

Slaves to Oil

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The nineteenth century saw a remarkable change, first in Europe and then in the United States of America. Laws were passed abolishing the practice of slavery. This process, which today is rightly regarded as a move towards goodness, was both shaped by conflict and was also, in part, the cause of conflict. Within a generation Royal Navy turned from a role of facilitation to one of interdiction of the North Atlantic slave trade. Slavery was big business and many voices had argued on both sides of Atlantic that abolition would be economically ruinous. Despite the possible economic pain and political hypocrisy of abolition and despite a recognition that today slavery is far from eradicated, one can only conclude that slavery abolition was morally right.

In recent years numerous parallels have been drawn between the challenge of nineteenth century slavery abolition and the twenty-first century challenge of substantially decarbonisation of the global energy system. Such parallels include: the nature of the political discourse; the relationship between an ethics-driven societal shift and economic interests; the role of enabling technological change and the relationship of slavery/environmental policy to geopolitics and the use of military force.

Rather than taking a critical approach, this paper merely sets out to collect and collate comparisons between slavery abolition and greenhouse gas emissions reduction. The paper closes with the observation that, just as today slavery remains a very real problem, so will greenhouse gases emissions for the foreseeable future. The central issue is the process by which will be able to achieve substantial reductions. The story of slavery abolition may indeed have things to tell us.

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