

Robin Melville

Review

Longitudes & Attitudes by Thomas L. Friedman

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Regrettably, given the enormity of its occasion—the events of 11 September 2001 and their consequences—Thomas Friedman’s *Longitudes & Attitudes* is rather a bathetic book. But how could it not be? It is surely the rare media commentator who has ever been able to bring to his regular, too frequent observations a depth of insight which makes what he writes transcend its particular moment to provide more generally applicable instruction. And Friedman is demonstrably not one of those. Neither, clearly, is he one of those, a Boswell acquainted with an at least interesting and perhaps even profound Johnson, who can then broadcast to others insights beyond his own capacity to generate. For a Boswell must be able to at least recognize such insights for what they are. Besides, Friedman’s “Johnsons” are for the most part men distinguished by little but their transitory possession of power or influence, whose casual remarks he sometimes even describes as “wise.”

To be sure, Friedman’s book is explicitly based largely on columns published in the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*. But both the fact and the nature of the compilation and its accompanying pieces—an introduction, a prologue, “The Super-Story,” and a concluding “Diary,” “Travels in a world without walls: September 11, 2001–July 3, 2002,” and also an acknowledgments section of some interest—surely require that the book be treated as a book. Were one simply reviewing a series of newspaper columns published over an extended period of time, even in so august a publication as the *Times*, the critical criteria to be applied to them would be rather different. Yet since his book is so intimately linked to his journalism, I would wish to suggest—heeding an ancient suggestion that one may more readily discern what is written large than what is written small—that what we may discern in Friedman the author may also tell something about Friedman the columnist.

It is in his introduction that one first encounters evidence that Friedman is not inclined to explore matters deeply. It is certainly gratifying to those of us who worry about the wages received for laboring for others that he gets paid satisfactorily to do something he really enjoys doing—to be paid to be, as he describes himself, “a tourist with an attitude” (ix). That is no doubt why he devotes the entire first paragraph of his acknowledgements to praising and thanking Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., and the Sulzberger family. But surely his claim that he can take any stance he wants on an issue

I have been the foreign affairs columnist since January 1995, and since then I have never had a conversation with the Publisher of *The New York Times* about any opinion I’ve adopted—before or after any column I’ve written. (x)

elides too casually over such matters of controversy as how media personnel are selected and how they are then fashioned. Before Friedman became its foreign affairs columnist in 1995, he had worked for the *Times* in various capacities since 1981, advancing fairly steadily through the ranks. Is it not likely that in these 14 years he had learned what Robert Darnton termed the “sociology of the newsroom,” had come to embody, as other successful employees did, the values of “the good *Times*man?” (See Edwin Diamond, *Behind the Times*, ch. 8.) Would he have risen as he did had he not shown that he belonged, that he could be trusted to fit in? Friedman may, of course, disagree with such analyses of the *Times* and the managerial style of the Sulzberger family. But his mere assertion of his autonomy does not begin to come to grips with arguments with which he must surely be familiar. Mere assertion is, however, one of Friedman’s favored modes of argument, even in matters he manifestly takes to be important. So he is hardly likely to have hesitated to employ it in such a minor matter as the one addressed here.

Friedman’s rise, it is also relevant to note, coincided with the development of the “opinion *Times*” (Diamond, ch. 9)—rather before television executives discovered the profitability of “reality TV,” the *Times* was discovering how much cheaper it was to deal in opinion rather than hard news. *Longitudes & Attitudes* bears witness to this: how much digging and reporting could Friedman have done while jetting around from Washington, D.C., to Kabul, to Jacobabad, Pakistan, to Washington, to Brussels, and to Washington again, meeting with others whose vocation it is to be opinionated, during the last three weeks of January 2002, during which time he also contributed seven columns. (Thus, by the way, does he come to know what is the mind-

set of “the Arab street”—a favorite collective concept of his; another is “the electronic herd.” How does he get away with it when others in this hyper-rational individualistic age are called to task for employing collective concepts much more carefully developed than this?) To be sure, authenticity-suggesting by-lines do not come cost free. And neither, no doubt, does Friedman. For he is by now a skilled entertainer who does not need to be reminded not to be “too complicated, or too sophisticated”—one of the six rules of the *Times* Op-Ed page enunciated by the deputy editor of that page in 1989 (Diamond, 279-80)—who knows how to shape his columnist persona to please the *Times*’ particular audience/market. To these things, too, does *Longitudes & Attitudes* bear witness. That these things help explain his book’s existence seems further plausible: the audience for the columns and the audience for the book partially overlap and mutually reinforce each other, to the material advantage of both the newspaper publisher and the book publisher, and Friedman as well.

