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Book Review
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Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution – and How it Can Renew America

**Thomas L. Friedman; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2008; 438 pages;
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In the late-1990's, two movies were released that dealt with the theme of an asteroid on a trajectory directly towards earth. One of these films, Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact* (1998) held the opinion that a collision was inevitable and all we could do to attempt to survive was hide, wait it out, and hope for the best. The ending of the film features a poignant scene with a father and daughter watching the tidal wave from the collision come ashore. The other film, *Armageddon* (1998) directed by Michael Bay, combatted the potential impact head-on. The government sent a team up to blow the asteroid to smithereens in order to prevent catastrophe.

Thomas L. Friedman, in his latest book, sounds the alarm for policy makers, innovators, and everyone else. While an asteroid is not coming straight towards the planet Earth, according to Friedman, Al Gore, and others, global catastrophe lies on the horizon. This book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution – and How it Can Renew America* alerts readers to three crises points we have arrived at. First, our world is hot and getting hotter due to the global warming phenomenon. Second, our world is "flat." Friedman uses the term to refer to the notion that technology – especially the internet – has made the world smaller than it was fifty years ago. There is a growing middle class, consumerism runs rampant, and people are more likely to know someone in India than the name of their next-door neighbor. Finally, our world is crowded and getting more-so all the time. According to Friedman, these problems should have been solved yesterday.

One thing Friedman is very good at doing in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* is providing us with concrete examples – both of the problems as they present themselves in the world and of solutions that are occurring in various parts of the world. For instance, Friedman calls for an "energy internet" in chapter ten. He takes this example from Washington State's Olympic Peninsula where smart appliances save energy. He describes a chip that manages the amount of energy used by appliances. (pp. 238-239)

Friedman calls for us to treat the year 2000 as the start of a new era. This is the Energy-Climate Era (ECE). Our world is rapidly changing and unless we respond we are in big trouble. Friedman says that the biggest threats to our way of living are: Too many people wanting to live like Americans, Petro-dictatorship, Abnormal weather patterns, Loss in biodiversity, and Energy Poverty. The solution to the problem, he suggests, is a combination of awareness, innovation, and radical change – "Code Green." He goes so far to suggest, in chapter twelve that the government offer financial benefits to companies searching for solutions to our global problem. He paints a picture of an ecologically responsible world, "Everyone now has an SBB—your own personal energy dashboard. Just as when you sign up for cable television you get a set-top box or digital recorder with it, now, when you sign up for the Energy Internet...you get an SBB [Small Black Box]" (224).

While Friedman offers examples of solutions for the current energy crisis, loss of biodiversity, and overcrowding, it appears more as if he leans towards the position of Mimi Leder's characters in *Deep Impact*. While he knows that *something* has to be done in order to change the current trajectory of exponential growth of problems, it's never really that clear as to what it is that has to be done. Friedman does suggest a "formula" based upon Google's greening formula:

REEFIGDCPEERPC <TTCOBCOG – A renewable energy ecosystem for innovating, generating, and deploying clean power, energy efficiency, resource productivity, and conservation < the true cost of burning coal, oil and gas (p. 242).

However, what does this formula mean? Friedman is saying that we need a miracle, and elsewhere in his book, he lays out seemingly impossible solutions for overcoming the problems he has taken to task here. Some of the include increasing the fuel efficiency of cars, increasing wind power, and cutting electricity use (pp. 212-213). He writes, “If the world managed to take just one of those steps, it would be a miracle” (p. 213). With this sort of passing attitude it seems that Friedman is trying to raise points to discuss, rather than offer a solution.

Jürgen Habermas, author of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *Theory of Communicative Action*, argues that in order to effect change in our world, we have to engage in a discourse. For Habermas, by having a public venue where different solutions to problems are presented, then we can achieve greatness through rhetoric. By looking at Friedman’s work, and how he sounds the alarm for global warming, overpopulation, and immobility of class, and applying Habermas’ theory of discourse, perhaps a solution is obtainable. Because Friedman presents us only with suggestions, and a rough sketch of what one possible “Code Green” future might look like, his book serves as the starting point for a discourse on what the green revolution should look like.

The most important thing Friedman wants us to take away from reading his book is that:

We cannot regulate our way out of the problems of the Energy-Climate Era. We can only innovate our way out, and the only way to do that is to mobilize the most effective and prolific system for transformational innovation and commercialization of new products ever created on the face of the earth – the U.S. marketplace (pp. 243-244).

This is fine – calling upon marketplace for solutions to problems currently faced. However, there are two potential places for criticism. The first is that through solving the problems outlined by Friedman through capitalistic measures, we are still placing extrinsic value on intrinsic goods. By doing this, I fear conservation of species and resources will still be an uphill battle. Second, I’m not convinced that innovation is enough. The “ideal” world Friedman describes is still very much dependent upon a “flat” world – something that Friedman has criticised. The ideal situation, as I see it, is much more like Michael Bay’s *Armageddon* – we have to have minds come together and tackle the problem head on, as a unified body of scientists, policy-makers, theorists, and citizens with great commitment to saving our planet.

References

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