



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

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

Laura M. Parker

Hot, Flat, and Crowded is a book about America. It is a wake-up call, explaining where we are, how we got here, and how we can move forward. It is a book about the impact of America on the rest of the world. It is a call for immediate action that is intended to both awaken and to inspire. If you are an American, I encourage you to read this book.

This 373 page book has 17 chapters that are divided into five sections. In part one of the book, “Where we are,” Friedman tells us that America has a problem and the world has a problem. Actually, there are several problems and these converge into one huge challenge for us all. He says that we can begin to solve one problem by making a nationwide commitment to fixing the other. The problem with the world is that it is getting hot (global warming), flat (a growing middle-class worldwide), and crowded (population growth). The problem with America, he says, is that we have been building walls and disconnecting ourselves from the rest of the world when we could have been building windmills. He refers to 9/11 as a squandered opportunity and says that America has lost its “groove.” What kind of America would you like to see, he asks, one that is earning the world’s contempt or one that is committed and earning respect? We need to invest in clean energy and we need to do it now.

We cannot continue to ignore the world’s problems. To do nothing is to die. Nor can we continue to ignore our own role in this problem. American per capita energy consumption exceeds that of any other citizen in any other country of the world. It isn’t just about preserving the American way of life; it is about saving the earth and its inhabitants. Clean energy, he argues, is also a way for America to redeem itself.

The world is changing very quickly. According to Friedman, the technological revolution is

over. He says that we have entered a new era, an Energy Climate Era (E.C.E.), and this is year 1 E.C.E. We face five big problems as we enter this new era: the increased demand for natural resources, petro dictatorship, global warming, energy poverty, and biodiversity loss.

In part two, “How we got here,” Friedman discusses each of the five big problems in more detail and the ways that these problems interact with hot, flat, and crowded. “Our addiction to oil makes global warming warmer, petro dictators stronger, clean air dirtier, poor people poorer, democratic countries weaker, and radical terrorists richer” (p. 72). We cannot afford to have two or three billion people living an American lifestyle. “The old way is not replicable on the China-India scale... without irreparable harm to the planet earth,” he says. “Innovation around sustainable energy and resource productivity is our only way out of this problem.” We invented and imported this system, he says, and we are in a position to set a different example for growth.

In Friedman’s discussion of the increased supply and demand for natural resources, he talks about how our dependence on oil already has and will continue to change the political climate of the world. In one of the most intriguing parts of the book, Friedman explains the connection between the price of oil and freedom. “Wherever governments can raise most of their revenues by simply drilling a hole in the ground rather than tapping into people’s energy, creativity, and entrepreneurship, freedom tends to be curtailed, education underfunded, and human development retarded” (83-84). He refers to what he calls the First Law of Petro politics:

In oil-rich petro states, the price of oil and the pace of freedom tend to move in opposite directions. That is, the higher the average

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global crude oil price rises, the more that free speech, free press, free and fair elections, freedom of assembly, government transparency, judicial independence, rule of law, and the formation of independent political parties and nongovernmental organizations are eroded. (86)

Petrolist states with billions of dollars in oil revenue don't need industry. This is especially true when the price of a barrel of oil is high. Necessary goods, including food, can be imported. Government income comes from oil, not taxation. Friedman says that if we apply the American idea of "no taxation without representation," this would translate into "no taxation, so no representation."

Petrolist states are authoritarian states, and state institutions are weak because no one challenges them. Friedman points out that last year Russia "saw record high oil prices and not one reform."

In the Middle East, the government takes care of both education and human need-based issues by giving money to charities and religious institutions. "Salafist-Wahhabi ideology is so deeply embedded in the Saudi religious/education system that trying to dial it down is no easy task" (80). Religious institutions are strong and have power, in part, because they also control the educational systems. Religion plays a powerful role in shaping young minds.

According to Friedman, oil wealth has also led to a high number of persons being unemployed. There is a "culture of dependency" on oil welfare. He says that almost two-thirds of the middle-east population is under the age of 25 and that about 25 percent of this young population is unemployed. For women, unemployment is even more pronounced because women have traditionally filled entry level jobs, such as those found in the garment industry. There is no garment industry. Young men who are employed most often work in the building and construction industries. When cheap labor is needed people are imported from places like India and Bangladesh.

The combination of high unemployment and the teachings of fundamentalist Sunni Islam has other consequences as well. Friedman says that young Sunni Muslims, mostly from Saudi Arabia and northern Africa, are at the heart of the suicide bombing corps in Iraq. We [Americans] are funding the very terrorists we say we are trying to stop. This makes our need to decrease oil consumption seem even more urgent. Friedman says that Green needs to be the new red, white, and blue, and that reform in the Muslim world can be best promoted by clean energy, not by invasion. If we believe in democracy, we need to bring down the price of oil.

In part three, "How we move forward," Friedman talks about the many ways each and every individual can play a part in the effort to end our dependence on oil, create a greener world, and save the earth. He says that all of these things are helpful, but not enough. Friedman says that we need integrated government policies, a combination of tax incentives, regulatory incentives, and renewable energy mandates to guide and stimulate innovation. We need investors who are committed. He says that this is a survival issue and that Energy Technology (ET) is the next big global industry. Friedman wants America to lead this industry. This book is a book about why America should lead this industry and how we can meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Friedman says that we have both a moral and an ethical responsibility to lead. He urges political involvement and putting pressure on government to make the right decisions. He argues that if the government can use a combination of taxes and education to get people to stop smoking, it can do the same for clean energy.

In part four, "China," Friedman discusses the role of China and how increased freedom and economic growth have had a strong negative impact on the environment. It was interesting to note that some Chinese people think that global warming is a western conspiracy to slow the growth of China. Of course, this leads to resistance, but the

Green Revolution

Chinese government has stepped in to pass reforms calling for green growth.

In part five, “America,” Friedman fantasizes about one day of a government like the one in China, not two days, just one. He imagines what it might be like if the American government took one day to impose the taxes and regulations necessary to launch a clean energy system. He says that his fantasy is born of frustration with the slow speed of our own government and its lack of support for a clean and renewable energy system. He urges all Americans to get involved and he imagines a world where the collective intelligence of all people comes together to address these problems. He says that we have the ability and a responsibility for change and that change needs to be based in optimism and not fear. We have a choice and “we have exactly enough time, starting now.”