

Bury the chains and the carbon dioxide

Review of *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* by Adam Hochschild, 2005, Houghton Mifflin, 468 pp.

Christian Azar

Received: 11 May 2007 / Accepted: 23 May 2007 / Published online: 11 September 2007
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2007

In the middle of the eighteenth century, England was the leading nation in the international slave trade. Sugar was one of the most important commodities, the crude oil of the time. The imports to England from Jamaica were worth more than 5 times as much as those from the 13 mainland colonies, taken together. Slave traders and sugar plantation owners made big money, as did suppliers. I have in mind more than just the wharves and ship builders; I'm thinking of those who manufactured foot shackles, hand shackles, thumb screws, and the speculum oris – a surgical tool for prying open the mouths of slaves attempting to starve themselves to death to escape the slave ships.

In total, Europe shipped more than 10 million slaves across the Atlantic. Life was good in the colonies, for the Europeans, while the slaves died from exhaustion in the fields. Since new slaves from Africa were cheap, no special efforts to keep them alive were required. Slavery was pervasive and therefore taken for granted; as an integral part of the economy, slavery was considered necessary and impossible to abolish. In Adam Smith's words, "[slavery] has been universall in the beginnings of society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will likely make it perpetual".

I've recently read Adam Hochschild's page turner *Bury the Chains*. Through historical documents, diaries, transcripts from parliamentary debates and books from the end of the eighteenth century on, Hochschild offers the reader a detailed view, not only of the suffering of the slaves but also of how the anti-slave trade movement came into being and of age in England. We are told how a small group of people woke up, realized the immorality of the slave trade, and started mobilizing the resistance.

If I were to have written a regular review of *Bury the Chains*, I would have talked about Thomas Clarkson who for his whole life rode his horse cross-country to speak against the slave trade, about the Member of Parliament and evangelist William Wilberforce who led the fight in Parliament for 40 years, about a number of Quakers who played central roles in the struggle, and above all about Olaudah Equiano who was taken as a slave in what is now Nigeria in the middle of the eighteenth century, renamed Gustavus Vasa after the Swedish king by that name, but who managed to save money to buy himself free! Following a

C. Azar (✉)

Physical Resource Theory, Chalmers University of Technology, 412 96 Gothenborg, Sweden
e-mail: Christian.azar@chalmers.se

number of voyages back and forth across the Atlantic he wrote “The Interesting Narrative”, an account of his life, which served as an important piece of evidence for the abolitionists. The book became a bestseller and was translated into a number of languages.

Let’s instead use Hochschild’s account to consider one of today’s great struggles for human rights and the Earth. Year after year, we produce greenhouse gases that threaten to flood half or whole countries, generate catastrophic droughts in already impoverished nations, and turn millions of people into refugees. Today’s industrial society, power infrastructure, transportation, and industries are built on burning fossil fuels and thereby emitting carbon dioxide.

My intention is not to suggest that the injustices and atrocities of the slave trade are similar to those caused by our use of fossil fuels. Rather, I’d like to point to the similarities in the *debates* over how to end slavery and global warming.¹ For 100 years, fossil fuels have been integrated in our economies, and many believe it impossible to maintain, let alone expand, our welfare without fossil fuels. Emitting carbon dioxide is the norm, abolishing emissions is considered virtually impossible. But I am thoroughly convinced that it is both possible and reasonable, technically and economically. In light of the enormous technological development of the past century it’s almost unreasonably pessimistic to believe that our collective genius wouldn’t prove capable of developing the technologies for getting rid of the emissions, especially since many of the required technologies already have been developed. Whether we will succeed will depend instead on political willpower, not just the will of politicians but the will of their constituents, how the media frame the question, and how industries move forward.

Hochschild’s book proves interesting for everyone working with, not just the climate issue, but all kinds of human rights, development, or environmental concerns. It constitutes an account of what probably is the first altruistic mass movement in the history of the world. It provides both perspective and inspiration for today’s activists. Only every twentieth(!) British man could vote at the time, and no women, of course, and the workers’ conditions in England were less than uplifting. Yet this movement took hold.

