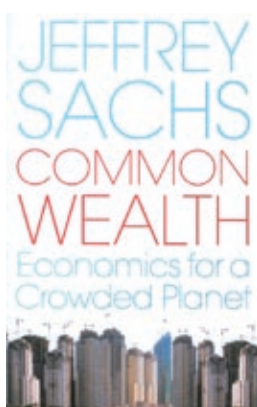


REVIEW OF THE WEEK

It's the fossil fuels, stupid

If we leave tackling climate change to economists such as Jeffrey Sachs, we will end up facing a demise as bleak as that depicted in the film *The Age of Stupid*, writes **Ian Roberts**



**Common Wealth:
Economics for a Crowded Planet**

Jeffrey Sachs

Penguin, £9.99, pp 400

ISBN 978-0141026152

Rating: ★★☆☆



The Age of Stupid

A film directed by Franny Armstrong and starring Pete Postlethwaite

Released in UK on 20 March

www.ageofstupid.net/

Rating: ★★☆☆

What if the oil men and the car men dig in their heels, just as the tobacco companies did, and use fair means and foul to delay the introduction of these new technologies until it is too late?

That the priests of our state religion of economics are so deeply distressed by climate change must mean that humanity is in grave danger. Nicholas Stern was the first to frighten the political congregation with his 700 page *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*, a scholarly but turgid tome that concluded that saving the Earth, and the ecosystems on which all life depends, probably represented good value for money (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sternreview_index.htm). And now in his new book we have the US economist and special adviser Jeffrey Sachs sounding the environmental clarion. The sermon that Sachs delivers is neither scholarly nor turgid; rather, it describes the flight of fancy of an economic bumblebee as he flits between biodiversity loss, climate change, population, poverty, and US foreign policy.

Sachs delivers his conclusions with the moral authority and optimism that only the deeply religious can muster: we must build more roads; we must trap carbon dioxide and stick it underground; we must end poverty in Africa; and the United States must understand the Middle East and act appropriately. These are just a few of his exhortations. It is not completely obvious why a Harvard trained economist, who may never have tended a patch of ground in his life, should advise global leaders on how to fill seven billion hungry mouths on a finite planet already degraded by the relentless pursuit of economic growth. Such, however, is the nature of priesthood. Training in theology and a deep conviction are all that is needed.

If Sachs's prescriptions fail, then humanity faces the dismal future mercilessly depicted in *The Age of Stupid*. The film is set on a post-apocalyptic Earth that has been decimated by its most voraciously destructive animal. Pete Postlethwaite plays the lonely and bitter curator of the archive of human history, which is housed within a huge black tower rising out of the pounding ocean swell of an ice free planet. He narrates to us our demise.

The main characters in his story are oil and profit. The story begins with sunlight and sea and, thanks to individual and corporate greed, ends the same way. Millions of years previously, microscopic plankton suspended in the ancient oceans sipped carbon dioxide from the surface and, with energy from the sun, built carbon compounds that trapped in their molecular structures the energy from sunlight. When these organisms died they sank to the bottom, where they were covered by mud and sand. Here they rotted, and their carboniferous remains were cooked into a thick black sludge.

Humans wasted no time in exploiting this treasury of stored sunlight, once it was discovered. They used it to power their cars and their planes, their agriculture, and their homes. The oil men became rich and powerful.

They became ungovernable. They became the government. The public were fed convenient lies, and the oil was burned. Over the course of just a century the carbon dioxide that had been extracted from the Jurassic sea and trapped safely underground was released, causing runaway climate change and ecosystem collapse and a parade of unimaginable horrors, including famine, mass migration, and conflict. The ice caps melted, the oceans rose, and Pete Postlethwaite, possibly the last person alive, asks himself, "Why didn't we save ourselves when we had the chance?"

But we are living now, and salvation remains a possibility. Who or what can we trust to save us? Sachs is optimistic about technology: "The reason for hope is that powerful technologies will likely be available to enable us to mitigate the climate shocks at very modest cost." He claims that plug-in hybrid cars are at hand and will provide a low cost solution to the problem of greenhouse emissions from transport. But what if the rapid growth in vehicle use overwhelms the increase in fuel efficiency? What if the oil men and the car men dig in their heels, just as the tobacco companies did, and use fair means and foul to delay the introduction of these new technologies until it is too late? Curiously, Sachs makes no mention of contraction and convergence and personal carbon rationing, the solutions endorsed in *The Age of Stupid*. Contraction and convergence is a policy framework for mitigating climate change that has been endorsed by governments, non-governmental organisations, environmentalists, and scientists all around the world, including by African nations, the very people that Sachs wants to release from poverty.

Climate change is too serious to leave to economists. We are all responsible for all. Contraction and convergence is being kept secret because those in power fear having to do what we elected them to do: represent our best interests. Burning fossil fuels irrespective of the planetary consequences makes big money for big business. The media are gagged by financial dependence on advertisements of cars, air travel, and distant holidays. They won't bite the hand that feeds them. It is down to us.

Putting a stop to climate change pits people against power. Coal fired power stations are one front, urban speed control and de-motorisation are another. The common thread is the abuse of fossil fuel energy without regard for the consequences. Watch the film, learn about climate change, study contraction and convergence, join the climate change protests, and help us save ourselves.

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