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## Carbon-Abolitionism, now!

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# The Current Column

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## Carbon-Abolitionism, now!

Bonn, Essen 11 April 2011. Imminent reforms in energy policy are hotly debated in the wake of the Fukushima-disaster. The sudden focus on nuclear energy somehow obfuscates the fact, however, that the dominant fossil-based energy regime has also lost much of its legitimacy in recent years. Ever more voices around the world call for its transformation. In the context of international climate politics, in particular, policy makers, environmental advocacy groups, church leaders and even a share of economic elites call for a low carbon world. They have every reason to be concerned about anthropogenic climate change and the persistence of carbon-driven economic growth.

This trend is confirmed by empirical research, too: according to the *World Values Survey* close to 90 % of some 60,000 respondents, hailing from a total of 49 countries, consider global warming as a serious or very serious problem, including a majority of respondents in both the United States and China! Likewise, a revival of public policy debates on the "Limits to Growth" and the adequacy of Gross Domestic Product as the appropriate indicator of social welfare highlight a global shift in values and beliefs that revolves around the issue of sustainability. Contrary to the 1970s and 1980s these debates are no longer a niche of green visionaries, but have spread to the highest political levels and across mainstream political ideologies and party affiliations.

Modern history suggests an interesting analogy: the abolition of slave trade and slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In its day, the institution of slavery and the exploitation of slave labour were as commonplace as are the combustion engine or coal-fired power plants today. Acquisition and possession of slaves were socially acceptable and of considerable economic significance. For American tobacco or cotton plantations, for instance, the availability of slave labour was similarly central then cheap electricity is for industrial production in our age. Yet, when philanthropists such as William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp or Thomas Clarkson, began to question the legitimacy of slavery – driven entirely by moral principle and an ensuing emancipatory

vision – this was the beginning of the end of legal slavery, not only in England. Within decades abolitionist movements on both sides of the Atlantic grew into broad societal movements that effectively abolished slavery for good.

At first glance, this may seem to be a case of apples and oranges. However, a quarter century after the establishment of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) and almost twenty years after the adoption of the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) the similarities become ever more striking. While many decision makers in politics and private business fret about growth, competitiveness and energy security, a diffuse and heterogeneous movement of prospective "carbon abolitionists" gains momentum. Its growing numbers are not merely scared about the consequences of global warming, but consider the implications for poor countries and future generations morally repulsive and, hence, unacceptable.

As with the abolition of slavery, radical change of the magnitude an abolition of the fossil-based energy system would imply requires broad societal support: it will only become effective if the status quo is considered politically and morally intolerable by large majorities. At the same time, the experience of abolitionism and other social transformations shows that rising awareness or shifting values alone will not necessarily alter individual or collective action. Environmental psychology, in particular, demonstrates a significant disconnect between changing attitudes and persistent behaviours. That is, profound awareness for ecological problems does not automatically lead to changes in lifestyle. Quite the opposite can be the case: The ecological footprint of the very people that emphasise the need to address environmental concerns – often well educated and affluent middle classes – is typically disproportionately large.

This notwithstanding, the transformation into a (more) climate-friendly society has already begun. Like the abolitionists before them, change agents around the globe and at virtually all levels of politics and society have been challenging the status quo for some twenty years now. And they actually

seem to be getting somewhere. For instance, "energy rebels" from Germany's Black Forest region who started out as a local citizens' initiative evolved into a profitable nation-wide provider of green electricity. Or the Danish island of Samsø, all of which thrives on 100 % renewable energy. Aspiring to similar ends, global networks of local authorities such as the *World Mayors Council on Climate Change* or the *C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group* join forces to reduce urban emissions and to develop strategies for sustainable urban management. Meanwhile, private governance initiatives like the *Forest Stewardship Council* (FSC) certifies an increasing share of wood- and paper products that originate from sustainable forestry. These are but a few examples.

These efforts alone, however, will hardly shatter the high carbon regime, much less supersede it. The change agents face an uphill struggle against mighty veto players who seek to maintain a profitable money-spinning fossil economy in which they can continue to bill the defenceless poor of the global South as well as future generations with their external costs. Like the slave traders of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (or recently the proponents of "safe" nuclear energy) they find themselves more and more involved in defending their increasingly shaky ground.

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen* - WBGU) in his recent flagship report „World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability“ outlines a number of diverse policies that could help to overcome the barriers of the high carbon regime while leading low carbon pioneers out of their niches and into the economic and societal mainstream. The Council's recommendations are not only about renewable energy sources, but also concern – *inter alia* – options for more participatory decision-making, while legally anchoring climate protection as an overarching societal objective and introducing compulsory "climate checks" for public investments. Crucially, the report also demonstrates that the envisaged transformation into a low carbon world is not at all a vision of utopian eggheads. Indeed, it underscores both the technical feasibility and the economic rationality of the proposed transformation, even for developing countries. What is left wanting is a courageous dose of political will, driven by a broad social movement of carbon-abolitionists, to liberate the world from its fossil yoke!



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