Slow Action as a Moral Wrong: The Abolition of Slavery and the Fight Against Climate Change

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Abstract

In the case of fighting climate change, not only inaction but also *slow action* creates harms. The literature on acts and omissions does not fully unpack the nuances of cases of intentionally delaying actions and yet, the consequences can be fatal. The history of British abolition of slavery contains a good example of how intentional slow action can perpetuate harms. The establishment of apprenticeships required the enslaved to continue working for their masters for a period of up to six years. This mechanism resulted in the continuation of harm, which is exactly what the Abolition Act was supposed to end. In the same vein, slow action in the face of climate change enables the continuation and deepening of harm, which is exactly what the Paris Agreement signatory states agreed to prevent. Not only inaction but also slow action may ultimately be equally harmful for the goals of social progress, as the abolition process shows. States should be called out for their slow action and be held accountable.

"*Pour ce qui est de l'avenir, il ne s'agit pas de le prévoir, mais de le rendre possible.*"
"*As for the future, it is not a question of foreseeing it, but of making it possible.*"
– Antoine de Saint Exupéry**,** *Citadelle*, 1948.

The problem of climate change has been documented for more than thirty years, but despite all the political commitments made, countries are showing a sluggish advance in meeting the targets upon which they have agreed.[1] While most people now recognise that climate change is the most important challenge we face as humanity and, therefore, needs urgent attention, the pace of our actions is not at the speed it needs to be to avoid irreversible damage to our planet and further loss of lives and livelihoods. Political and technical decisions to reduce carbon emissions have not echoed the level of urgency ingrained in scientific warnings. In fact, emissions have continued to grow (Jackson et al., 2019; UNEP, 2019).

To bring about the transformation necessary to fight climate change, it is important to examine states' underperformance. I argue that, in the case of fighting climate change, not only inaction, but also *slow action* creates harms and, therefore, carries important moral consequences. Raising awareness about the moral relevance of slow action and shedding light onto the resulting harms is imperative to trigger the social, economic, and moral shifts required to put humanity onto a path of decisive climate action. This paper scrutinizes the intermediate stages between negligence and recklessness, contributing to the literature on acts and omissions.

To bring more perspective to the harms resulting from of slow action, an analogy is made with another historic process of social, moral, and economic transformation: the process of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies colonies and, in particular, the establishment of *apprenticeships* as a transitional mechanism between slavery and freedom.[2] By looking at how the actual liberation of the enslaved was intentionally delayed in order to maintain the status quo, with harmful consequences, I draw lessons for contemporary debates on the slow action of states in the fight against climate change.

[1] See https://climateactiontracker.
[2] The *apprenticeships* were a mechanism designed to stall abolition and protect the interests of slave owners for up to eight years after the 1833 British Abolition of Slavery Act was passed.

While slow action and delay tactics are not as bad as inaction, they are ultimately harmful for the goals of social progress, as the abolition movement has shown us. Insofar as abolition and climate justice are analogous, states should be called out for their slow action and be held accountable.

The paper is structured in four sections. First, I will consider the moral consequences of failing to act with the required speed when a harm is underway. Second, I will examine the process of abolishing slavery in the British colonies as a paradigmatic historical reference of social, moral, and economic transformation advanced to end a harm. I will pay attention to how resistance to change and, especially, mechanisms to delay the emancipation of the enslaved can provide lessons for our contemporary climate challenge. Third, I will analyze slow climate action and its resulting harms. Finally, I will conclude by drawing attention over the moral relevance of slow action, calling states to avoid errors of the past, comply with present commitments, and prevent further harm.

