

KlimaCampus Kolloquium

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Leviathan in the Greenhouse: controlling climate change without extending state

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Abstract

Climate change is often presented as the ultimate challenge for collective action. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it is claimed, requires substantial changes in consumer and corporate behaviour throughout the world that can only be achieved via internationally harmonised carbon taxes or emission permit schemes. Many mitigation measures already implemented, from bans on inefficient light-bulbs to subsidies for renewable energy, do indeed represent some kind of extension of the state.

Enthusiasts for free-market economics are understandably concerned. But rather than offering a credible alternative, they have generally chosen to adopt a Panglossian view that the problem does not exist, will turn out to be tolerable, or can be addressed by some futuristic technical fix like geo-engineering.

I will argue that almost all of the measures currently proposed to "stop climate change" will do nothing of the kind, because they focus on reducing the rate of flow of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, while the risk of dangerous climate change is primarily determined by the total stock of fossil carbon released over the entire 'anthropocene'.

Suggestions that reducing emissions of shorter-lived climate forcing agents (like methane and soot) represent a way of "buying time" for carbon dioxide reductions are similarly misguided. Framing the problem in terms of carbon stocks suggests that the only way to solve the problem is by focussing "upstream", on the point at which fossil carbon comes out of the ground. Ensuring the net flux of carbon out of the ground is reduced to zero before we release too much into the atmosphere, through a massive increase in carbon capture and storage, is a formidable technical challenge that only the global fossil fuel industry has the resources and knowhow to meet, so the sooner they are simply mandated to get on with it the better.