In May, 1787, 12 men formed a committee for the abolition of the slave trade. Lectures were given, letters to the editor written, and depictions of slave ships circulated. After but a few years’ work, the abolitionists had mobilized an impressive public opinion. In the 1790s England’s population was barely 10 million. Of these, 300,000 participated in the boycott of sugar from the Caribbean in protest against slavery. Women, who otherwise operated outside the world of politics, played a definitive part in the movement.

The supporters of slavery, for instance the West India Committee, provided money for lobbyists and media campaigns, organized groups to cover the press and counter whatever the abolitionists might have had put in print, and also suggested self-regulation in order to avoid government control. Several plantation owners were members of Parliament and were beginning to get worried. Laws were passed to improve the situation for the slaves. Where once there was no limit on whippings, these were now limited to a few hours each afternoon. Ship owners threatened to move capital and production abroad. The parallels with today’s environmental and human rights debates are pronounced.

At the beginning of the 1790s, three or four slave ships left the British ports each week. In return, the profits from sugar plantations flowed in. At this time, public opinion demanded that the Parliament abolish the slave trade; during a few weeks, 390,000 signatures were added to the petitions against slavery, more signatures than under the previous 20 years.

¹In a recent paper in *Climatic Change*, Marc Davidson (2007) discusses similarities between the rationalisation of slavery in the US abolition debates and the rationalisation of ongoing GHG emissions in the US congress.

The definitive parliamentary debate took place on April 2, 1792: The hall is filled. Equiano is there. A long session begins. Wilberforce holds forth emotionally in opposition to the slave trade: “Africa, Africa! Your sufferings have been the theme that has arrested and engages my heart – your sufferings no tongue can express; no language impart.” Others defend the slave trade, and some apply a delay tactic that insists abolition must come “gradually”, during a long period. Finally, at 4 A.M., William Pitt, the Prime Minister, rises to speak. Not yet 33 years old, but with 10 years worth of experience at his job, Pitt is opposed to the slave trade and speaks, extemporaneously, apparently, for over an hour despite the time.

One of the main arguments for continued slave trade was that if England abolishes the trade, other nations will simply take over the lucrative business. Today, this justification reappears in discussions on so-called carbon-leakage: increased emissions in countries without climate policy as a result of industries relocating from carbon-abating regions. But Pitt didn’t buy it: “How, Sir! Is this enormous evil ever to be eradicated, if every nation is thus prudentially to wait till the concurrence of all the world shall have been obtained?... There is no nation in Europe that has, on the one hand, plunged so deeply into this guilt as Great Britain, or that is so likely, on the other, to be looked up to as an example.”

The abolitionists won a partial victory: slave trade was to be outlawed, but not until several years later. A string of tumultuous events further delayed things (e.g., the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars). In 1807, the entire British slave trade was finally abolished. In order to prevent other countries from engaging in slave trade, roughly a third of the British Navy was assigned to patrol the oceans and intervene against other countries’ slave ships. The measure is reminiscent of the demand voiced in the EU to protect the domestic energy-intensive industry from competition from non-abating countries like the U.S. and China.

For reasons of strategy, the abolitionists first focused on slave trade and not on slavery. England did not outlaw slavery in its colonies until 1833. Here, too, there are similarities with present-day climate policies: the slave owners, not the slaves, were compensated, just as today, the owners of European coal power plants, some of the worst climate offenders, can cash in the EU trading scheme emission permits allotted to them.

It was not only in England that voices were raised against slavery and the slave trade. The rebellion of the Maroons on Jamaica is legendary, as is Toussaint L’Ouverture’s slave rebellion in Haiti. In 1804, Haiti became the second sovereign state in the New World.

Echoes of Pitt’s speech in Parliament on national responsibility can be heard clearly today in discussions on how to respond to global warming. The idea that we cannot act until everyone acts is widespread. In 1997, the US Senate voted in advance to reject the Kyoto protocol unless large developing countries also agreed to real commitments. The “Sense of the Senate” resolution passed 95-0. That China and India were not required to make these real commitments was one of the main reasons the US cited upon repudiating Kyoto. Analogous arguments are made in Europe. In the best of all worlds, all nations would shoulder the responsibility. But, as Pitt put it, if everyone waits until we all act concurrently, how will we ever eradicate this enormous evil?

Reference

Davidson ME (2007) Parallels in reactionary argumentation in the US congressional debates on abolition of slavery and the Kyoto Protocol. *Clim Change* (in press)