Slaves to Fossil Fuels -a Dangerous Warning from History

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A historian has drawn uncomfortable parallels between our current attitudes to fossil fuels and climate change and the behaviour of mid 19th century slave owners, with worrying predictions for the future.

Jean-Francois Mouhot, from the University of Birmingham, calls for a recognition of “the evil of continuing to live as we currently do.” Comparing the attitude of slave owners with our modern day attitudes to oil says Mouhot, is valid and useful, because so many people acknowledge that owning slaves is wrong.

Mouhot says: “It is almost impossible in our contemporary world to live without relying on some sort of energy of the fossil variety. We are perhaps as much victims as culprits of a consumer society. However, our moral duty once we become aware of the evil of the system is to resist it.”

In an article for History Today, Mouhot claims that there a more similarities between current attitudes to oil, gas and coal and those of slave owners that might immediately be perceived. His comparison rests on the premise that it is a feature of human nature to take advantage of having someone or something else to work for them for free or at a small cost, even if it came at a high moral cost.

Looking at the impact on human suffering, beyond the obvious pain caused by slavery, large-scale burning of fossil fuels is inflicting global suffering, in terms of the environmental impacts of droughts, flooding, threats to crop yields and the displacement of large numbers of people.

Mouhot calls for an honest recognition of the damage being done to the planet and humanity, and warns of the dangers of ignoring the powerful lessons of the past.

“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.”

Jean-Francois Mouhot’s article Free the Planet is published in the August issue of History Today, and is available online at**www.historytoday.com (http://www.historytoday.com/)** .

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Further media information

Jean-Francois Mouhot is available for interview. Please contact the Press Office on 0121 414 6029 / 07920 593946.

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