Friedman’s disinclination to explore matters deeply is further evident in his prologue, where he provides what might be termed the metatheoretical and theoretical underpinnings of his twice-weekly columns and the unifying themes of his book. Those who might be deterred by the difficulty of such philosophical notions are quickly encouraged not to worry, for it is a somewhat condescending Tom Everyman who will be their guide:

I am a big believer in the idea of the super-story, the notion that we all carry around with us a big lens, a big framework, through which we look at the world, order events, and decide what is important and what is not. (3)

No effeteness here, this tough-sounding, down-to-earth style reassures; we are meeting up with a real man’s man—why, he even, so he tells us in several book acknowledgments he has published, plays golf for money with guys who aren’t the least bit interested in ideas. (e.g., 383) But now the tone begins to shift a little, for an audience which has been comforted that it need not fear erudition must nevertheless not be allowed to forget its place, or his; just a small reminder that he has some social science should do it.

The events of 9/11 did not happen in a vacuum. They happened in the context of a new international system—a system that cannot explain everything but *can* explain and connect more things in more places on more days than

anything else. That new international system is called globalization. . . . This new system is the lens, the super-story, through which I viewed the events of 9/11. (3)

It is interesting to note, by the way, that despite his own understanding that the events of 9/11 require explanation, Friedman seems most hostile to others who are seeking explanations. Thus, on October 5, 2001, he is railing against those in the foreign press and in campus teach-ins whom he portrays as asking why it happened rather than uttering outright condemnation. But, then, they can only be making conjectures. He, on the other hand, is providing to the world the Friedman theory, which is seemingly so obviously true as to require no great elaboration and defense in the face of theoretical or evidentiary criticism and which brooks no opposition.

Globalization, as he goes on to tell us in his prologue, is

the inexorable integration of markets, transportation systems, and communication systems to a degree never witnessed before—in a way that is enabling corporations, countries, and individuals to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before, and in a way that is enabling the world to reach into corporations, countries, and individuals farther, faster, deeper, and cheaper than ever before. (3)

To correctly understand the events of 9/11, we must, he tells us, appreciate two major features of globalization. First, the world is no longer characterized by division. It is now characterized by integration. We have gone from a world of walls to a world enwebbed. (4) But, although “we are all connected and nobody is quite in charge” now, some of us do not benefit from the new system. And some—“people who feel overwhelmed by it, homogenized by it, or unable to keep pace with its demands”—may lash back at it. (4) But since according to Friedman the changes are inexorable and seemingly impersonal, we begin to understand, perhaps, why he takes the views that he does of those whom the new system disadvantages. (For some reason I am at this point reminded of Winston Churchill’s attitude toward the British coal miners back in 1926: he pitied their condition so long as they remained passive before the inexorable greed of the coal owners, but God help them if *they* dared to try to do something about it. Paternalists are so predictable.)

The second major feature of globalization Friedman urges upon his readers' attention is built around three overlapping, interacting "balances": the "traditional balance of power between nation-states"; the balance of power between nation-states and global markets—our world is defined both by the sole remaining Superpower and by the newer Supermarkets; and thirdly, there is "the newest [balance] of all and the most relevant to the events of 9/11," that between individuals and nation-states (5)—individuals "super-empowered" by the new technologies and the new modes of connecting with others across the face of the earth, "some of [whom] are quite angry, some of [whom] are quite wonderful" (6)—surely an interesting comparison, full of implications for the evaluation of behavior. But is it really the case that Jody Williams, who worked so hard to rid the world of land mines, whom Friedman juxtaposes to Osama bin Laden, was not angry about what was being done to the world? (6) Besides, Friedman himself allows at several points in his present text—oddly, in language that seems not to convey it particularly well—that he is angry. Anger, it would thus seem, does not constitute a very useful mark of malevolence.

But there we have it:

You will never understand the globalization system, or the front page of the morning paper—or 9/11—unless you see each as a complex interaction between all three of these actors: states bumping up against states, states bumping up against Supermarkets, and Supermarkets and states bumping up against super-empowered individuals—many of whom, unfortunately, are super-empowered angry men. (6)

That—four pages, much of them given over to deliberately and not necessarily fairly chosen examples and exhortation—is purportedly what informs and unites what follows. Those who wish more detailed discussion of these notions, Friedman directs to his previous book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. But it is difficult to tell whether all of the features of the system he sketches here actually do have a place in that other prolix, repetitious, assertion- and anecdote-laden account of the on-going transformation of our world. In short, the very amorphousness of Friedman's presentations makes it difficult to tell exactly what beyond the commonplace his "super-story" is. Since, however, we inhabit a time and place in which, as Bob Woodward has now revealed to us in his recently published *Bush At War*, such concepts as "pounding sand" and "boots on the ground" now figure hugely in the arcane

imperial deliberations of our most high, there is perhaps more to the notion of “bumping up against” than I have yet been able to figure out?