Section I: Slow Action: What It Is and Why It Is a Distinctive Moral Wrong

A necessary condition for establishing moral responsibility is that an agent's conduct causes, contributes to, and / or exacerbates an actual or potential state of affairs (Hart and Honoré, 1959).[3] Conduct may include omissions, or "negative acts," as well as positive acts. Both acts and omissions can trigger the causal process (positive causation) or fail to prevent the causal process from happening (negative causation).[4] For instance, failing to reduce emissions (an omission) and continued subsidization of fossil fuels (an act) may both result in failure to prevent climate change (negative causation). While our intuitions might tell us that acts are more important than omissions (Scheffler, 1995), consequentialism considers the act-omission distinction to be morally irrelevant (Baron, 1993). I argue that both acts and omissions are important, but that acts are more so. While omissions that fail to prevent

[3] On the other hand, *legal* responsibility can only be possible if an agent's conduct is the *cause* of that state of affairs. For that purpose, clarity on the factual causation process is imperative.

[4] According to Hart and Honoré (1959: 397), omissions can also be understood as positive asserts in that "an omission is equivalent to the removal of an obstacle to the occurrence of a consequence; such removal is itself positive." An obstacle, in this case, is defined but the authors as "a factor which is known or assumed to be present and which would prevent a purpose from being achieved."

harmful environmental acts (e.g. failing to enforce an environmental law) deserve our attention, halting those acts that harm the environment in the first place (e.g. reduce emissions) should be a priority.[5]

Since negative acts may prevent the completion of the causal process, climate change has been predominantly characterized as a matter of omissions (Peeters, et al., 2015: 51). For instance, people believe that our inability to address climate change derives from our failure to build the adequate institutions or to develop the appropriate technologies to address climate concerns without hurting the economy. While this is a common characterization, it deviates the discussion from more critical aspects of positive causation (Peeters, et al., 2015: 52). "It is primarily by positive acts," says Honoré (1999: 63), "that people do harm and create risks of harm to others, in the sense of changing things for the worse." For instance, tackling climate change is not only a matter of incentivizing the development and use of clean energies, it is also a matter of stopping to subsidize fossil fuels and ceasing to engage in activities that emit greenhouse gases.

In any case, and in line with Wright (2007: 291), the distinction between positive causation and negative causation is more significant than the distinction between acts and omissions. Intentional omissions are closer to intentional action than they are to inaction: "both [intentional omissions and intentional actions] are manifestations of agency. Both can result from deliberation and choice, and both can be done for reasons" (Clarke, 2014: 60). Refraining from acting is in itself a kind of action and therefore not the same to "just doing nothing at all" (Brand, 1971: 46), particularly if it is the result of a deliberation between right and wrong (i.e. done for the right reasons). For example, a conscious buyer may abstain from purchasing (or boycott) a product from a company with the intention of actively preventing the company's negative environmental practices.

I claim that "not doing enough," that is, acting but not meeting a certain standard, should also be perceived as blameworthy in cases of positive duties. Slow climate action is characterized

[5] This is especially relevant, for instance, to counter the arguments that sustain that we can continue with our harmful practices on the premise that future technological advances will be able to solve the problem that we create today.

by a continuation of harmful practices (e.g. *positive causation,* like continued subsidization of fossil fuel, unsustainable agricultural practices, etc.), despite having set certain emission reduction targets, resulting in countries exceeding their fair share for holding global warming to below 2°C. We can also consider slow action the delays in reducing those emissions in addition to the lack of policies and practices to make those reductions a reality and prevent harm (*negative causation*). Slow action takes place in the intermediate stages between negligence and recklessness, resulting in the creation of harm.

An analysis of the moral relevance of positive or negative acts should also consider whether an agent acted in breach of obligations that should have been met (Miller 2004: 246), commonly considered as negligence. For instance, failures to avert to the risk of harm, when one has the duty to avoid it, is common to cases of negligence (Clarke, 2014: 163). Those duties, called by certain norms, standards, or ideals (Clarke, 2014: 33), may require an agent to *perform* or *not perform* an action (positive or negative duties). For instance, the continuation of fossil subsidization (that is, performing) when there is a call to halt subsidization (a negative duty) could be interpreted as non-compliance with climate concerns. In the same vein, not passing laws to restrict emissions (not performing), when there is a need to pass restrictive laws or norms (a positive duty) could also be interpreted as noncompliance with climate agreements if those laws are required to reach climate targets.

