



Welcome to COWS > About COWS > Newsroom > News

We Control Energy Choices, But Within Limited Options

By: Joel Rogers, Guest Editorial

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If it's really true - and it is - that we could be doing a helluva lot more to achieve energy efficiency, sustainability, cleanliness and safety, while also saving money and generating a lot of good jobs to boot, a natural question occurs: Why aren't we?

This turns out to be a big question, to which there are at least a couple of big answers.

One is the sheer political and market power of those who benefit from our current irrational energy system. The auto-industrial complex that remains at the core of our industrial structure has vast resources, often deployed to fend off alternatives to itself. Early in this century, when General Motors noticed that the electric trolley systems that then existed in Los Angeles and other cities limited its market for cars (since people used them!), it solved the problem simply. It bought up the trolley companies and then destroyed them, eventually even ripping up their tracks. Presto, a gigantic new market for automobiles.

When disinterested panels of government and private experts recommended, in the 1950s, the systematic exploration of solar power alternatives for the United States, the oil and nuclear industries made sure that those recommendations went nowhere. While autos and oil benefit from enormous public subsidies in the form of favored taxes of all sorts, and nuclear wouldn't exist as an industry if it ever had to meet a "market test" of competitiveness, those industries long blocked any substantial investment in creating new markets for cleaner energy, and continue to do so today.

What complicates this political story - and eventually moves it from run-of-the-mill corporate intrigue and crime to history - is what happens once such big possibilities are excluded as an option, and consumers make other choices. This very thought may seem strange, since we are often told that in the market the consumer is "sovereign" - that the market for goods and services is driven by consumer preferences. But alas, even Santa Claus would admit that this is just a fable. Preferences are effectively revealed only within a framework of possible satisfaction - you can't easily reveal a preference, and have the market act on it, for something it doesn't first provide - and that framework isn't set by you and me, bub.

An important point here is that choices made by individual consumers often have the effect of locking other consumers into place, say around a given technology. Which means, in sum, we're sort of not to blame for the mess we're in, and we are in fact, and in fact we're not. Is that perfectly clear?

Maybe an example will help. Say GM does its handiwork - ripping up those tracks and all. Then it's understandable that people choose cars to get around, and then are in the market for gasoline to run those cars. But if everybody's driving cars, then the buses and trains can't begin to pay for themselves, so they don't get built, which leads to more future demand for cars, and frustration for environmentally sensitive folks who really don't want to drive them all over the place, but instead would prefer to avail themselves of a technology that is perfectly feasible, but not available. So here perfectly defensible consumer action, at least in light of constrained choice, indefensibly constrains the choices available to future consumers.

In the post-World War II era, government got in the business, big time, of subsidizing sprawl. One form of this was government-backed mortgages for single-family houses, most cheaply built on the outskirts of cities. These efforts were very successful. A couple of generations later, America is "suburbanized," with most people living outside our central cities, and those cities with population densities less than half their World War II level. But now consider the decision of someone who wants a place to live. If you're looking for one for yourself and your family, where are you mostly likely to find one? And if you find it in suburbia, it's understandable that you're newly interested in maintaining the system that produced suburbia in the first place - including government policy to favor homeowners over apartment dwellers, and suburban homeowners over city ones at that.

* All this - big choices beget little ones, which add up to further big ones - is ultimately uninteresting, however, because it doesn't tell us how to undo those big social choices. It may help us understand the world, but like the man said: The point is to change it. Our real question is how to do that. How can we find our way "back," or "forward," to a more sensible ordering of living patterns and energy use? We can't just say to suburbanites: "Get out of your houses, burn your cars and move back to the city!!!"

Short of some big giant bloody revolution, which is not in the cards and doesn't seem like such a great idea anyway, we need to find points of leverage, within the existing system, to begin to turn things around - small steps that eventually, again reinforced by individual decisions, can result in big changes.

These are out there, and we'll talk about some of them next week. But know now that you won't even be able to see them if you've got your "all that is good, is, and all that is, is good; the market tells me so" social choice shades on. We can reconcile our desire for individual choice, respect for self-interest in social organization and desire to save the earth, but only if we're prepared to see that present markets in this area, like so many others, are themselves in need of fixing.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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