The core of *Longitudes & Attitudes* consists of 92 columns, now chapters, each conforming to the 740-word length requirement set by the *Times*. The eleven chapter-columns in the section entitled “Before” first appeared at a scattering of moments in the nine months preceding 9/11; the last of these, “Walls,” appeared on the morning of 11 September itself. This section would seem to serve at least two functions: to provide some scene setting for what follows and to establish Friedman’s intimate, indeed prescient knowledge of the new world about to be so violently born. The “After” section is composed of the columns—he seems to have left almost none of them out—which appeared every three or four days, with only a couple of brief breaks, between 13 September 2001 and 3 July 2002 (while the beginning date is obvious, the concluding date remains unexplained). Here especially, self-portrayed as the intimate of the powerful and the privileged, the royal, the economic, intellectual and media élites, in places most of us will probably never even visit, we encounter Friedman in his roles as adviser to princes, as castigating prophet, as international prosecutor and judge, and as the guide to the perplexed and ignorant but sovereign *Times*-reading public through the intricate by-ways of an alien, troubling hell of a world. Part of the time, too, we encounter Friedman as a sort of superhero, “Friedman of the *Times*,” risking his all, despite the entreaties of his daughters, in Kabul, Peshawar, Bethlehem, Jidda, Jakarta and Tehran, and let us not forget many-mosqued Brussels (27 January 2002; Diary, 330-337), so that we—and they, the inhabitants of these distant, usually unusually benighted, places—might receive enlightenment. (But thanks to modern technology he has not had to suffer the fate of those earlier heroes who ventured to many-towered Ilion; no ten or twenty year absence from home for him so that order-disrupting injury may be avenged. Not only that. He could even make sure distinguished U.S. senators got home too—for, such is his power, it was he who could call the State Department from Afghanistan on his cell phone and make it possible for the Secretary of State to order a military officer to let Senator Biden and Friedman board a military plane to Pakistan [Diary, 328-9].) At other times, however, his language betrays it, he is Tom Everyman, who cannot be blandished or led astray by overly sophisticated (mis)representations of reality from bluntly speaking the plain truth of that reality to power in paternalistic defense not only of his daughters but of all his fellow citizens.

Having alluded to Friedman's literary style at several points, let me note one of its particularly disquieting features: his tendency to make his points through appeals to authority. Notwithstanding his openly expressed contempt for media experts—indeed, his column on the virtues of golf and the Golf Channel could be taken to reveal him to be a self-hating pundit (21 April 2002)—he again and again relies on “the Middle East expert,” “the foreign policy expert,” etc., quite a number of whom would appear, from his acknowledgments, to be his personal friends. So long ago as 1989 Edward Said chided him for his reliance on “trusted gurus” whose opinions he self-servingly “palms off . . . as reasonable, uncontested, secure” (reprinted in *The Politics of Dispossession*, ch. 34). In fact, most of the criticism Said then directed at Friedman, from his tone, to his mode of argumentation, to his simplification of complex issues, to his contradictoriness, would seem to apply to the book presently under review. It may even be, as with his repeated reliance on a few friendly experts, that these flaws have become more pronounced as he has grown in confidence and acclaim. But, of course, Said is not someone I would expect Friedman to pay much heed to.

When not relying on argument from authority, Friedman relies on argument by anecdote— anecdote after anecdote after anecdote—and argument by assertion. This is not, I think, simply a consequence of the fact that this particular book is composed of newspaper columns. It would seem to be his customary style. One example from his *Lexus and the Olive Tree*, which is more deliberately constructed as a book, I found particularly striking, especially since it resonates with his condemnations in *Longitudes & Attitudes* of the stupid, the misguided and the malevolent who do not understand or accept the inexorability of globalization: “There is no Third Way. There is only one way—the balanced way.” (I still think Margaret Thatcher said it better—TINA, “There Is No Alternative.”)

Despite his declaration that we, all of us, inhabit a world undergoing radical transformation, Friedman himself is not, or so it seems to me, immune to lapsing into a certain kind of fundamentalist backlash:

But most of all, of course, I was angry that the America I had grown up in would never be quite the same for my two daughters aged thirteen and sixteen. . . It was a new world knocking—not one that I had grown up in, but one my girls would now grow up in—and I didn't want to let it in. (Diary, 298-9; see also September 25, 2001)

It is this reaction which begins, I think, to explain the otherwise odd homage to one of his high-school teachers in the scene-setting segment of his book (January 9, 2001).

