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# COP21 and *Business as Usual*



by Scott Slovic



*Heads of delegations at COP21.*

**S**ix months out from COP21, the sober reality of how difficult it will be to achieve the aspirations of this unique international agreement is setting in. Let's not downplay the significance of the Paris accord. How often do 196 nations agree on anything, let alone something as complex and contentious as a blueprint for mitigating global climate change? But if last December's historic meeting revealed a broad course of action, it also brought to light—and I hesitate to say this—the virtual impossibility of making actual progress in this direction.

With the celebratory applause still hanging in the air, it was back to business as usual—burning fossil fuel like there's no tomorrow—for most of the world. In fact, some might point out that even the COP21 gathering was business as usual. Reports estimate that the carbon cost of 50,000 people traveling from across the globe to Paris to solve the climate dilemma (and report on the proposed solutions) was some 300,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>1</sup>

During a trip to attend the Paris event that released more CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere than the annual emissions of 31 U.S. households, President Obama said, "I've come here personally, as the

leader of the world's largest economy and the second-largest emitter, to say that the United States of America not only recognizes our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it."<sup>2</sup>

Self-awareness and recognition of the problem is a crucial step toward acting to correct many conditions, from alcoholism to fossil fuel addiction. Full disclosure: During COP21, I stood at the back of a vast ballroom in San Francisco, listening to a panel of leading climate scholars, who had crossed the country to be there, lecture to an audience of several thousand scientists at the American Geophysical Union Fall

Meeting on the seriousness of the climate predicament—many of the 24,000 attendees at the conference had traveled from around the world to speak on climate-related topics.

You get the picture. Like President Obama, the rest of us who stay up at night thinking—worrying—about climate change are also major emitters.

Is this inconsistency—some would say "hypocrisy"—unusual? The sad thing is that it's not surprising at all. Systems theorist Donella Meadows noted this famously in a 1991 piece called "Living Lightly and Inconsistently on the Land."<sup>3</sup> Many who tout particular values, from environmental protection

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Brisbane, Australia—September 21, 2014: Young student demonstrates during the People's Climate March with a colorful sign.

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to support for human rights, from concern for personal health to the idea of living within one's financial means, find it difficult to adhere consistently to these values.

For many individuals, the inconsistency between deeply held values and daily habits is almost imperceptible. Unless compelled to slow down and articulate these values, most people concentrate their attention on immediate choices associated with personal or household well-being. In a sense, we have been socialized through advertising and other societal structures to follow paths of least resistance—we drive fossil-fuel-burning vehicles because there are nearby gas stations, we buy out-of-season vegetables because local grocery stores sell such foods at prices that seem affordable, we use copious electricity because our homes are full of light switches and appliances

and because our computers would stop working if we unplugged them. Our lives would grind to a halt, it seems, if we unplugged ourselves from the grid.

It is easier not to contemplate the profound inconsistency between our ultimate concerns and our daily practices, but wrestling with this disconnect now seems imperative. This is one of the goals, in fact, of the book *Currents of the Universal Being: Explorations in the Literature of Energy* (2015), which James E. Bishop, Kyhl Lyndgaard, and I compiled as a way of facilitating public engagement with the gap between values and behavior vis-à-vis energy consumption.<sup>4</sup>

Psychologists recognize this inconsistency as a normal process of weighing multiple, conflicting values. All of us do this every day, but the stakes are usually not as high as when world leaders struggle to develop policies that might help mitigate global climate change. The

process of deliberating about competing values is business as usual for the human mind. How this process occurs may not be good news for supporters of the COP21 agreement.

Research by Paul Slovic and his colleagues on a phenomenon known as *the prominence effect* reveals that we often choose to act in ways that defy our stated values when these priorities compete with other values that are more easily defensible, more prominent in our imaginations.<sup>5</sup> For instance, even if we profess to care deeply about human rights, we may support policies that restrict, to one extent or another, the immigration of international refugees for reasons of national security or cost. National security, in particular, often trumps other values when it comes to government policy decisions.

This is particularly worrisome in the context of climate discussions.

*Delegates at COP21.*



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Paris, France—September 21, 2014: The People's Climate March is a street march organized in many countries as a worldwide event to protest against climate change.

Psychologists have found that near-term, tangible values usually overshadow values associated with diffuse, long-term outcomes. We can picture what a terrorist attack or a military conflict would look like, and this is why we find national security to be such a defensible value. It is more difficult to imagine the predicted effects of rising sea levels on coastal population centers in the United States. It is even more difficult to think of the diffuse, indirect impact on our own comfort and security when island nations in distant parts of the world are swamped by rising seas and when myriad species of plants and animals become extinct. There will be effects on our own lives, but the uncertainty of these effects and their relative lack of psychological prominence make it difficult for us to include these predictions in our decision-making processes.

If such thinking is difficult for us as individuals, consider the challenges our government and corporate leaders face

when trying to defend their plans and policies. *Defensibility* is a fundamental aspect of the prominence effect. The most defensible decision typically wins out.

For the sake of security in the form of a robust, near-term economy, our leaders may struggle to defend the possible financial sacrifices implied by a carbon-neutral society, especially if developing nations are asking for relief from similar restrictions in the spirit of “climate justice.” And without such compromises, it will be difficult to convince the diverse signatories to the Paris agreement to move from words to actions.

However, a slow, rational calculation of the long-term security implications of ending fossil fuel subsidies and taxing carbon pollution, among other COP21 goals, may actually result in the realization that true national—and international—security requires bold action to rein in global warming and an end to business as usual.

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## NOTES

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