



Climate Revanchism

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Climate Revanchism

My train into Paris from Charles de Gaulle airport let out at the Gare du Nord train station. The train and metro had been declared free on Sunday and Monday in anticipation of the tens of thousands of delegates and observers arriving in Paris for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference in Le Bourget, France from 30 November to 11 December. But I wanted to get out of the metro at Gare de Nord and walk to the Place de la République. Two weeks earlier three separate teams of ISIS attackers launched six coordinated attacks in Paris that killed 130 people. French President François Hollande declared a state of emergency, which included a ban on all public demonstrations. The Place de la République had been the planned site of the largest of the many public protests planned to mark the beginning of the 21st Conference of Parties (or COP21, the governing party of signatories to the UNFCCC) meeting set to start on Monday, 30 November.

The quickest route from Gare du Nord to the Place de la République is along the wide, tree-lined boulevard de Magenta. For anyone interested in the politics of urban design, it is required walking. The boulevard Magenta was part of the first wave of Georges-Eugène Haussmann's late nineteenth-century redevelopment of Paris. It ends at the Place de la République, an enormous pedestrian square expanded to nearly 10 acres in 2008. Nearly two million people gathered there in the wake of the January 2015 attacks by Al-Qaeda of Yemen on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo that killed 11 people.

Establishment architectural and urban design histories of Haussmann's total reconstruction of Paris celebrate it for modernizing the city. What was once a crowded, unhealthy city impossible to navigate, they declare, became the modern City of Light under Haussmann's redevelopment. The work took decades and employed tens of thousands of people and created parks and pleasant avenues like boulevard de Magenta.

More critical appraisals of Haussmann's redevelopment consider it the bourgeois extension of the 1848 February revolution. The Second Republic that emerged in February 1848 began nominally as a coalition of the working class and a debt-bound petite bourgeoisie organized in solidarity against Louis Philippe. But by June growing worker militancy began to frighten financial interests. The Constituent Assembly declared a state of emergency in June and gave the military the authority to "restore order" in the city. The police and military, with the support of the bourgeoisie violently repressed working-class revolutionaries. By October Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte became President and the conservative nature of 1848 began to come into focus. Marx would describe the February

revolution and the June reaction by bourgeois interests as the “unchaining and establishing of modern bourgeois society” in France.

In an 1852 *coup d'état* Bonaparte declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. He placed Haussmann in charge of redeveloping Paris and tasked him with remaking the physical city in the interests and image of the bourgeoisie. Haussmann annexed suburbs, destroyed and rebuilt working-class neighborhoods, dug and extended sewers and aqueducts and, perhaps most visibly, created a network of enormously wide boulevards throughout Paris. As Harvey (2008, 26) described it, Haussmann’s “Paris became ‘the city of light,’ the great centre of consumption, tourism and pleasure; the cafés, department stores, fashion industry and grand expositions all changed urban living so that it could absorb vast surpluses through consumerism.” This was the Paris that Émile Zola described in his novel *The Kill*: “Cuts everywhere. Paris slashed to pieces with a saber, its veins laid open to provide nourishment for a hundred thousand excavators; carved up into strategic routes with forts placed in the heart of old neighborhoods.”

It is the unique hubris of architects and urban designers to imagine that design alone brings new social relations to life. Zola, however, understood the Haussmannization of Paris differently. It was no accident that the boulevards made it easier for shoppers and the police and military alike to maneuver. Urban redevelopment is always about security, and security in the capitalist city is always implicitly understood as anything that secures the interests of the bourgeoisie. And so Zola evoked the violence of the battlefield when describing the opulence of Paris during the Second Empire.

But I was not thinking of any of this as I walked along boulevard de Magenta pulling my carry-on bag behind me. Instead I was struck by the incredible number of police vans along the avenue. They stretched in an unbroken line on both sides of the avenue from just south of the train station all the way to the Place de la République. I lost count somewhere near the Jacques Bonsergent metro station, where I paused to take a quick video of the scene on my phone.

They were there because article 16 of the French constitution gives the president the power to temporarily suspend the constitution, which Hollande did on the same day as the attacks. French ministers voted on 19 November to extend the *état d'urgence* for three months. Thousands of National Police flooded Paris and they won't be leaving any time soon. The state of emergency will likely be extended indefinitely. In the days after the attacks, Hollande proposed constitutional reforms to the *état d'urgence* that would include a “civilian crisis rule clause” and allow the government to strip people of their French nationality if convicted of acts of terrorism, thus guaranteeing that elements of the state of emergency will be made permanent.

