

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of an article published in **Environmental Values**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/77320/>

Paper:

Lovelace, R (2013) *The future Is not what it used to be: a review for optimists.*
Environmental Values

The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: A review for optimists

Review of *The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: Climate Change and Energy Scarcity*, Jörg Friedrichs (2013) by Robin Lovelace

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013
ISBN: 9780262019248 (HB) £18.95. 224 pp.

The scope of the book is not only to explore the intertwined problems of climate change and peak oil, but also to assess the chances of an effective response. It becomes clear in the first few pages that *The Future* is a unique contribution. Many authors have written about the scale of the problem and bemoaned the lack of action; fewer have adequately explained inaction, or honestly appraised the likely impacts of collective failure. In a refreshingly stark and honest beginning to the book, Friedrichs sets out his aim, to "explain our inability to adequately grasp and confront our predicament" (p. *viii*). This review assesses the work on two levels: firstly it is assessed in its own terms - how well does it meet its aim? Secondly, I offer a more general assessment of the book's worth, from the perspective of an optimistic environmental geographer eager for a 'post-carbon' future.

Few would question the importance of the former criterion: tackling the root causes of the 'Long Emergency' of global industrial society is a challenge to which we must rise to create a liveable future (Kunstler 2006). The long-running debate will undoubtedly benefit from new perspectives and fresh assessments of the evidence. A more challenging question to ask of any book facing up to such grim realities yet targeted squarely at the 'lay' public is whether it can actually be fun and accessible, whilst maintaining its rigour and commitment to the evidence. Impatient readers will be pleased to learn that the blunt answer is a decisive 'yes'. The more subtle answer, of course, depends largely on the reader. It is therefore worth taking a quick detour to consider the type of person who might be interested such an ominous title.

A small but committed group of people find books about the 'big picture' to be addictive. One could be forgiven for thinking that such people are narcissistic pessimists, flicking through each page alone at night, delighting in the Earth's sorry state and egging-on its gradual demise. Humans are by nature optimistic beasts, so taking the world's broad burdens onto our slender shoulders can seem to go against the grain. This is arguably especially so now that there is so much information about future threats: past apocalypantics had it comparatively easy, relying on magical interpretations of ancient texts and gut feeling. Now confronted with a vast and complex body of peer-reviewed literature from many fields suggesting that things are not going so well at the system level, the continued popularity of more leisurely exploits, such as golf or consumerism is understandable.

On the other hand, others enjoy the challenge of confronting reality head-on, whatever it might throw up. Satisfaction and even life guidance can emerge from a broad perspective. Falling firmly into the latter category, I reacted with relish, not trepidation, when this hardback arrived on my desk. Having sought-out, read and even reviewed (see Lovelace 2011) equally charming titles such as *The Long Descent* (Greer 2008),

Blackout (Heinberg 2009) and *Escaping Vesuvius* (Douthwaite 2011), I imagined Friedrich's first book would be light hearted by comparison. It quickly dawned it would not. The author is unwilling to mince words or sugar-coat the message at any stage: "why is there so little being done about climate change and energy scarcity", when each "has the potential of jeopardizing not only industrial society as we know it but ... our core civilisational values" (p. viii)? Friedrichs proclaims that "Facing the future is not for wimps" (p. xi) and proceeds to tackle the world's problems with a clipped, direct style. The tone is upbeat despite the subject matter.

After the bravado of this opening, the first chapter, in which the historical background of Limits to Growth and Malthusianism are described, could seem a little underwhelming to the experienced apocalyptic. Things quickly pick up in chapter two which presents, in impressive brevity, the scale of the energy security and climate change threats.

Friedrich's writing contains meticulous attention to detail, made more impressive by the scale and breadth of the topics he tackles. The topic of carbon lock-in exemplifies this detail: "If present trends continue, carbon lock-in is on track to rise to 100 percent by 2017" (p. 26), meaning that built infrastructure completed by 2017 alone will have the potential to exceed the 'safe' 450 ppm CO₂ targets, even if no additional roads, mines or power stations are built beyond that point. In comparison with authors who prefer to use abstract terms and metaphor to describe the same issues (e.g. Eisenstein 2012; Kunstler 2006), Friedrich's insistence on evidence and precision is, again, refreshing.

The brilliance of the book lies in its ability to glean insight about the future from past precedent. Friedrich's does not take this approach lightly and is fully aware of the method's limitations: "careful inference from historical cases is the worst research strategy except for all others" (p. 83). Specifically, the author rebuts more narrowly 'scientific' approaches as a pathway to envision the future: "An insistent critic might further object that formal modeling is a better strategy to study the social and political effects of disruptive energy scarcity. I respectfully disagree ... it is an illusion to assume that [modeling] leads to more directly applicable and unequivocal results" (p. 82).

