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Overpowered: American Domination, Democracy, and the Ethics of Energy Consumption

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Imagine for a moment that you are an Indonesian farmer living on Java in the year 2050. You farm rice the way that your ancestors have for generations. You have managed to subsist as a farmer, but hardly luxuriously. You do not own any appliances that require electricity, because your village (as with a very large portion of Indonesia) has not been electrified.

This means that you do not have a refrigerator and you wash your garments by hand in the river. You certainly do not have air conditioning in this tropical climate, and you do not even have a fan. You do not own a vehicle, so if you need to get to the next village you must borrow a motorbike. Over the last few years, you have noticed that your fields closest to the ocean have become increasingly salty and unable to sustain a rice crop. Storms have surged farther inland, eroding and salinating soil on higher ground. Only the very upper portion of your field is arable.

Now a government official has come to tell you that you and your family must evacuate, because rising sea levels will completely submerge your farm in the near future. (Jakarta, a city of 15 million, is by now being flooded with seawater.) You must move to a refugee camp until some country—Australia? New Zealand?—agrees to allow you to immigrate. There is no available land for you to farm and nowhere for you to live. You have been told that sea levels have risen more than a meter because of global warming, and global warming has occurred because of something called “greenhouse gasses.” Greenhouse gasses, you are told, are produced mostly by the burning of fossil fuels to make electricity and run automobiles.

But you use hardly any oil or coal; in fact, your entire country uses less than 1 percent of the world’s energy, despite having over 300 million people. You do not even know anyone who owns his or her own car. Why is this happening to you?¹

Like so many others in the developing world, that farmer is right to ask how such monumental changes in their lives can be caused by the consumer energy choices half a world away. What gave the distant consumer the right to do this? Did those who burned all that oil and coal know what harm they were causing, and who was being harmed? Did they think they were morally justified in their actions? Who made the decision, anyway? Giant corporations?

The answer, of course, is us. But, surely ordinary Americans would never harm Indonesian farmers and other poor people around the world who never harmed the United States. Or would we?

At present, the United States consumes approximately 25 percent of the energy produced each year worldwide. Yet we make up only five percent of the world’s population.² Fossil fuels are non-renewable, and Americans are exhausting them at a disproportionate rate, relative to our make-up of the current number of people in the world. This raises a question of economic justice: is it fair that Americans consume so much of this finite natural resource—a resource that plays such an important role in economic growth and development?

Fossil fuel consumption to power electrical plants is the primary cause of atmospheric carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that contributes to global climate change. Gasoline and diesel consumption are other major contributors. If the scientific consensus on climate change is correct, rising levels of greenhouse gasses will lead to higher sea levels that will primarily affect heavily populated coastal areas, such as Indonesia, where millions of people live near sea level. (The one-foot rise in sea level during the past century has already forced the evacuation of the island of Tuvalu, and the residents of the Maldives anticipate their impending evacuation.)

If ocean levels rise by projected amounts, millions of people around the world will become refugees. (In fact,

¹ Population forecasting is based on estimates from the Energy Information Department. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/indoe.html> accessed June 15, 2006.

² Donald F. Fournier and Eileen T. Westervelt, “Energy Trends and Their Implications for U.S. Army Installations,” U.S. Army Corp of Engineers publication, September 2005, 21.

the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forecasts an increase of one meter during the next century.) Who will take the dispossessed? New Hampshire? And is it fair that our energy consumption imposes costs on those who not only do not consume it, but also play no role in the formation of our energy policy?

These moral issues extend beyond the consumption of fossil fuel, and beyond the direct use of energy. The average resident of a developed country such as the United States uses ten times the energy of the average resident of a developing country, with all of the accompanying pollution.³ Energy consumption is connected to the consumption of wood, metals, minerals, and water. This in turn affects poorer and less powerful nations disproportionately.

For example, the demand for wood and minerals leads to road development in tropical areas, leading to “slash and burn” agriculture and environmental degradation. (Before sea levels rise enough to force evacuations, for example, Javanese farmers will probably abandon most of their fields due to severe flooding—caused by deforestation—that has made much of the land extremely difficult to work and nonproductive.)