Interestingly, Clarke (2014: 31) points out that "we might also count as omissions failures to do *well* what one does, even when one never intended to do the things not done when one so fails, and even when no rule requires doing them" [emphasis in original]. Clarke offers the example of a chess player who fails to castle at some point. Here Clarke equals omission to *poor* performance. Even if the rules of the game do not require the chess player to castle at that particular point in time (and even if the player ended up winning the game!), there is certainly a standard against which she is measured. Clarke refers to omissions when there are grounds to expectations (e.g. cases of habits and, particularly, in cases of applicable norm). However, Clarke does not unpack any further the issue of "poor performance," which I believe is crucial for our discussion.

Slow action measures the action against a pre-defined timeframe. What *poor* performance and *slow* action have in common is that the action does not meet the set standard. Thus, slow action refers to a temporal gap: the difference between the speed with which the action was actually taken and the speed with which the action should have been taken in order to be effective. Consider this example:

> Susan lives in Birmingham and has an appointment with a doctor in London on Monday at 3pm. Driving is the only possible transportation option that particular day. She knows that to safely meet her appointment, she is required to depart from Birmingham by 12.30pm. When that time comes, Susan is still preparing to leave and decides to have lunch first and leave by 1pm instead. She reasons that if she drives a bit faster, she can still make it on time for her appointment. She procrastinates further and ends up leaving by 1:45pm. Susan now drives at over 90 miles/hr, which is 20 miles over the speed limit, to reach her appointment on time.

In this example, Susan must drive very fast, which brings with it various possible and actual wrongful harms. For instance, she puts her safety at risk, puts the safety of other drivers at risk, and violates the speed limits. The time gap between the safe time to depart and the actual time of departure results in the exacerbation of risk and possible wrongdoing if others are injured or killed. Susan's delay in departing constitutes an instance of slow action in my view. It is not only inaction by Susan not leaving at all, but also slow action of Susan taking her time to leave can create risks and possibly wrongful harm. In the example, harm is caused by trying to make up for slow action. Susan's slow action also increases the risks of facing unnecessary costs: getting a fine, losing her driving license, missing her doctor's appointment, crashing, etc.

Now consider climate change. Our slow climate action will also require us to make up for the time lost, also at a huge cost. To avoid crossing the thresholds of dangerous climate change will require that we make much deeper and drastic mitigation efforts. Making up for the time lost also entails harsher socio-economic adjustments than if those adjustments had taken place more gradually over a longer period of time. Finally, slow climate action creates more risks. For instance, catch-up methods such as carbon capture storage and other

geoengineering techniques being considered to tackle CO_2 emissions are still to be proven viable and may encompass serious inherent risks (Zoback and Gorelick, 2012).[6]

There is one critical distinction between our case of Susan and climate change, however. Contrary to Susan's example, in the case of climate change, harm is already under way. Acting slowly only allows harm to continue and grow. The analogy with the abolition of slavery, below, will illustrate this point further. Finally, it should also be considered that acting *too fast*, also has the potential to create harms. Acting impulsively or making decisions based on insufficient data or analysis can inadvertently create alternate hazards. To avoid this, slow action, in my view, only occurs when there is sufficient available information about a harm that is underway. This will be established in the examples below.

Section II: Resisting Slavery Abolition

There are few cases in history as morally reprehensively as the institution of slavery. While the abolition of slavery is often cited as a moral leap in human history, for my purposes it also offers a clear example of slow action. Moreover, the history of the abolition is not only a testament that social, economic, and technological transformations of great magnitude – like the ones required to address climate change – did take place in the past but can also help us gain perspective on current affairs to avoid repeating past mistakes.

The process of abolishing slavery in the western world took roughly a hundred years.[7] For the sake of our argument, I will only focus on the path that the abolition processes took in the UK and its West Indies colonies. The British experience contains an example of slow action when abolition bills were finally enacted.

