global climate targets has not been a prerequisite but a substitute for appropriate action."*[11]

In this, scientists and economists have been collaborators, bending to political demands for advice that keeps a 2°C limit looking feasible. All the current scenarios for 2°C require heroic assumptions about our capacity to withdraw carbon from the air in future, as well as the development of a vast biofuel enterprise. The feasibility of the first is an open question, because nothing like it exists in theory or in practice. The second would mean taking over an area of arable land the size of a continent. In other words, claiming that 2°C is still in reach entails massive wishful thinking - and yet it is routine. In another essay, written six months before Paris, Geden put it like this: *"Everyday politics is therefore dominated not by evidence-based policy-making but by attempts at 'policy-based evidence-making'."*[12]… a thought that should remind us of Ophuls' warning.

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Everyone who has faced the climate crisis squarely knows it is just one of a number of ecological problems of immense scale and importance that have become critical during that last half-century or so, when human presence on Earth has grown to overwhelm the biosphere. Knowing this brings despair. It's peculiarly painful to think that we could be aware of our predicament, and yet be quite unable to avert it.

"It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing." With these words, Elizabeth Kolbert closed her fine book on the climate problem - not resigned, but concerned.[13] What she had reported puzzled her as profoundly as it does you or me. It might be called the Easter Island paradox - the challenge of understanding the contradictory things we build into our traditions and institutions. Surely we will find their sources inside ourselves, as Ophuls says, in the restless chaotic heart of darkness where visitors rarely go. If so, then societies would need explorers of the unconscious, just as much as people do, if we are to understand ourselves.

If this is really the way to resolve the contradictions of Paris, then there is something more than discouragement in the outcome. Yes, it means no simple adjustment to the system of markets will be enough to steer things the way we need. That would terminate one of the great hopes of the conference sponsors. But we're not stuck with disappointment. The climate problem is very bad, but it isn't really the thing we have to fix. If Elizabeth Kolbert were to give our predicament a one-word diagnosis it wouldn't be 'climate', but 'growth' - addictive growth and the relentless consumption it entails. A disrupted global climate is one of a suite of unintended side-effects of this economic adventure that has made human presence on Earth a dominant geophysical force. The thing is, we are quite clever enough to manage this - if only we knew what we are doing. But we don't. If Paris can eventually work as a wake-up call that switches our focus onto this, it may turn out to have been a great first step after all.

Because of our precocious mental gifts, we humans live in two worlds - the surface of the Earth, which is a tiny part of the universe: the solid earth, the air, the water, and our fellow creatures - and another one we create for ourselves with our imaginations and languages, our memories and inventions. Let us call this the human world because we are the only ones in it.[14] This striking fact can be used as a frame in which to view our predicament. It is as if civilized people elaborate the human world, in the way Ophuls describes, crowding it with more and more of their creations until it becomes so compelling that they forget their real home in the first one. There's no better instance of this than the fantastically complex set of arrangements we've made for the production and exchange of goods and services all over the world - what we call the global economy. The people who study this for a living routinely think of it as a self-contained apparatus that can be managed so it keeps producing the things humans want for as long as there are people to direct it. Little wonder the rest of us feel much the same.

But, as some dissident economists have insisted, this is a dangerous fallacy. The economy isn't an autonomous agency at all. It produces stuff by permission of the planet on which we dwell. Being finite, the Earth necessarily imposes limits upon all and any extractive processes. Human ingenuity can work around some limits, for a time, but sooner or later they must return. The first world always wins. The economy is actually a sub-system of what is now often called 'the Earth system', a scientifically described matrix of dynamic entities and processes that compose everything on Earth's surface (and some beneath). These are facts we cannot escape, and until orthodox economic disciplines incorporate them, they won't be able to give us good guidance for solving any of our ecological problems.

