

HISTORY BEHIND THE NEWS



Free the Planet

Jean-François Mouhot traces a link between climate change and slavery, and suggests that reliance on fossil fuels has made slave owners of us

Most of us approach slavery with the underlying assumption that our modern civilization is morally far superior to the barbaric slave-owning societies of the past. But are we really so different? If we compare our current attitude to fossil fuels and climate change with the behaviour of the slave owners, there are more similarities than one might immediately perceive.

Historians have long argued that there are numerous links between the commerce of slaves and the Industrial Revolution. Slavery encouraged early industrial production in a circular way, by channelling demand for goods and providing capital for investments. The slave trade stimulated production: slaves were exchanged against goods produced by manufacturers in Europe, such as textiles or firearms; the demand for padlocks and fetters to chain slaves represented a significant market for burgeoning industrial cities like Birmingham. Goods grown by slave labour and exported by planters helped create the first mass consumer markets and made Europe dependent on imported commodities. Plantation agriculture also resembled the 'factories in the field' that prefigured the manufactures of the future. Finally – even though the importance of this phenomenon is still debated – some of the capital accumulated by slave traders and planters fuelled investment back in new machinery, which helped to kick start the Industrial Revolution. Slave traders therefore played a significant – if perhaps indirect – role in the establishment of the industrialist system at the core of our contemporary societies.

Ironically, there are also connections between the Industrial Revolution and the demise of slavery. A striking correlation in time exists between the rise of anti-slavery movements and the advent of steam-driven machines. A few industrialists at the time perceived that steam power might ultimately reduce the need for slaves. For example, Birmingham manufacturers Boulton & Watt, who opposed slavery on moral grounds, supplied steam

engines to the sugar plantations in the West Indies. By doing so they hoped to reduce the need for slave labour.

The idea that steam power could replace the work of a large number of people can be traced back to Aristotle, and in the nineteenth century many Luddites held similar views, believing that labour-saving technologies triggered unemployment by reducing demand for labour. In 1832 the former US president and prominent abolitionist John Quincy Adams reported to Congress that 'the mechanical inventions in Great Britain were estimated [in 1815] as equivalent to the manual labor of two hundred millions of people'.

In a lecture given in 1848, Robert Dale Owen, son of the socialistic idealist Robert Owen, and himself a social reformer who supposedly had some influence with Abraham Lincoln prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, clearly equated steam-powered machines with slaves, and their owners with masters:

Great Britain may be said to have imported, from the vast regions of invention, two hundred millions of powerful and passive slaves; slaves that consume neither food nor clothing; slaves that sleep not, weary not, sicken not ... slaves patient, submissive, obedient, from whom no rebellion need be feared, who cannot suffer cruelty nor experience pain ... That aid ... sent down from Heaven ... to assist man in his severest toils, must have rendered him a master instead of a slave, a being with leisure for enjoyment and improvement, a freeman delivered from the original curse which declared that in the sweat of his brow should man eat bread all the days of his life.

The connection between steam-powered engines and the demise of slavery is not, however, a straightforward one. Machines were not advanced enough in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries to replace

Above: enslaved to their metal cages? A traffic jam in Manila, June 2008.

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effectively the work done by slaves. Most slaves in the USA worked in cotton fields where machinery started to appear on a large scale only much later. The intuitions of people like Owen remained mostly irrelevant to the wider public at the time. During heated debates on slavery, abolitionists do not seem to have used this argument. However, hindsight often provides the opportunity to see things that were not perceived by contemporaries. It may be that one enabling or facilitating condition for the abolition of slavery was that there was a growing feeling that slaves could eventually be replaced by steam-powered machines. The industrial and technological advance created a diffuse feeling of human progress. This hypothesis could help explain the often-noted puzzle of why it took until the end of the eighteenth century for an anti-slavery movement to appear.

There are clearly a number of striking parallels between the attitude of slave owners then and our own attitude to fossil fuels now. The ideas expressed by Robert Dale Owen or John Quincy Adams have not disappeared. There are actually nowadays a growing number of people who convincingly argue that modern technology has replaced slaves. Is it far-fetched, then, to go one step further and draw a comparison between our attitude and actions towards oil, gas and coal and the attitude of slave owners?

The comparison starts with an hypothesis that it is a feature of human nature that whenever humans have had the possibility to find someone or something else to work for them for free or for a small cost, they have almost always taken advantage of it, even if it came at a high moral cost. A number of slaveholders in the American South had themselves been slaves. If slavery reminds us, in the words of historian David Brion Davis of 'our [slave and slave-owners alike] shared humanity, not only our triumphal possibilities but also our profound limitation', the same could be said of fossil-fuel usage. Even if Western countries are on average high greenhouse gases emitters, it is worth noting that amongst the ten highest emitting countries per capita, seven are tiny oil-producing nations or small countries in the West Indies.