The British Abolition of Slavery Act was passed in 1833 and came into force on August 1st, 1834. The tremendous ordeals that the enslaved people in the British colonies suffered before

[6] Zoback and Gorelick (2012) argue that there is a high probability that earthquakes will be triggered by injection of large volumes of CO_2 into the brittle rocks commonly found in continental interiors.

[7] If we consider the creation of the Society for the Abolition of Slaves in Britain, in 1787 as a (somewhat arbitrary) starting milestone, and the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 as the (similarly, somewhat arbitrary) concluding landmark.

that are well documented. During those years leading up to the abolition, the topic was already a subject of heated public debates in the UK and in its colonies. Abolitionists implemented the first international campaign with tremendous force and those who gained the most from slavery or valued most its economic benefits fervently resisted. These years of deliberations delayed action on the ground and therefore enabled the continuation of harm to take place. This slow action to end harm could be explained by the fact that social processes take time to trigger such important social, moral, and economic transformations. Yet this does neither justify the harm-enabling resistance to change, nor take away the moral responsibility of those who deliberately delayed the process. For instance, in 1832, when the push for abolition was already very strong, and after a fierce suppression of the 1831 slave insurrection in Jamaica, "Lord Grey's administration authorized parliamentary committees to conduct formal investigations of West Indian slavery. This was an idea proposed by the West Indians, at least for the House of Lords, as a tactic for '*indefinite delay*'" [emphasis added] (Davis, 1984: 200). In this example of moral wrong, the actions of Lord Grey and his acolytes contributed to the continuation of harm resulting from the deliberate slowing down of the social and political process that led to effective abolition.

An even clearer example of slow action is what happened *after* the abolition act was passed, and how long it took for the enslaved to actually enjoy some level of freedom. The 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act established a system of "apprenticeships" – a concession to West Indian planters – that required the enslaved to continue working for their masters (now "employers") for a period of four and up to six years in exchange for board and lodging and with the objective of learning "how to be free." While the enslaved under the age of six years old were automatically freed by the bill, those above that age had to undergo this transitional stage between slavery and freedom: "…*in order to afford the necessary time for such adaptation of the said laws, a short interval should elapse before such manumission should take effect*" (Slavery Abolition Act, Art. I, 28th August 1833).[8]

[8] Act for the Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies; for promoting the Industry of the manumitted Slaves; and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves. 28th August 1833.

Certainly, it was the slave owners, and not the enslaved, whom they had in mind when they designed "such adaptation" period. If it was ever conceived as an educational mechanism for the apprentices, it would prove largely ineffective (Latimer, 1964). According to Wesley (1938: 155):

> During the debates concerning its adoption there were those who regarded it as only a modification of slavery. Others looked upon it as 'worse than slavery.' Still others concluded that it was 'a poor substitute for slavery,' and they could not understand why the laborers should be required to serve a six years' apprenticeship at the tasks which they had performed all of their lives.

In practical terms, little changed in the lives of the enslaved on the day that slavery was officially banned. For instance, the Act gave the "employers" the right to transfer apprenticed laborers as property. Moreover, even if whippings and other punishments were forbidden, accounts and reports – including those from the special magistrates sent to the Colonial Offices – recorded that harsh punishments continued for the apprentices (Ishmael, 2013). The system of apprenticeships represented, in practice, a gradual implementation of the ban on slavery. This wrongfully harmed the former-enslaved-and-now-apprentices, who continued to serve the same masters[9] and live in the same plantations under the same dreadful circumstances for years.

The system of apprenticeships may have been somewhat successful in appeasing planters, but it failed to ensure that the former enslaved enjoyed the rights and privileges of a free person. It was, in fact, little different from slavery, and thus faced a strong opposition from both activists in the UK and the apprentices themselves (Hochschild, 2005: 348). In fact, it is daunting to understand that after a hundred years of raising awareness about the harms being inflicted to the enslaved, the same abolition bill that would be enacted to end that harm would intentionally delay emancipation further. In other words, this lagged approach to granting full liberty to the enslaved (the '*necessary time for such adaptation*'), ingrained in

[9] Slave owners were '…entitled to the services of such apprenticed laborer as would for the time being have been entitled to his or her services as a slave if this Act had not been made'. Abolition Bill, 1833.

the Abolition of Slavery Act, resulted in the continued suffering of the enslaved.[10] This is a clear example of how slow action, not inaction, enabled the continuation of harm.