Accepting this, it's not hard to see that a real fix for the climate problem has to be also a remedy for all the unsustainable things we're doing. I can just hear you say, 'Wow! we thought Paris was hard'. Just so. But looking impossible doesn't mean we shouldn't say it - or try to make it happen. What would it take? We hardly know. Many perceptive people are trying right now to figure that out, and if you share my view, then there's nothing more important they (or any of us) could be doing. One thing's for certain - misanthropy won't do, nor will any of the simplistic back-to-nature ideas. If we don't want chaos on the way to the future, we have to recruit those better angels of our nature, put them through management school, and re-build our cooperative habits under their good care.[15]

Notes

[1] The Guardian, December 12th, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/environment/georgemonbiot/2015/dec/12/paris-climate-deal-governments-fossil-fuels

[2] http://www.grandkidzfuture.com/occasional-pieces/the-paris-agreement.html

[3] Ophuls, W, 2012. *Immoderate Greatness: Why Civilizations Fail*. Create Space

[4] Ophuls, 2012. p1

[5] Hodgson, G, 2006. What Are Institutions? Journal of Economic Issues, XL; 1

[6] The text of the Paris agreement can be accessed here: https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf

[7] Anderson, K, 2015. *Duality in Climate Science*. Nature Geoscience [AOP]. 2015, *Talks in the City of Light Generate More Heat*. Nature, 524, 437

[8] Harvey, D, 2014. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. OUP

[9] Anderson, K, 2015 *Duality in Climate Science*.

[10] Some, like Herman Daly, think capitalism can transition to a zero-growth state; others believe economic growth can be 'decoupled' from resource consumption; still others, like David Harvey and Ophuls, are certain that our civilization's fate depends on discovering a way to keep prosperity without capitalism. And there are those who think they can see a way. Richard Smith's eco-socialism is one of them. http://climateandcapitalism.com/tag/richard-smith/

[11] The Guardian, December 15, 2015. *Paris Climate Deal: the trouble with targetism*. https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2015/dec/14/the-trouble-with-targetism

[12] Geden, O, 2015. Nature, 521, 27.

[13] Kolbert, E, 2006. *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*. Bloomsbury, NY.

[14] This thought has been explored by many writers, notably by Rene Dubos & Barbara Ward in *Only One Earth*, 1972, Norton; and Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*, 1967, Anchorbooks, chapter 1

[15] A long footnote about people and institutions.
William Ophuls is not the first scholar to be interested in the issue of civilizational failure - in fact his title comes from Gibbon, who's study of the fall of Rome has been an inspiration to students for a couple of centuries. He acknowledges his debts to other scholars in a preface. However, if you haven't encountered his thesis before, it might strike you as implausible or imprecise, so I thought I'd offer the following as a way of making the idea a bit more concrete.
The Catholic Church can be called an organization, if you mean the arrangements that look after its administration, finances, policy, and so on. It can equally be called a community, if you mean the millions of non-official people who think of themselves as belonging to it. It can be called a tradition, if you mean the many practices and records that have accumulated and become sort of fixed in its repertoire of thought and action. It can be called many things because it is many things. But let us roll all of them together and call it an institution.
Now, in recent years, this institution has had to confront some disagreeable truths, because it has become clear that, for centuries, while it was doing all manner of other things, some good, some not so good, it was also permitting and perhaps encouraging the abuse of children while they were under its care. It has also been demonstrably bigoted, cruel, worldly, venal, corrupt, and self-serving. These truths have somehow to be reconciled with its founding mission - indeed, the only reason for its existence - the propagation of the spiritual and moral teaching of someone who is the impersonation of selflessness, succour and salvation.
How has the institution responded? Well, this is where it gets interesting for us. Obviously, it's been very difficult. But if there's anything you could say without fear of contradiction, it is that the Church's institutional self-knowledge has been very feeble indeed. It seems impossible for officials representing the Church to see it the way others do - which of course is the only way this awful problem can be fixed.
Over many centuries, countless catholics have understood that the tension between their Church's mission and its life as an institution was both inescapable, and full of danger. Many have tried, with varying success, to deal with it, but always, in the end, they have been overborne. Institutional power is everywhere, and yet mostly unseen. Not even their agents recognise how all kinds of institutions quite routinely capture the humans who create them. And this blindness, it seems to me, shows up in Paris, just as it does in the many judicial reports into Catholic child abuse. Ophuls would not want to say this can never change, just that it never has.