
Books in Review

Not Just Flat

Hot, Flat, and Crowded:
Why We Need a Green
Revolution—and How It Can
Renew America

by Thomas L. Friedman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 410 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by
Andrew Ferguson

CHAPTER ONE of Thomas L. Friedman's new book opens with an anecdote, and the anecdote Thomas L. Friedman recounts is about Thomas L. Friedman. He is attending a play in a London theater. (He tells us the time of year, the name of his companion, and the play's title, but I won't bore you with them.) During intermission he rises to stretch his legs. Instantly, he is recognized, for in this wired, globalized, interconnected world, celebrity is often transnational. It can come zooming down the aisle

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of a West End theater all the way from Charlie Rose's TV studio, where Friedman is a frequent guest, and from the *New York Times* newsroom, where he is a columnist.

"Are you Mr. Friedman?" a fellow playgoer asks.

"When I nodded yes," Friedman writes, "he introduced himself."

Note that Friedman does not *say* "yes"; he merely nods. It would be a mistake, a big mistake, to say that Thomas Friedman is a man of few words, but there are moments in a celebrity's life when a regal silence is the appropriate response to the solicitations of fame, and this is one of those moments apparently.

It turns out that the playgoer is a fan. Not that he agrees with Friedman all the time, of course, but one of Friedman's columns was just so good he clipped it and still keeps it handy. At first Friedman is unable to recall the column, which might suggest that his writing is so forgettable even he has difficulty recollecting it. But then he does.

The column was about the new consulate the U.S. built in Turkey a few years ago, a fortified and barricaded and heavily guarded structure. In Friedman's literary imagi-

nation, the consulate has become a symbol of America's bunkered and fretful attitude toward the rest of the world. It is also, by the way, terrifically ugly.

How ugly is it?

"It looked like a maximum security prison—without the charm."

Ba-da-bump.

"All that was missing was a moat filled with alligators . . ."

Rim shot.

". . . and a sign that said in big red letters: 'Attention! You are now approaching the U.S. consulate in Istanbul. Any sudden movements and you will be shot without warning. ALL VISITORS WELCOME.'"

Stop it. You're killing me.

"They could have filmed the Turkish prison movie *Midnight Express* there."

NO, SERIOUSLY, all hilarity aside, Friedman has a serious point to make about this ugly consulate in Istanbul, and the mere act of pondering it lofts him into hortatory extravagance: "That is not the kind of place we want America to be. That is not the kind of place we can afford America to be." Once, you see, America was a more admirable

place. It was, in Friedman's phrase, "a beacon of hope." Today, "we need that America—and we need to be that America—more than ever." Fortunately, America can be that America again. It can "get its groove back."

Like so many Friedman sentences, these convey little or no meaning. They merely fill space until he is ready to introduce one of his patented incantatory catch-

phrases. When you see him back-and-forthing about "an America we could be—an America we once were—an America we can be again," prepare yourself. He is about to unload.

And here it comes: the world, he writes, "is getting *hot, flat, and crowded.*"

The italics are in the text and wholly unnecessary. In case we

might have missed the phrase the first time, he repeats it three more times in the next 200 words. As it does constitute the title of his book, he might have presumed that his readers are already modestly familiar with it. But there is a purpose to the repetition, for "hot, flat, and crowded" is this year's version of "the world is flat."

While promoting his book of that name, Friedman invoked the words "the world is flat" with a kind of autistic frequency, in print and in interviews, and doing so helped him move more than a million units. So now he has returned, ready to hang that little trademark sign above a similar and, he hopes, equally catchy string of words, one that refers to global warming (hot), globalization (flat), and overpopulation (crowded).

The pattern has been set for the next 410 pages, give or take a few dozen hotflatandcrowded: anecdotes whose only point is to draw attention to the writer; jokes at the level of a middle-school talent show; relentless repetition; the piling-up of distracting detail; too-cute catchphrases; helium-filled sentences with no meaning; repetition; shameless padding; clichés; repetition; grandiosity. Plus, he repeats himself. Over and over.

We read of trends that are "tightening energy supplies, intensifying the extinction of plants and animals, deepening energy poverty, strengthening petro-dictatorship, and accelerating climate change." That sentence appears on page 5. Then on page 26 we read about "the growing demand for ever scarcer energy supplies and natural resources; a massive transfer of wealth to petrodictators; disruptive climate change; energy poverty . . . and rapidly accelerating biodiversity loss." Then on page 37 we read about "energy supply and demand, petrodictatorship, climate change, energy poverty, and biodiversity loss." And so on, with slight variations, to page 43, 49, 173, and 403, and probably several instances I missed.



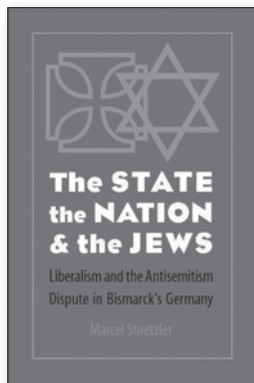
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THE SLOPPY writing is a symptom of runaway egotism, but it is also entwined with sloppy thinking. The argument of *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* is that the United States needs to be mobilized, mostly by its government, to adopt a raft of regulations, market interventions, and personal habits that will cut carbon emissions and curtail global warming. It is a sweeping program, nothing less than a reinvention of American life. And yet Friedman seems unable to fathom that his fiscal prescriptions—among other things, a gas tax and huge subsidies for windmill makers, solar panel operators, and Silicon Valley eco-investors—might entail costs that would endanger the very results he hopes to bring about.

One small example: he thinks that a dollar gas tax levied immediately after 9/11 would have pushed Americans into driving fewer miles and buying fuel-efficient cars, thus making the U.S. less dependent on foreign oil and cutting carbon emissions. But an extra dollar per gallon would also have burdened a shaky economy at a perilous moment with huge costs in every sector, from agriculture to trucking. Consumers would not have abandoned their gas guzzlers for more efficient automobiles because they would have been unable to afford it. As guzzlers age, they emit more CO₂, poisoning the air and warming the planet.

Friedman's economic reasoning is a pristine example of Frédéric Bastiat's "fallacy of the broken window," a bit of economics so elementary that even a *New York Times* op-ed columnist might be expected to know about it.

THE OVERALL effect of *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* is one of astonishing intellectual vulgarity, as though the author harbored an active hostility toward any attempt at literary grace, stylistic economy, or originality of expression. Clichés leap from the page like sprites. Friedman has fallen hard for the word "sustainable," an adjective without which no pop-

ular sage can moralize properly these days, though its meaning is never explained. He likes "leadership," too. Leadership, merely by being invoked in print, works miracles. And he is far from immune to more traditional solecisms, as when he tells us that not long ago, Congress "literally gagged and blindfolded the government." (That was one big blindfold.)

Friedman is a marvelously successful instance of a classic American type, not the first in his line of work and surely not the last but one of the most formidable. He needs to be careful, though, that no policymaker follow the advice in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. An economy reformed to Friedman's specifications would be one in which fewer and fewer people could afford to buy the books and pay the speaking fees of hucksters.
