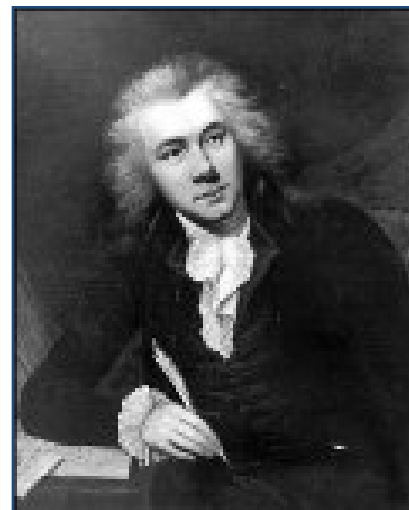


## By Invitation:

### Climate change: Calling the fossil fuel abolitionists

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**Where is the green  
Wilberforce?**

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The collective effort needed to fight climate change is on a par with the struggle to overturn slavery 200 years ago, argues Andrew J. Hoffman

There is no simple, quick fix to climate change; no technological silver bullet that will eliminate this problem as easily as many hope.

Why do I say that? The answer lies in the parallels between ending our dependence on fossil-fuels and the abolition of slavery.

The first time these two concepts were linked for me was seven years ago, when a senior oil industry executive in London asked me a rhetorical question: "If it wasn't for oil, where would we get our energy?" His answer, to my astonishment, was "slavery".

In 'Bury the Chains', US author Adam Hochschild observes that in the 18th century more than 75 per cent of the world's population was in bondage of one kind or another, either slavery or serfdom. In parts of the Americas, slaves far outnumbered free persons.

Slaves managed the fields, maintained the households and most importantly, ran the factories. They were a primary source of energy and a source of wealth, particularly for the dominant world power, Great Britain.

When abolitionists began their work, the response was clear and unequivocal: such a move was out of the question as it would cause the collapse of the British Empire's economy and way of life. Abolitionism was a challenge to the underlying beliefs upon which the Empire was built.

People simply did not believe, as we do today, that all people have a right to freedom and equality. Slavery was seen as the natural order of things, unquestioned and even supported by many through the words of the Bible.

It took roughly 100 years to abolish slavery in the British Empire, and Hochschild points out that, by the end of the 19th century, slavery was, at least on paper, outlawed almost everywhere.

## **Climate dilemma**

Now, flash forward to today. We live in a fossil fuel-based economy. Fossil fuels are our primary source of energy and support our entire way of life. As scientific evidence mounts that this critical institution is causing changes to the global climate, we are faced with a technological and social dilemma.

Calls to end our dependence on fossil fuels are being met with the same kind of response as did calls to end our dependence on slavery: such a move would wreck the economy and the way of life that is built upon it.

If you stood on a New York City street corner and insisted that burning fossil fuels was

morally wrong and should be stopped, listeners would laugh you off as a crackpot. Abolition of the primary source of energy in the world is out of the question, both socially and technologically.

Just as few people saw a moral problem with slavery in the 18th century, few people in the 21st century see a moral problem with the burning of fossil fuels. Will people in 100 years look at us with the same incomprehension we feel toward 18th-century defenders of slavery?

I believe that the answer is yes; our common atmosphere will no longer be seen as a free dumping ground for greenhouse gases and other pollutants. But this value shift will require humankind to come to terms with a new reality.

### **New morality**

The first piece of this reality is that humankind has grown to such numbers and our technologies have grown to such capacity that we can, and do, alter the Earth's ecological systems on a planetary scale.

It is a fundamental shift in the physical order, one never before seen and one that alters the ethics and morals by which we judge our behavior as it relates to the environment around us and to the rest of humanity that depends on that environment.

The second piece of that reality is that we share a collective responsibility and require global cooperation to solve it. The coal burned in Ann Arbor, Shanghai or Moscow has an equal impact on the environment we all share. The kind of cooperation necessary to solve this problem is far beyond anything we, as a species, have ever accomplished before. International treaties to ban land mines or eliminate ozone-depleting substances pale in comparison.

Looking at climate change through the parallel of slavery helps us to see the magnitude of the issue before us. But the analogy isn't, obviously, an exact correlation. One difference is the element of time.

Scientists are concerned that we have 30 to 40 years left before we cause irreparable harm to our planet. Some say the time line is shorter, others longer, but all agree that there is a clock is ticking. And a quick technological fix will not help us avert this harm before time runs out.

And this leads to a second difference. While slaves were, for the most part, a more obviously replaceable source of labor and energy than fossil fuels are today, we cannot simply turn off

the oil wells and continue to live as we do.

There is a vast physical infrastructure that depends on oil, and it cannot be simply replaced without great disruption. And unlike slavery -- and other environmental problems -- there is no clear single villain. We can't simply point to that smoke stack or that waste dump and identify someone who should fix it.

Where the abolition of slavery could target the powerful embedded interests of sugar, tobacco, and cotton, the abolition of fossil fuels draws our attention to all sectors of the economy, including ourselves, the complicit consumers. We are all in this together.

### **Seeds of change**

But that gives reason for hope, because, unlike slavery, climate change is an existential threat to us all, not just to the slaves. That makes it at least conceivable that a burst of human ingenuity -- technological and cultural -- might be forthcoming.

Climate change is creeping its way into conversations about national security, economic competitiveness, business strategy, insurance risk, international governance, and religious morality.

We can see a public that is growing to accept the science on climate change; three presidential candidates that are likely to propose climate regulation; and most importantly, a business community that is beginning to talk about solutions as financial opportunities.

Driven by skyrocketing oil prices, a prevailing belief that climate regulation is inevitable, and both consumer and financial markets that are beginning to pay attention, companies like GE, Dow, Wal-Mart and others are seeing opportunity in green products.

In 2006, the total U.S. venture capital investment devoted to clean energy companies reached \$2.4 billion, over 9 per cent of all VC spending. The strongly positive returns of energy efficiency are fueling an exploding green building market. According to venture capitalist John Doerr of Kleiner Perkins Caulfield & Byers, "This field of greentech could be the largest economic opportunity of the 21st century. There's never been a better time than now to start or accelerate a greentech venture."

Only with this kind of thinking, spurring the entrepreneurial spirit of business, will any kind of solution to climate change be found. We could, quite possibly, be at the start of an energy renaissance. Will there be enough time for this renaissance to play out? One way or another, we are about to find out.

Andrew Hoffman is the Holcim (US) Professor at the University of Michigan, holding joint appointments in the Ross School of Business and the School of Natural Resources & Environment. He is also Associate Director of the Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise. His latest book *Climate Change: What's Your Business Strategy* was released as part of the Memo to the CEO series by the Harvard Business School Press in May 2008.

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