

Humankind's Faustian "Pact" with Fossil Fuels*

*This posting is a simultaneous submission for "Climate Change and You: Putting a Face on Global Warming," EcoRes Forum Online E-Conference #3, October 19-29, 2009. Further information available at www.eco-res.org.

A Faustian "pact" is a myth indigenous to parts of the world where a belief in the devil occurs. In the myth, the devil offers diabolical favors in exchange for an individual's soul. Although the pacts are usually made by individuals, societies apparently are not excluded.

When humankind discovered it could obtain large amounts of energy from fossil fuel, no oral or written pact was made between them and nature. Humans found they could have huge amounts of energy at their disposal (or a nation's disposal) merely by extracting fossil fuel and burning it. Individual humans had more energy per capita than any other species on the planet. Humankind knew what fossil fuel could do – provide energy for transportation, heating houses, and what appeared to be control and mastery of nature.

Humans became so addicted to the benefits of fossil energy that they failed to ask what else its use would do to the planet. Extraction and use of fossil fuel made possible the doubling of the human population within a single human life span (at least for developed countries). Cheap, abundant fuel made globalization possible. Ordinary people could travel over the planet at low cost, sometimes carrying diseases and agricultural pests with them. Raw materials could be shipped to China from all over the world and finished material goods could be shipped anywhere in the world.

However, burning fossil fuels produced greenhouse gases that changed the climate since coal produces much more carbon dioxide per unit of energy generated than either petroleum or natural gas. In addition, Heinberg (2009, p. 55) notes that coal consumption has been rising at a rate of up to 10% per year, which means a doubling of demand every seven years. This situation is high risk, even if non-carbon alternatives (e.g., solar and wind) were available, which they are not, in adequate quantity in the United States. Also needed is an updated, national, electric transmission line.

Heinberg (2009, p. 27) lists three conclusions concerning coal reserves.

- (1) *World proven reserves (i.e., the reserves that are economically recoverable at current economic and operating conditions) of coal are decreasing fast . . .*
- (2) *The bulk of coal production and export is getting concentrated within a few countries and market players, which creates the risk of market imperfections . . .*
- (3) *Coal production costs are steadily rising all over the world, due to the need to develop new fields, increasingly difficult geological conditions and additional infrastructure costs associated with the development of new fields.*

Brown (2009) reports:

The United States has entered a new energy era, ending a century of rising carbon emissions. As the U.S. delegation prepares for the international climate negotiations in Copenhagen in December, it does so from a surprisingly strong position, one based on a dramatic 9 percent drop in U. S. carbon emissions over the past two years and the promise of further huge reductions.

Before getting carried away by optimism, human society needs to remember that greenhouse gas emissions still exceed Earth's assimilative capacity for them. Even with the heartening present reductions, the emissions will continue to accumulate in the atmosphere.

Conclusions

Humankind is, figuratively, driving full speed (powered by gasoline, naturally) toward a brick wall (i.e., energy crisis) without a reduction in speed. A major part of the problem is that, as socialist Robert Brulle remarks: "At best, global warming remains an abstraction for many people" (as quoted in Revkin 2009).

Freedom has been won by the blood of citizens, but it is nurtured by a well informed citizenry. However, the "news" media (as in the United States), under pressure from advertisers and other special interest groups, has morphed from employing investigative reporters like Walter Cronkite to a medium for the propagation of misinformation. As a result, far too many citizens in the United States believe "clean coal" technology is available at present when it may never be economically or technologically feasible (e.g., Weld 2009). This unsubstantiated belief is how a society makes Faustian "pacts" that it will later regret.

LITERATURE CITED

- Brown, L. 2009. On energy, we're finally walking the walk. Washington Post 20Sept
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/18/AR2009091801143.html>.
- Heinberg, P. 2009. *Blackout: Coal, Climate and the Last Energy Crisis*. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada.
- Revkin, C. 2009. As U.N. meets on climate, momentum on pact is elusive. New York Times 23Sept
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/23/science/earth/23cool.html>,
- Wald, M. L. 2009. Refitted to bury emissions, plant draws attention. New York Times 22Sept
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/22/science/earth/22coal.html>.