In contemplating his homage, I do not mean to suggest either that his journalism teacher, Hattie M. Steinberg, is not deserving of his public thanks and praise or that he, Friedman, is entirely insincere in proffering these. But—perhaps it is my age—it is quite a shock to encounter Friedman’s account of the world as he saw it in the tenth grade in 1969 America. He was clearly already aware that there was a troubling world out there. His first published story in the school newspaper, based on a lecture he attended on the Six-Day War and an interview with the lecturer, Ariel Sharon, reveals that he already had been made acquainted with massive violence. But one would never guess from what he says in this chapter or in the related sections of his Diary, that he arrived at the age of reason in Sixties America, at a time when the United States was riven over Vietnam, or that before he would graduate from college there would be secret wars and Watergate and so much else. Friedman’s America of his youth sounds more like a regurgitation of some complaint he heard from his fifties-era parents, about how wonderful things used to be back in their youth. But as Raymond Williams has shown in his exploration of pastoral bliss, it always existed yesterday.

Nevertheless, it surely staggers belief in those who experienced the sixties in America to be told that they lived through a Golden Age. Perhaps his myth mongering is no more than an accompaniment to the fact that he and those he deeply cares for are now experiencing in ways he cannot accept the inexorable change he elsewhere celebrates. But I fear he is also trying to (re)construct a myth of America the beautiful, of an idyllic United States that never really was, not only to encourage his fellow citizens as they wage “World War III” (September 13, 2001) but also to employ it as a weapon against his enemies in the war between good and evil. It also serves, perhaps, to emphasize the grandeur of Friedman’s own struggle. For, his pre-9/11 America is a veritable Garden of Eden. And we all know who it was who brought about the fall of the first one

I say “his enemies”—which on the basis of this present book are legion—because again and again in *Longitudes & Attitudes* Friedman is clearly seeking to define who and what the enemy is for the U.S. political leadership

and the U.S. public, or at least the influential *Times*-reading public. He is urging them to make his struggle their own. But this brings us to another problem with the book he has constructed. When one encounters only after the space of several days yet another excoriation of most of the Middle Eastern Arab leaders or Islamic religious leaders and followers, one has had sufficient time to think of other things and perhaps even encounter other views, some perhaps harsher, perhaps some not so harsh. It is a very different matter when one encounters repetition after repetition of Friedman's assertions within the space of a few pages. Perhaps if one were to read the book over the space of, say, a calendar year, one would view it differently. But who reads books as one reads newspaper columns, especially books purporting to be topical and relevant, in this fashion. And surely Friedman did not want his book to be read that way.

So it has to be said that as a book Friedman's enterprise fails because it is just too blatantly manipulative. As a book, it has some of the relentlessness of religious fanaticism—which is awfully hard to take. Had he or an editor been more selective, the outcome might have been somewhat different—though even selectivity would not have eliminated other of the failings I have noted. Here it has to be noted again, that to the 92 reprinted columns Friedman adds an 85-page Diary, which adds almost nothing significant to what has gone before, though it does permit him to express with even greater prolixity notions he has already conveyed several times and to provide us even more views of him being received in a royal Saudi tent or in a Jordanian palace or mingling with Israeli “terrorist experts,” or encountering admiring fans. But books, especially nowadays, do not just happen. They are the product of at least some economic thought and market calculation. The very failure to be selective, to exercise constraint, thus would seem to be not so much an error of judgement as an error of character. Perhaps it is merely the error of pursuing one's own material advantage a little bit too vigorously?

But I fear it may be something worse in one who so evidently aspires to provide political leadership: vanity, “the need personally to stand in the foreground as clearly as possible,” as Weber put it. For consider the way in which he concludes his Diary and his book, a story told to him by a fellow *Times* journalist about his visit down into the dark depths beneath Ground Zero. There, on a bench adjacent to some derelict and some destroyed PATH cars, a newspaper, a *New York Times*, open, would you believe it, at Friedman's 11 September column, “Walls.” As his colleague told him,

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“When I saw that headline on your column—it just really hit me that this is what it was all about” (378-9). So now we know. The real target, the real occasion for the attacks of 9/11 was Thomas Friedman himself, Friedman of the *Times*, and his ideas. One would probably never have suspected that from his columns. So perhaps, despite its many flaws it’s a good thing he has published his book. Otherwise we might never have known how to properly interpret his writings or understand the true depths of his fears and his passions or the true greatness of his self-assigned task.