

A West German Journalist Ponders the Implications of the Oil Shock (November 15, 1973)

Abstract

In the fall of 1973, the cartel of oil-exporting countries (OPEC) decided on a ten-fold increase in the price of oil. In the following op-ed piece, the well-known leftist columnist Sebastian Haffner reflects on the consequences of the increase and suggests that saving oil and reverting to coal could help restore energy independence in Europe.

Source

Can't We Make Do Without Oil?

Try as we might, we cannot call the Middle East declaration by the EC countries very dignified. First of all, the Europeans speak up when they aren't asked to and when they have no say. Second, it's all too clear why they're suddenly telling the Arabs what they want to hear: out of fear—out of sheer fear for their beloved oil.

Sixty or seventy years ago the European countries would have responded to the delivery bans, price dictates, and boycott threats of the Arab oil countries by sending out warships and marines. We don't want to go back to those times. We aren't imperialists anymore. But gestures of humility aren't correct either. Anyone who goes along with extortion will end up facing more of it. This old maxim applies to politics as well.

It applies especially in this case because the Arabs have obviously taken a liking to it. They have noticed that they have us in the palm of their hand and can always sell less and less oil for more and more money. They'd be fools not to continue this flourishing business until we're bled dry, and we'd be fools if we believed that good political behavior could secure our future oil supply. We can't secure it anymore—either with our money or our nice words. And that's why there's no alternative: We have to free ourselves from oil, even if the withdrawal is hard to cope with.

It is true that oil is presently the most economical source of energy. It's versatile, efficient, clean, convenient—preferable to coal in every way. Except that we have coal, and we don't have oil. We would have been better off sticking with coal, even if that meant getting rich a bit more slowly. It was short-sighted to close down so many mines and retrain so many miners; short-sighted to have so completely neglected the security factor for the sake of pure economic calculations. To go from "white-bread" oil back to "dark-bread" coal is tough at this point. But unless we're prepared to allow our entire economy to be choked off by the withdrawal of oil at someone else's whim, then we have no other alternative.

Merely saving oil is not enough though. The task is to replace oil.

This is not only a challenge for the state and the government; above all it is a challenge for the market economy, which now has to prove its much-extolled flexibility. Of course, it's no small matter to switch from one energy source to another—less convenient one—on short notice. But it's not impossible, just expensive and unpleasant. Coal is certainly available, and almost anything can be made from it—if necessary, even car fuel. And besides, there's no harm in taking this opportunity to accelerate the switchover from gasoline cars to electric ones, since it will come sooner or later anyway.

This is also a challenge for science, and not just with regard to atomic energy and the futuristic project of solar energy. Unfortunately, we have no time to wait for these things. What scientists have to do now—just like in wartime when they have to quickly develop new weapons and alternative raw materials for industry—is develop, for example, new and better coal-liquefaction processes and new foundations for the field of synthetic chemistry.

Nowadays, when the chemical industry can make just about anything out of anything, it would be ludicrous to think that oil is the only thing that plastics can be made from. It's just that it's so easy and inexpensive with oil. But it doesn't help to cry about it. The less we think about the fact that something like oil exists, the faster we will put the unavoidable shortages behind us.

This all sounds harsh and alienating, I know. It means making an effort—including a mental one—and doing without, two things that we are no longer used to. At least it doesn't mean that we'll go hungry, and assuming that we don't go about things too foolishly, we won't freeze either. And maybe it isn't so bad to have a few real things to worry about again. In the last few years, we've occasionally succumbed to the trivial pseudo-worries of people who are too well off.

Source: Sebastian Haffner, "Geht es nicht auch ohne Öl?", *Stern* no. 47, November 15, 1973.
Republished with permission.

Translation: Allison Brown

Recommended Citation: A West German Journalist Ponders the Implications of the Oil Shock (November 15, 1973), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-940>> [April 19, 2024].