Although the disproportionate consumption of other raw materials is also a serious moral problem, our consumption of fossil fuels presents a particularly acute one. At least we can at least partially reverse deforestation, and we can clean up some of the pollution from our mineral extraction. We cannot, however, replenish nonrenewable fuels such as oil, coal, and natural gas. Moreover, it is unclear how we could even begin to remediate global warming and its ancillary effects. The damage caused by our consumption appears, in this case, permanent and irreversible.

The Moral Questions

We can divide the ethical concerns of energy consumption into two types: concerns of illegitimate harm, and concerns of fair procedure. First, who benefits from the current distribution and use of fossil fuels, and who is harmed? Many people in the developed world believe that we are harming ourselves by our oil dependence. Pollution, urban sprawl, longer commuting times, traffic deaths, declining public spaces, and an unwise policy regarding the Middle East are all said to flow from our demand for oil.

Still, “first-worlders” appear to benefit from this policy, at least to the degree that it reflects consumer preferences. Many Americans like to drive, want spacious and aggressive-looking SUVs, and we are increasingly inclined to live in suburban areas that require more and more driving. Americans are flocking to southern climates where air-conditioning for most of the year is considered a necessity. So, we may not like some of the consequences of our choices, but at least they appear to be our choices. If we are fully informed of the costs of our energy choices, then in what sense are we harming ourselves? After all, economists would argue, we are satisfying our informed preferences.

At the same time, the hypothetical scenario we began with illustrates how other people in the developing world suffer harm from choices that seem to benefit us. In this case, they are not the victims of their own choices. They are at the mercy of consumer demand thousands of miles away, and clearly those who suffer from global climate change and pollution do not ultimately benefit from the choices of oil-greedy nations. In addition, future generations in both developed and developing nations will pay a high “cost,” both in terms of global climate change and energy depletion. Current energy consumption patterns violate the 17th-century philosopher John Locke’s “proviso” that whatever natural resources we use, we must leave “enough and as good” for others.⁴ Clearly, our current policy of not replacing resources as we consume them violates Locke’s proviso. It is hard to deny that the “over-consumers” of oil are harming others illegitimately, if not themselves.

The second, related moral matter concerns fair procedure. Setting aside the costs and harms of oil consumption, has energy policy been fair? Indonesians might want to have cheap gas, and most would like a refrigerator, television, and motorbike for their families. This cheap energy is a by-product of oil exploration upon which they were not consulted—regardless of whether or not it benefits them. Future generations of all nations also remain voiceless. They cannot protest our exhaustion of resources and concomitant pollution, although they will surely pay for it.

It is tempting to argue that Americans in general, and middle-class members of developed nations in particular, are themselves the victims of a top-down energy

³ Alan Durning, *How Much is Enough?* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992, 51.

⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatise of Government*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 288. (Originally published in 1689.)

policy. After all, it was the development of an interstate highway system that led to the decline of public (especially train) transportation. Most of us alive today had little to do with those decisions. We did not invent highways or plan 20th-century cities around cars. We are simply held hostage to them.

Much of our energy-use patterns seems to be determined by forces not under our control or even supervision. Indeed, the Supreme Court has defended the right of Vice-President Dick Cheney to refuse to reveal the members of his secret Energy Task Force. (Thus we may never know if Halliburton, of which he was once CEO, actively participated in those meetings. (Halliburton is the single largest contractor to the U.S. Army).⁵ If we do not actually control our own country's energy policy, then how can we be responsible for it?

Despite these arguments, we cannot pretend we are innocent. Americans continue to protest expenditures on public transportation and urban infrastructure, while happily paying taxes for pothole-free highways. Our technology-based demand for electricity continually outstrips supply. Gas prices surge upward, and yet demand is strong. Clearly we have not yet accepted that our energy policy runs counter to our own interests. It is even clearer that we have not considered the interests of those most gravely affected.

⁵ Linda Greenhouse, "Justices' Ruling Postpones Resolution of Cheney Case," *New York Times*, June 25, 2004.