The history of slavery should, nonetheless, inspire us by demonstrating how social and economic systemic transformations can take place despite entrenched interests. More importantly, it should be a reminder of how decisive our actions should be once we are clear about the harmful consequences of certain practices. The example of the abolition of slavery should be an awakening call for swift climate action, particularly after more than thirty years of slow action. Indeed, it is to climate change that I now turn.

Section III: Delayed Implementation of Climate Agreements

"We cannot wait any longer for bold and decisive Climate Action."

- UN Secretary-General António Guterres[11]

As argued by Mouhot (2011) and others (e.g. Azar, 2007; Davidson, 2008; Wenar, 2006), there are many similarities between our dependency on fossil fuels and the dependency on enslaved people in the past as well as the suffering resulting from them. We may have arrived at the present climatic situation convinced of the benefits of modernity – certainly enabled by fossil fuels – and with no willingness to cause harm to others. But we have now been aware of the harms entailed by our fossil-fuel dependence for decades and are therefore morally obligated to set a different path. States, however, have collectively procrastinated too much with regards to climate action.

Slow climate action enables the continuation and aggravation of harm. I show this in two parts. First, I briefly analyze the evidence and consequences of slow climate action, claiming that it perpetuates harm. Moreover, I refute any potential argument claiming that the current

[10] Even when colonial assemblies abolished apprenticeships (around 1838), and about 800,000 black men, women and children officially became free, the formerly enslaved were faced with such lack of opportunities and mistreatment from the ruling white elite that their lives continued to be tied to their former masters in similar conditions than when they were officially their property.

[11] Calling for urgent action to address the exacerbating climate crisis, following the temperature reading of 54.4°C (130°F) at Death Valley on 18th August 2020 – the highest temperature on earth since 1931 - https://public.wmo.int/en/media/news/wmo-will-verify-temperature-of-544%C2%B0c-california-usa.

pace of climate action of most countries is dictated by economic, technological, or other order of contextual limitations. In order to do so, I look at some examples of both developed and developing countries that are, in fact, advancing in their climate targets to demonstrate that action in line with climate agreements is not only necessary, but also possible. Second, I analyze the responsibility of states and examine two cases in which they have been held responsible for slow action.

Harm and the Need for Swift Action

The first clear alarm bells of the dangers of anthropogenic climate change were sounded more than thirty years ago. An important milestone regarding climate change was 1988, when James Hansen, the then NASA Goddard Space Institute Director, declared at a US congressional hearing that human activity was the reason behind the sharp rise in global temperatures.[12] He affirmed three things: first, that global warming had begun; second, that it was connected to human activity (i.e. greenhouse gases); and third, that the problem was large enough to begin to affect the probability of extreme events. Since then, the intensity and frequency of climate-related disasters have, in effect, increased significantly, not only costing lives, but also resulting in unprecedented economic losses (Wallemacq & Rowena, 2018).

Twenty-seven years after that hearing, with the 2015 Paris Agreement (CoP 21), countries established targets to keep rising temperatures under control. In fact, Article 4 of the Agreement called for *rapid* action from signatory states:

> In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal […], Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science [emphasis added].

With additional scientific evidence, a 2018 special report of the IPCC further alerted of the negative impacts for life in the planet of a 2°C temperature increase and made a strong call

[12] A paper published in Science by Hansen et al. (1981) demonstrated a 0.4% increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in the previous century. Anthropogenic climate change models and simulations were being Dr. Hansen had presented testimonies to the US Senate in 1982, 1986 and 1987.

to further limit global warming to 1.5°C (IPCC, 2018).[13] Achieving these targets would be possible only as a result of a *faster* reduction of emissions (IPCC, 2018: 6) and *rapid* "system transitions that can be enabled by an increase of adaptation and mitigation investments, policy instruments, the acceleration of technological innovation and behavior changes" (IPCC, 2018: 21).