In his follow-up to *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben traces the origins of the “State of Exception” to First Empire France when, in December 1811, Napoleon decreed that the emperor could declare a state of siege whether or not a city was actually under attack. The power to suspend the Constitution in order to “save” the Constitution was expanded in June 1848 when the French Constituent Assembly established the principle that “the power to suspend the laws can belong only to the same power that produces them” (Agamben 2003 [2005],

12). Thus, the State of Emergency from its beginning has been a “technique of government” in which the state invokes an existential threat to state sovereignty in order to suspend the Constitution as a means for general repression against anyone considered a political opponent to the state. It “allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (2003 [2005], 2).

In 1848, under the pretext of national security, the French police destroyed revolutionary working-class elements in Paris and strengthened the power of the bourgeoisie. In November 2015, under the pretext of national security, the French police targeted radical climate activists who were organizing in Paris in advance of the United Nations (UN) climate conference. Hollande declared ISIS as an existential threat to the French state when he suspended the Constitution in November 2015. With the constitution suspended, the police throughout France are now free to conduct warrantless searches and indefinitely detain people. The target, however, is not only “Islamic terrorists” but also includes climate change activists. The National Police and Gendarmerie have conducted thousands of warrantless searches and placed more than 300 people under house arrest. By the time I arrived in Paris for the conference, two-dozen climate activists were among those under house arrest, and all planned public protests related to the climate conference had been declared illegal.

The police on boulevard de Magenta sat four to a van holding their rifles between their legs while they ate their lunch. I realized why they were there only when I finally made it to the Place de la République (Figure 1). Following the state of emergency, reformist elements in the climate movement acquiesced to French government demands and canceled the 29 November march and protest, but hundreds of anarchists and communists came anyway and occupied the east side of the square (Figure 2). They held signs that declared capitalism as the enemy of the climate. I spoke with a man named William as he handed me a flyer. “Do you know there’s a line of police just up the road?” I asked. “Yes,” he



Figure 1. Graffiti on a building adjacent to the Place de la République.



Figure 2. Protesters in the Place de la République on Sunday, 29 November, the day before the beginning of the UN climate change conference in Le Bourget, France. All photos were taken by the author.

said. “It’s why there’s so few people here. This was supposed to be the big march. But people are scared.” Are they scared of the terror attacks?” I asked. “No, the police,” he said.

They had reason to worry. The police finished their lunch and then stormed the square, firing tear gas and beating activists with truncheons and arresting more than 100 people.

COP21: The UNFCCC

Who needed protecting from the climate activists? The first Monday of the climate change conference was given over to heads of state speeches, more than 140 in all, including Barack Obama’s. I did not have the secondary credentials to gain access, so I spent the morning wandering around the 110-acre Père Lachaise cemetery in eastern Paris. More than a million people have been buried at Père Lachaise since it opened in 1804, and today it is a regular Paris tourist stop. Molière, Chopin, Oscar Wilde, Édith Piaf, Jim Morrison and others are buried there. A helpful map with a list of notable “residents” greets visitors at the cemetery’s entrances. I walked first to the grave of Louis Auguste Blanqui (Figure 3). His body lay in a cement crypt on top of which lies a dramatic life-sized bronze sculpture of Blanqui portrayed as if in the moment of his death.

By mid-May 1848 it was clear that bourgeois interests were consolidating power in the new Constituent Assembly. Blanqui joined with Aloysius Huber, Louis Blanc and others to oppose the conservative elements who were quickly undoing the victories of the February revolution. With comrades from all over France and Europe, they stormed the Palais Bourbon and marched on the Paris City Hall where they declared an “insurrectionary government” and the



Figure 3. The grave of Auguste Louis Blanqui in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris.

dissolution of the existing assembly and the resumption of Blanc's socialist policies. But reactionary elements in the Assembly along with the National Guard took the protestors by force and arrested Blanqui along with the other leaders. The brief uprising hardened the resolve of conservatives in the new assembly, who set about to completely dismantle the most progressive elements of the Second Republic. They disbanded the National Workshops, setting the stage for the bloody June Days clashes in which the police killed more than 10,000 striking workers. The only existential threat faced by the French government in 1848 was the possibility of a socialist rather than a bourgeois revolution. The State of Emergency was the political technique of the bourgeoisie to destroy its socialist opposition. Only through the bloody repression of the working class could the bourgeoisie ever even have its chance to remake Paris. Haussmann's "urban renewal" was merely an extension of the working-class repression of May and June 1848.

I left Père Lachaise and traveled to Le Bourget, the working-class suburb north of Paris where the COP21 was held. The National Police closed the highway to Le Bourget. Armed Police and Gendarmerie patrolled the train stations and streets and guarded the entry to the conference with military weaponry and assault vehicles.