Thus, both slave owners and the average inhabitant of developed countries relied and still rely on the work of an external 'source of energy'. In the first case, labour came from slaves; in the other, labour is mostly provided by energy of the fossil variety. One study points out that 'through its use of energy, each European has at his or her disposal about a hundred slaves called plant

machines, trains and cars, ships and planes, tractors, central heating, white goods, lawn-mowers and ski-tows' (Jancovici and Grandjean, 2006). That is, if we wanted to do without any petroleum, coal, natural gas or electricity, we would need to employ about a hundred persons working fulltime for us. The authors of the study ask: 'Who was able, only a century ago, to afford the equivalent of several tens of servants to get fed, washed, transported, diverted, and so on, with the sole product of one's work?' It is no wonder that the majority of us want to continue to enjoy the carbon economy.

Secondly, slavery caused harm to human beings, as does our current large-scale burning of fossil fuel. Some might argue that it is not possible to compare pain triggered by the use of slaves and

pain caused by the use of oil, gas or coal, as in the latter case we are dealing with inanimate objects. However, when we burn oil or gas above what the eco-system can absorb, we are causing pain and suffering to other human beings. The release of carbon dioxide is already causing harm and human suffering and is forecasted to produce much more, by increasing droughts and flooding, threatening crop yields and displacing large numbers of people. Also, what

should we do of the moral problem that in a world where world grain stocks are low and where poor people struggle to find enough food to feed their families, we are increasingly burning food to run our cars or heat our homes? Some remorseless companies encourage people to burn corn instead of wood pellets. Filling a 4x4's fuel tank with ethanol uses maize to feed a person for a year. Put starkly, the rich are buying up food to run their cars at the expense of the world's poor. It is argued that there are some long-term benefits from the carbon economy. the hospitals, schools, and roads we build today through the use of fossil fuels will benefit future generations. What is more, not all of the consequences of climate change are negative: a rise in temperature by a few degrees will have some beneficial aspects. However, these arguments are erroneous as the predicted overall damage, according to the IPCC, far

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Below: 'white' electrical goods are piled up ready for export from Singapore, 2005. These 'labour-saving' devices do the work once done by servants or slaves, but the mineral and energy resources required for such goods are endangering the future of the planet.



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Below: in the cotton-fields of the southern United States, mid-19th century.

outweighs any positive impacts climate change may have. The same kinds of arguments were used by slave owners to justify having slaves. They also said that the work of slaves would benefit future generations, and that people were actually better off being slaves in America than working in factories in slave-like conditions. Some also claimed that freed slaves would be unable to feed themselves or be responsible for their own fate.

It is also true that it is almost impossible in our contemporary world, to live without relying on some sort of energy of the fossil variety. As individuals, we are subjected to constant incitation, to consume ever more goods or foreign holidays. We are perhaps as much victims as culprit of this consumer society. However, our moral duty, once we become aware of the evil of the system, is to resist it. We know that some emissions are not causing any harm because they are absorbed by the eco-system. To be free from hurting other people, we must get a fair share of carbon dioxide allowance per person, and we should keep emissions under the threshold of what worldwide carbon sinks can safely absorb each year.

A last objection to my comparison is that definitions of slavery all emphasize the idea of complete ownership and control by a master over a person who is legally owned by someone else and has to

work for them. Slavery denies people autonomy. Our burning of fossil fuels does not directly do this. However, this objection can be challenged. Firstly, comparatively cheap energy is a required condition for the transport of foreign goods on a massive scale and over large distances. As it is inexpensive to transport those goods from the Far East to Europe or America, it is possible to import products made in often slave-like conditions for a fraction of the cost of producing them in our countries. We have delocalized slavery and put it far from view, but it still exists and we benefit from it. Secondly, the harm of climate change often amounts to violence or force against a large number of people. Global warming, like slavery, is already limiting the possibilities they have for living a good life. Floods, droughts and rising sea levels will force millions of people to become refugees; their land will be taken away from them and they may have to work in slave-like conditions instead of growing their own crops. Even if they do not become refugees, in the 'developing world' many poor peasants have to contract debts to survive. Any crop failure, which can be caused or worsened by climate change, put these peasants at the mercy of debt bondage. It is even possible that the consequences of climate change will be far worse and longer lasting, and affect a much larger number of people, than slavery ever did.

Comparing the attitude of slave owners and our own attitude to petroleum is therefore both adequate and useful. It is useful because so many people nowadays agree that owning slaves is wrong. If we accept the analogy, it follows that we must to recognize the evil of continuing to live as we currently do. We all want to identify with abolitionists, but at the same time we know that the slave owner in each of us will want to resist change. Our abundant energy gives us an extraordinary power but we should never forget that power corrupts. If we do not change, our generation and our children's generation will pay heavily for the consequences of our reckless activity. Moreover, they will look back at us and wonder how our civilization could live in such appalling moral conditions. Will they see that until

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relatively recently, we did not know the devastating consequences of our actions? That the vast majority genuinely thought fossil fuels were improving the lives of people on the planet? That we were also suffering ourselves from the fossil fuel bonanza, through obesity, pollution or loneliness and had become surreptitiously addicted to the substance? Probably not. They are more likely to curse us for the damage we will have done to the planet. Surely, they will say, these were barbarian people. ■

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