What Friedrichs means by this is not that science is a weak foundation on which to construct visions of the future; simply that it has little to say on the political and economic changes resulting from more quantifiable features such as average temperatures and oil well depletion rates, that will likely have the largest impacts on peoples' lives.

Chapters 3 and 4, which use past instances of climate change and energy scarcity as analogues for the future, respectively, are thus the core of the book. The former harnesses the archaeological record in Iceland and Greenland to illustrate how changes in temperature can wreak havoc on food supplies with knock-on consequences for socio-economic systems and culture. Friedrichs rejects environmental determinism, however: it was the society-level coping strategies of Icelandic culture that allowed it to survive the Little Ice Age.

The most impressive use of the historical analogy is presented in the subsequent chapter. This builds on an academic paper (Friedrichs, 2011) to discuss the implications of previous societal reactions to fuel shocks to our own situation. Interwar Japan and post-Soviet North Korea and Cuba are used to exemplify three contrasting responses to rapid declines in oil availability: militarism, autarky and adaptation, respectfully. Again, Friedrich's meticulous yet concise use of evidence is his saving grace here. Rather than wallow in whether or not we are 'doomed', a brisk description of what actually happened in these dramatic situations is harnessed to provide dense

nuggets of insight about how different parts of the world might adapt to energy shortages or rationing. Although Cuba's is clearly the most preferable, there is no attempt to gloss-over the hardships of community-driven coping strategies or the cynical merits of more totalitarian responses.

These are informative analogies indeed. So why are we not acting on them? Why do we not take pre-emptive action to mitigate the inevitable future declines in energy consumption now rather than being forced to in the future? The answers are provided in chapter 6 which is, in my opinion the book's finest and most important contribution. "The moral economy of inaction" is a sweeping synthesis of social and psychological explanations for lack of action to mitigation civilisation level crisis, despite mounting evidence of trouble ahead. Based on a paper published in *Philosophical Psychology* (Friedrichs, 2012), the chapter explains with clarity and force how human nature tends to focus on the 'here and now', pushing systemic problems into the future. Friedrichs masterfully employs metaphor to explain complex psychological processes in lay terms, concluding that denial has set-in and is extremely difficult to deal with.

This chapter is disquieting because it contains the admission that climate and energy crises are seen by the author as intractable and that "we have already passed the point of no return" (p. 160). The interesting thing about this admission is that it can act, as Friedrichs himself acknowledges, as a self-fulfilling prophecy - if the issues are seen as intractable, denial becomes a logical solution to minimise pain.

Despite being a self-confessed pessimist, Friedrichs wrote the final chapter for optimists. "Where to go from here" rejects wishful Utopian thinking and sketches out what a solution would look like in the abstract terms: it must be global, involving "radical transformations of our political, legal and economic subsystems" (p. 172). There is a potential for terrible atrocities to occur as a result of future 'eco-scarcity' yet these depressing outcomes are far from inevitable. Hope can even be found in the case of collapse, as underlined by reference to Greer's magnificent vision, *The Ecotechnic Future* (Greer 2009) in the book's closing section.

In summary, *The Future is not what it used to be* provides a potent antidote to wishful thinking about the scale of global problems and a brutally honest high-level assessment of humanity's failure to act. For pessimists there is much to confirm one's world-view and insight into how to avoid the traps of despair or denial. For optimists the book is a gruelling but ultimately enlightening experience. Falling into the latter camp, I found the book a dark masterpiece. A sober check against reckless hope, it contains a message that anyone interested in civilisation's long-term future needs to hear.

References

- Douthwaite, R. J., Heinberg, R., & Fallon, G. 2011. *Fleeing Vesuvius: Overcoming the Risks of Economic and Environmental Collapse*. New Society Publishers.
- Eisenstein, C. 2011. *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*. Evolver Editions.
- Friedrichs, J. 2010. 'Global energy crunch: How different parts of the world would react to a peak oil scenario'. *Energy Policy*, **38**(8): 4562–4569.
- Friedrichs, J. 2012. 'Useful lies: The twisted rationality of denial'. *Philosophical Psychology*, *ahead of print*.
- Greer, J. M. 2008. *The Long Descent*. New Society Publishers.

- Greer, J. M. 2009. *The Ecotechnic Future: Envisioning a Post-Peak World*. Aztext Press.
- Heinberg, R. 2009. *Blackout: coal, climate and the last energy crisis*. New Society Publishers.
- Kunstler, J. H. 2006. *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*. Grove/Atlantic.
- Lovelace, R. 2011. 'The Ecotechnic Future'. *Now Then*, 37: April
<http://nowthenmagazine.com/issue-37/the-ecotechnic-future/>

ROBIN LOVELACE

University of Leeds