The first person I saw was Bill Gates (Figure 4). I nearly crashed into him when I left the security checkpoint as I walked into the official observers' area of the conference center. He was standing on a plywood platform placed squarely in the middle of the walkway that connected the various conference buildings and



Figure 4. Bill Gates at the UN climate change conference interviewing with CNN regarding the “business opportunity” posed by climate change.

staring into a bank of cameras, talking to CNN’s Christiane Amanpour. While more than 140 heads of state from all over the world were giving speeches marking the start of COP21 in a cavernous airplane hangar nearby, Gates was telling Amanpour that climate change was a good business opportunity. He planned to recruit other billionaires, he said, in order to create a massive climate fund that would bankroll the climate mitigation schemes he anticipated the talks would produce.

I walked over to the “We Mean Business” kiosk at the center of the conference facility to talk to Dirk Forrester, the Executive Director of the International Emissions Trading Association, a trade group that represents emissions trading firms and investors. I told him I had just seen Bill Gates. “The thing[s] that CEOs value get paid attention to,” he said.

I attended a press conference of business leaders later that day. A corporate consultant complained that the agreement lacked the kind of market language that once dominated agreements coming out of the UN. But at a meeting later in the day on carbon trading, Andrei Marcu, a business consultant from the Center for European Policy Studies, explained that negotiators have learned the

need to “hide market language in the agreement.” What was “carbon credits” is now “mitigation outcome.” Every economist and industry representative I talked to mentioned this shift in language. Paris was different only in how it talked about the market. Christina Hood, a climate policy consultant with the International Energy Agency, told a room full of climate finance consultants, “we can’t use words anymore like ‘credits’ or ‘markets’ or ‘accounting.’ All are out in Paris.” Instead the agreement uses euphemisms such as “international credited mitigation outcome mechanism.” “That’s how we refer to markets in Paris,” she explained.

The predictions of economists and business leaders during the first week were reflected in the agreement hammered out during the second. The very thing that climate activists were protesting against at Place de la République on 29 November—the possibility that COP21 would merely reinforce corporate interests—is exactly what the Paris agreement does. Through seemingly innocuous phrases like “regional economic integration” and “internationally transferred mitigation outcomes,” the agreement expands the failed policies of Kyoto. Ironically, the only mention of “non-market mechanisms,” an approach one economist called “the Bolivian view of the world,” comes in “Article 3ter” of the agreement, which is the section that actually creates the standards for a global trade in carbon credits.

On Friday of the first week of the conference, I sat on a bench across the street from the Grand Palais in central Paris and watched the crowds queue up for Solutions COP21, a kind of corporate-sponsored, climate change “theme park” with business booths and corporate speakers talking about “sustainability.” Part World’s Fair, part Disney’s Epcot center, it was an unofficial event, but not unrelated to the official activities in Le Bourget. Most of the people standing in line wore the familiar green lanyards and IDs that indicated official COP21 delegate or observer status. And corporate interests were at the heart of COP21, the first UNFCCC conference with official corporate sponsorship. BMW and Louis Vuitton, among a number of other corporations, “sponsored” COP21 and dozens more funded Solutions COP21, an event climate activists promised to protest against. And the corporate Solutions COP21 received the same police protection from public protest or criticism that the official COP21 received. I sat across the street and watched waves of riot gear equipped National Police and Gendarmerie ([Figure 5](#)) swarming in and out of the crowds, searching people as they moved through the line.

The Paris agreement establishes what we might call “climate revanchism.” Since Kyoto and the advent of cap and trade, greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere have spiked from around 360 parts per million (ppm) to over 400 ppm today. Cap and trade has not reduced greenhouse gas emissions. And yet, as one consultant explained to me, this agreement “will finally establish the conditions for an international market in carbon to emerge.” We have not moved away from the business-friendly Kyoto Protocols, but instead have allowed capital to stake a permanent climate claim. The Paris agreement does this because it establishes durable private property rights to the atmosphere and sets the conditions for their enforcement. And that is why Bill Gates was in



Figure 5. A squad from the National Police in riot gear protecting the business-sponsored Solutions COP21 at the Grand Palais in Paris.

Paris. It is why COP21 was crawling with business consultants, corporate CEOs and economists droning on about carbon markets and carbon pricing. The Paris agreement was a climate grab, a total victory for a market-based approach to climate change; the Haussmannization of the climate. It was the possibility that this might *not* happen—that possibility that a radical climate movement might emerge in Paris and interrupt the market-based logic favored by the UN and corporate interests—that constituted the real state of emergency.

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