

Hot, Flat and Crowded

Author : Thomas L. Friedman

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One of the pleasures of reviewing a book is that it gives the reviewer the opportunity, according to his own preferences, to answer three important questions: What does the book tell us about the subject? What does it tell us about the writer? And finally: What does it tell us about the audience?

Thomas L Friedman, the three times Pulitzer Award winner, and the author of "Hot, Flat and Crowded: Why the World Needs a Green Revolution – And How we can Renew our Global Future", makes it easy for the reviewer to answer the first question. To begin with, Friedman's style is breezy, even snappy. The book takes the reader along at a brisk jog, with no sudden detours into unconnected territory. At the end of the book, the reader is left with the well-satisfied feeling of having just consumed a gourmet meal, with a clear gastronomic path from starter to dessert, minus the need for an antacid.

Friedman structures his book linearly, almost like a dense PowerPoint presentation. Thus the book starts off with Part 1: Where We Are, and proceeds to Part 2: How We Got Here, and from there on to How We Move Forward, China and finally America. In Part 1, again in the same PowerPoint bullet style, Friedman begins with Why This Book? He then moves on to What do I mean by Crowded? What do I mean by Flat, and unsurprisingly, What do I mean by Hot? You get the idea.

Then comes the mandatory Stop Right There, Suspend All Disbelief moment, which all good PPTs must have. January 1, 2000 was Day 1 ECE, proclaims Friedman dramatically. E C

E? Energy-Climate Era, explains Friedman, which is how we need to describe the 21st Century if we are to survive. Till Day 1 ECE was the buildup. After that day (approximately, not exactly) "we're running into an uncontrolled experiment in the only home we have", towards the looming environmental catastrophe. How Did We Get Here, to where we are today, is the obvious next question.

First, because the American model has been so successful, says Friedman. Too successful, in fact, because there are now so many others trying to carbon-copy America. But that is starting to put an unsupportable strain on our planet's resources and environmental capacities. Second, because of the geopolitical power of the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, whose economic interest lies in increasing both the price and the consumption of petroleum products. Third, because climate change is a nonlinear, not a linear, process and therefore it requires a leap of imagination, absent till now, to understand how it happens. Fourth, because people have forgotten that there are two meanings of the word Later – the first and familiar meaning is that you can postpone something; but the second and more ominous meaning is that something is over, finished with and won't be back, like much of our planet's biodiversity. Fifth, because of the poverty of available alternative, eco-friendly energy technologies in the poorest parts of the world.

How do we get from here? Do we need a Green Revolution? Are we in the middle of

one? Not yet, says Friedman. We need to do much more to move forward.

To understand what and how, let's imagine what a truly disruptive and transformational clean power revolution would look like, suggests Friedman. We would feel that we were living with an Energy Internet, as though the two revolutions, the Information Technology revolution and the Energy Technology revolution, had fused together, to enable the most efficient and most sustainable utilization and distribution of resources and energy. Governments would have evolved a system of taxation that would reward energy conservation and punish energy inefficiency. The word Green would have gone from a being a concept to being a standard – Green would not be new, but normal, just as civil rights are today. There would be a reawakened and transformed spirit among the peoples of the world, and the ethos of conservation would be as widespread as the ethos of consumption is today. Finally, countries would compete to outgreen each other, not outconsume each other, and through this the ghost of terrorism would have been finally buried.

What does it take to move to this utopia on earth? Can China be a benchmark, asks Friedman. Because China is engaged, through its alternative energy initiatives, in one of the most daring experiments in governance anywhere in the world. As one observer puts it, "China's leaders are trying to replace the motor in a Chinese bus from a gas-guzzling polluter to a superefficient hybrid – but while the bus is doing 50 miles an hour". China's leadership knows it cannot catch up with the US by imitating it – it needs to do things differently. And, emphasizes Friedman, the rest of the world needs to understand that they need to support China in this effort, so that the people of China will have not only more

energy, but also more freedom and empowerment, and will thus be able to inspire the rest of the world.

Finally, what about America, the centre of the modern world, asks Friedman? Leadership and focus are the issues. Not only because strong, transformational leadership is the only choice, not just the best choice, we have in this crisis, but also because America leads the world, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

There is much to admire in Friedman's writing; its unwavering intellectual curiosity, its strong basis in "if you don't go, you don't know", its openness, idealism, and humanity, to name just a few. There are many interesting, even breakthrough, insights that Friedman provides along the way – the relationship between low oil prices and growth of democracy, the emerging convergence of IT and ET, the notion that clean energy is a great way to handle terrorism, and so on. It is impossible to read the book without coming away moved, even empowered, to reflection and cogitation.

So that is what the book is all about. But what does it tell us about the author and his audience, those second and third questions that a reviewer can choose to confront? It is here that the answers are less satisfactory.

Thomas Friedman, as a successful author knows that one of the best outlets for a book is an airport bookstore. If you design your book carefully enough, you can get the *crème-de-la-crème* of the airport visitor – the travelling CEO – to pick up a copy. Friedman's book is aimed at the CEO market. "Do half your employees use computer and half use papers, pencils and abacuses?" he asks in one passage clearly confident that the readers is a chief executive.

However, in targeting this segment, Friedman unconsciously reveals himself as a follower of the Elites theory of history and society, which basically holds that everything of consequence in a society is a function of what the current elite of the time is capable of accomplishing. He has postulated that there are two types of elites, foxes and lions. Foxes are those who are superior in political astuteness and cunning. Lions are those who possess high levels of courage and military leadership. Through a process termed "circulation of the elites", one kind replaces the other and vice versa over a period of time.

In this perspective, Friedman's approach, and indeed his trajectory as a writer, becomes much easier to comprehend. It is no surprise to find that he is an unswerving supporter of the need for global American leadership, as this is very much the task of the elite, and specifically the American elite.

Friedman, as a writer, went in the past decade from "The World Is Flat", which catapulted him to global stardom as a thinker in the liberal mould, to a somewhat less stellar position as a supporter of the Iraq war. This trajectory of Friedman's, in a sense, paralleled the replacement of the foxes of the Clinton era by the neoconservative lions of the Bush administration. *Hot, Flat and Crowded* seems to be Friedman's attempt to catalyze the replacement, once again, of the lions by the foxes.

In this approach, perhaps, lies the book's biggest drawback. For in targeting the elite as its primary readership audience, the book does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility that real change has not been proved to come only via a top-down, elite-fuelled, CEO-driven strategy. Rachel Carson was not a part of the prevailing elite when she wrote "Silent Spring", which triggered the environmental consciousness movement. Erin

Brockovich was a struggling single mother when she took on Pacific Gas. No CEO would have come up with the idea of embracing trees as a way of showing the importance that they play in people's lives, which was how the Chipko movement started.

Real change will need the individual to act. It will take the empowerment of the average man in the street. It is the artist, the novelist, the poet, the film maker, the singer, who has always understood this. Thomas Friedman is excellent, even great as a writer, but he appeals to the left brain, not to the right; to our logic, not to our emotions. And till that happens, real change will not come, and as surely as the night follows the day, the leaves that are green will turn to brown.

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