A blanket formula of what "rapid" means for each country is not set in the Paris Agreement, as it allows each country to determine their national fair share to contribute to the attainment of those goals.[14] Yet time is clearly running out, because the global temperature has risen about 1.18°C since the late 19th century (NASA, 2021).[15] Not acting with the required speed involves enabling the continuation of harm. "It is no exaggeration to say," argue Figueres and Rivett-Carnac (2020: xxii), "that what we do regarding emissions reduction between now and 2030 will determine the quality of life on this planet for hundreds of years to come, if not more."

A plethora of scientific reports either explicitly state there is slow action or imply there is by calling countries to go faster. The UN Environment Emissions Gap Report 2019 (UNEP, 2019) highlights concern around this slow action pointing out that, as a matter of fact, "every year of postponed peaking means that deeper and *faster* cuts will be required" (UNEP, 2019: v) [emphasis added]. In other words, it is not just a matter of achieving the targets in 2030, but of embarking onto a clear and effective path of emissions reductions – e.g. through a shift in investments, the adoption of cleaner technologies, and a transformation of our behaviour.

A recent report by New Climate Institute (2020:2) underlines that because ambitious global climate policy has been delayed so long, and emissions have been increasing in the last 10 years, "today we have to reduce emissions three times faster." As the earth continues to absorb more solar energy than it radiates to space as heat, the temperature of the planet

[13] The report is explicit in warning that 'climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C' (IPCC, 2018: 9).
[14] The Carbon Action Tracker offers a good analysis of the situation of the world's main carbon emitters, and their pledges to reduce emissions according to their fair share - https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/
[15] https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/

continues to rise.[16] This means that "the required reduction of greenhouse gases is larger, and the time that we have to achieve the reduction, even though uncertain, is certainly shorter" (Hansen, 2020).

The need for deeper and faster emissions cuts are thus an immediate result of the slow action over the last three to four decades. As the famous environmentalist, Bill McKibben, put it in a recent op-ed in The New Yorker:

> in 1959, when humans began measuring the carbon-dioxide concentration in the atmosphere, there was still some margin. […] In 1988, when […] Hansen alerted the public to the climate crisis […] we had a little margin. […] If we'd acted swiftly, we could have limited the damage dramatically. [Now] we are out of space in the atmosphere, and we are out of time on the clock. […] We think we always have time and space to change, but in this case we do not.[17]

It is impractical to think that those transformations can take place further down the line with no major implications. To put it bluntly, a continuation of the status quo believing that we will avert catastrophe by triggering sudden changes overnight when we get closer to the 2030 or 2050 reference benchmarks, amounts to wishful thinking. Moreover, it would be morally wrong to delay action. Slow action enables the continuation of harm – as in the case of apprenticeships examined above – and exacerbates risks. Climate change has already resulted in the increased frequency and intensity of climate disasters with many victims, could push up to 165 million people into extreme poverty by 2030 (Hallegatte et al., 2016), and risks undoing the last 50 years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction (United Nations, 2019).[18] As indicated by Caney (2009), climate change can put the satisfaction of human rights in jeopardy, including the right to life, health, and subsistence.

[16] Von Schuckmann et al. (2020) have reported the increase in the energy imbalance in the years 2010-2018, which is consistent with our collective inability to reduce CO_2 emission rates.

[17] https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-a-warming-planet/on-climate-change-were-entirely-out-of-margin

[18] Climate change represents the biggest global health threat (The Lancet, 2018)[18] and the 2020 World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report puts environmental risks such as extreme weather, environmental disasters, biodiversity loss, natural catastrophes, and failure to mitigate climate change at the top of their long-term risks by likelihood list. The Report "Climate Change, Extreme Poverty and Human Rights" issued by the Special Rapporteur for extreme poverty (A/HRC/41/39) notes that "although climate change has been on the human rights agenda for well over a decade, it remains a marginal concern for most actors."

