

'The Great Disruption' attempts to spotlight world's future dangers

"The earth is full. In fact our human society and economy is now so large we have passed the limits of our planet's capacity to support us and it is overflowing."

These two sentences open "The Great Disruption: Why the Climate Crisis Will Bring on the End of Shopping and the Birth of a New World" by Paul Gilding, the former head of Greenpeace International. As the global population surpasses 7 billion, "The Great Disruption" is Gilding's attempt to alert us to the dangers that lie just around the corner if we continue on our present course.

He argues convincingly that any political or economic system predicated on the notion that economic development can go on forever is inherently doomed to fail. Although this model has served us well for most of recorded history, Gilding asserts that civilization is about to reach a critical tipping point. For centuries, the exploitation of natural resources has been viewed as essentially limitless; our entire way of life, to a fairly significant extent, has been prefaced on the idea of unlimited expansion. So what happens when there is nothing left to develop?

For the most part, the book is well-researched and includes nine pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main text. Moreover, Gilding breaks the subject matter he is addressing down into 20 relatively easy-to-understand chapters. Those with only a rudimentary background in climatology and economic theory will be able to follow his main points as well as those who are more well-versed in the underlying science he consistently references.

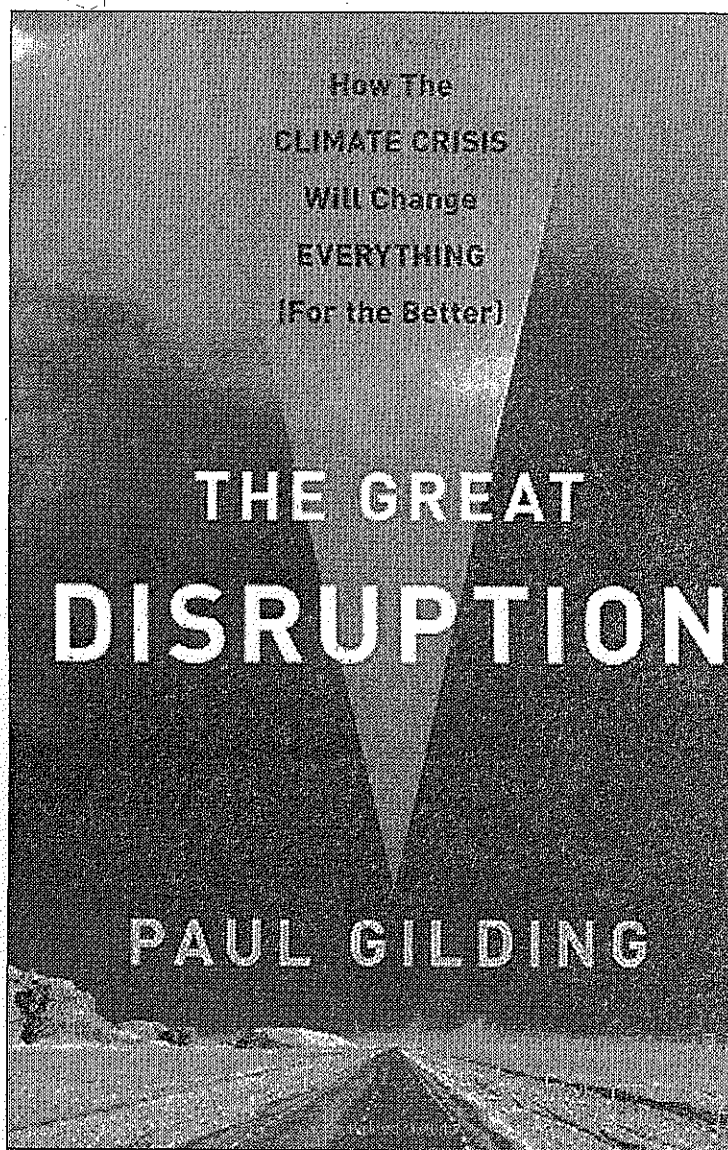
One of the refreshing features of "The Great Disruption" is the relatively balanced way Gilding seems to present his primary thesis. Although his bias is unapologetically evident from the first page, he does something that a few of his contemporaries could stand to emulate — he treats those who hold opposing viewpoints with civility and respect.

"It is dangerous to dismiss all counterarguments to the consensus on climate science as coming from climate denialists or as representing corrupt science driven by coal or oil industry funding," Gilding explains. "We should be aware that discouraging people who challenge the consensus risks undermining good science."

If the reader follows Gilding's reasoning closely, it becomes obvious that he is advocating some pretty radical changes to the way the world has operated since the dawn of humankind. And he approaches the subject from both a macrocosmic (global markets) and a microcosmic (individual happiness) level.

"We support growth and drive it hard through the political process based on the incorrect assumption that most of us hold that having more money and stuff will make us happier," Gilding argues. "The problem is that the process of acquiring it, rather than actually satisfying our needs, drives a self-replicating cycle of dissatisfaction and greater want."

"If a trend emerged where people realized that buying more stuff



"The Great Disruption: Why the Climate Crisis Will Bring on the End of Shopping and the Birth of a New World" by Paul Gilding. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011, 292 pages, \$25.

wasn't improving their lives and was instead locking them into a cycle of time-poor lives, unsatisfying work, and endless debt, they might stop," Gilding speculates. "Of course not completely, but buying significantly less would have a far-reaching impact."

"This would soon roll out across the system with dramatic consequences," he continues. "If we stop buying so much stuff, we don't need to work so much to make the money to buy it. We could pay off debt and tear up our credit cards, undermining the business model of most retail banks."

Gilding is quick to discount the "conspiracy theory" card that many contemporary authors are often prone to play when writing this kind of book. While it would simplify matters exponentially, and give us someone to blame for our current predicament, the reality is that we have all contributed — and continue to contribute — to the dire state of affairs we now find ourselves facing, as well as the ominous prospects on the horizon.

"If the world were really run by powerful men making decisions in smoke-filled rooms, we could go and knock on the door and explain the problem," he explains. "But unfortunately, it's not the way it works. Our system, the global economy, is a complicated array of interconnected components. Each component is individually managed but works within a system, and while some very smart people try to guide it, no one is, or ever can be, in charge."

In addition to his work with Greenpeace, Gilding is a core member of the faculty at Cambridge University's Programme for Sustainability Leadership. He consults regularly with Fortune 500 companies on energy and economic policy matters and advises several community-based organizations around the world. Gilding has spent his entire career studying and writing about environmental issues; his blog can be found at www.paulgilding.com.

"This century is going to be a wild and exhilarating ride," Gilding warns. "The pace of change will be breathtaking and the twists and turns unpredictable. We will face the real and present danger of falling off the cliff and plunging to our demise."

As is usually the case with any book addressing controversial issues, some readers will find themselves motivated by his call to arms in the sustainability movement while others will be vigorously opposed to his conclusions and recommendations. But engendering that kind of passionate response is also one of the marks of a good writer.

Gilding is genuinely concerned about where we seem to be headed, but he is not an alarmist. He realizes that to run screaming from the room would not serve any useful purpose. Those who are interested in our future will find the book thought-provoking and relevant.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University