Is It Possible to go Faster?

I will examine below some examples to show that some developed and developing countries are in fact making good progress. India, the world's third largest single country emitter of CO_2, is on track to overachieve its Paris commitments. Fifty-five percent of the newly installed energy capacity in 2019 was from solar and wind.[19] In fact, wholesale solar power in India became cheaper than coal-fired electricity in 2018.[20] So while coal will not disappear in the short term, given the existing capacity, it is definitely becoming unattractive. India's energic divestment from coal comes as a result of a political commitment by the government married with a fall in the price of renewables.

Some European countries are also implementing environmentally friendly policies and practices with tangible results: renewables produced 56 percent of Germany's electricity in the first half of 2020,[21] and Portugal[22] has gone fifty-nine days and the UK[23] sixty-seven days with no coal-fired electricity in the same period. The UK is the first major global economy to set its own net emissions target to zero by 2050.[24] In December 2020, the Danish government, on its part, banned any future oil and gas explorations, a decisive move in the direction of phasing out oil and gas production. In September 2020, the European Commission presented a plan to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This target has yet to be included in an amendment of the European Climate Law and confirmed by the Parliament and the Council.[25] A study,

[19] Government of India Ministry of Power, "Installed Capacity – December 2019," (January 2020). http://cea.nic.in/reports/monthly/installedcapacity/2019/installed_capacity-12.pdf

[20] India received bids for solar power at 2.44 rupees per kilowatt-hour and that this is 24 percent lower than the average cost for coal-fired electricity in India - https://www.pv-tech.org/guest-blog/unravelling-indias-2.44-rupee-solar-tariff-refined-sensibility-or-a-churlis; https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/10/indian-solar-power-prices-hit-record-low-undercutting-fossil-fuels

[21] https://www.ise.fraunhofer.de/en/press-media/press-releases/2020/net-energy-production-first-half-of-2020.html

[22] https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/electric-power/060420-portugal-power-demand-sees-lowest-may-total-since-2003-ren

[23] https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-52973089

[24] There is an expectation the EU is planning to put forward a revised and more ambitious 2030 NDC target in 2020 of 55% reduction by 2030, which is still considered below what is necessary to reach a Paris Agreement compatible emissions pathway by CAT.

[25] By the time of writing, the Council and the European Parliament's negotiators had reached a provisional political agreement.

however, indicates that the EU could achieve emissions reduction of up to 62 percent (below 1990 by 2030) if best practice policies found in some EU member states are applied across the EU (Climact & New Climate Institute, 2018).[26]

The path of India and some European countries are evidence of what is possible in terms of climate action, both qualitatively as well as temporally. These examples show the extent to which clean energy industries, especially from wind and solar, are expanding quickly. In fact, they are becoming the cheapest source of energy for large segments of the world's population.[27] In addition, investments in renewables and energy efficiency create three times more jobs, on average, than investments in fossil fuel technologies (Garret Peltier, 2017). In short, the evidence shows that there is no need to wait any further to implement such policies. Moreover, undertaking the actions that are feasible today, without delay, will leave us more time to implement harder measures further down the line.

However, despite the availability and falling costs of clean energies, and despite the existence of certain good practices that shed light on what is practically possible (i.e. energy reform, legal action, etc.), the world is collectively failing to act quickly enough. [28] According to the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2020: 14), investment trends are poorly aligned with the world's projected needs, reflecting a "lack of progress in boosting key clean energy technologies *at the pace required* by rising global needs and the imperative to address climate change" [emphasis added]. Furthermore, the Production Gap Report, a collaborative analysis by several research and academic institutions and experts[29] that presents an assessment of countries' plans and outlooks for fossil fuel production and the gaps vis-à-vis climate objectives, observes that governments are on track to produce about 50 percent more fossil

[26] These efforts of some EU countries should be coupled with supporting the net zero transition of Central and Eastern European countries – like Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia - that are heavily dependent on coal. But Heilmann, Popp and Amon (2020) find that the economic profitability of coal in these countries is already declining.

[27] As of 2019, more than two-thirds of the global population live in countries where solar or wind, if not both, are the cheapest source of new electricity generation. Bloomberg New Energy Finance, "New Energy Outlook 2019" (2019). https://bnef.turtl.co/story/neo2019?teaser=true

[28] Climate Action Tracker, 22 September 2020 update - https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/eu/

[29] Including the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), International Institute for Sustainable Development, Overseas Development Institute, CICERO Centre for International Climate and Environmental Research, Climate Analytics, and UNEP.

fuels by 2030 than would be consistent with limiting warming to 2°C and 120 percent more than would be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5°C (SEI et al. 2019: 4). In contrast, in 2019, global military spending observed its largest annual increase in a decade: it rose to $1,917 billion - 7.2% higher than in 2010 (Tian et al., 2020).

Despite thirty years of international efforts to build the evidence and trigger decisive action against climate change, global climate action has been too slow to reverse the damaging effects of the changing climate. While we may consider delayed and slow action not as bad as inaction, evidence shows that they are nevertheless harmful. The moral and, possibly, legal responsibility of states for the harms resulting from intentionally slow action is a matter that, consequently, deserves further research and attention.

Conclusion

The example of the British abolition of slavery in the West Indies and the establishment of apprenticeships is a shameful reminder of the harm created when short-term material interests are put before the value of life and the rights of people. They contain two major lessons for our contemporary climate challenge: first, that once it is acknowledged that harms are taking place, action to end harm needs to be qualitatively and temporarily decisive. The experience of the apprenticeships, as a gradual transition between slavery and freedom, resulted in the continuation of harm, which is exactly what the Emancipation Act was supposed to end. Similarly, our current transition to a low-carbon economy and more environmentally friendly practices is too slow if we want to avert permanent damage and be able to achieve the targets of the Paris Agreement. This results in the continuation and deepening of harm, which is exactly what the Agreement signatory states agreed to prevent. As ashamed as we are of past systemic harms like slavery, future generations will look upon us and judge our slow action in the face of the harms of anthropogenic climate change.

Second, the examination of the abolition of slavery is also a reminder that harmful practices can be changed, even when they are deeply entrenched in our complex social, economic, and political systems. The example of the abolition of slavery should give us hope in our collective capacity to bring about a global social and economic transformation of great

magnitude, when moral concerns are a driving force. More concretely, the end of institutional slavery, a global complex system that was a "normal" feature of life, should teach us that we can end our dependence on fossil fuels, another global complex system on which we now depend. As shown above, cases of countries on track to meet their Paris commitments are a testament that putting in motion the needed climate action *is possible*. Reflecting on past experiences of how humanity was able to face daunting challenges should help to remind us that we *can* change, and we *should*.

Slow climate action has been having very tangible impacts on the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, let alone the negative impacts on other forms of life. States are not only morally responsible for their failure to prevent harm, but above all for their continued creation and / or exacerbation of harm and risk of harm, in disregard of science and their international commitments. The literature on acts and omissions, on positive and negative causation, does not fully unpack the nuances of cases of intentionally delaying actions and, yet, the consequences can be fatal. Common sense may indicate that slow action is not as bad as inaction, yet they may ultimately be equally harmful for the goals of social progress, as the abolition movement has shown us.

In this paper I have chosen not to debate the Paris targets, but I acknowledge that certain challenges and harms will persist even if these targets are met, in the same way that once the enslaved were finally freed, a whole new chapter would begin in their fight to fully enjoy the newly acquired rights and privileges.

The unwillingness to act upon international climate commitments, along the required timeframes, represents an inconsistency between moral standards and actions. Time is running out; every day that passes widens the gap between what we need to do and what is actually being done. Procrastination and slow action should no longer be tolerated. States should be called out for allowing harms to continue and be held accountable. It is now time for a bold and decisive climate action in alignment with the preoccupation to maintain life and uphold human rights.

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