

The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century

A book by Thomas L. Friedman,

Reviewed by Garrett Crowell

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INTRODUCTION

The World is Flat is a book by New York Times columnist and three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist (for reporting), Thomas L. Friedman. Friedman has written three books previous to this one, all dealing with themes of conflict or potential conflict arising between vastly dissimilar groups of people; The Lexus and the Olive Tree (whose themes extend into this book and inform it through some of Friedman's personal contacts and research), From Beirut to Jerusalem, and Longitudes and Attitudes (about the events leading to 9/11). The object of The World is Flat, with its multiple crises and opportunities serving as the planks in the platform of Friedman's thesis, is globalization, from roughly the fall of the Berlin Wall to the time the book was published, hence the rest of the book's title, "A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century."

Friedman keeps supplementing the book with new material in subsequent additions, responding to suggestions, criticism and new events. To date, there have been three versions of the book published in 2005, 2006 (as a "revised & expanded version) and finally in 2007 (as a "version 3.0," reflecting Friedman's love of technical jargon). This review deals only with the 2006 "revised and expanded" version.

As a professional columnist for a major American newspaper, Friedman writes in a way that is meant, I believe, to be accessible to the widest possible audience, and this can be beneficial in some circumstances but more often than not, reads as oversimplification as he attempts to "boil down" what are in some cases very complex concepts and processes. Additionally, the book often feels like a series of his newspaper columns, and apparently, some of it was published as such before becoming a book. Due to this, it is often repetitive and seems

to jump forward and backward, creating for the reader the sensation of watching a badly edited film. Additionally, it becomes clear (and Friedman makes no bones about it) that he is often out of his depth when dealing with complicated logistics, scientific theories and some multi-national issues, and it is in these instances that he relies on transcribed interviews with experts who he quotes at great length, sometimes for so long that the reader forgets that he is still reading quoted material.

Before I get into my critical summary of Mr. Friedman's actual book I will go ahead and state that I did not, on balance, enjoy the book, find it useful, agree with many of its conclusions, or much like Mr. Friedman's writing style. This last I found especially annoying, filled with pointless meandering, cheap narrative devices, repetition, glossy subtraction of facts that fail to support his thesis, and finally, relentless cheerleading for capitalism. A cheerleader is not objective, but someone like Friedman probably should be. On technology, Friedman's writing feels a lot like having a conversation with my aging father-in-law; the thing that goes BOINK is neat, but any further ramifications of it are astounding revelations akin to magic. The book reads like a collection of globalization musings, not a serious academic treatise.

TEN FLATTENERS & THE TRIPLE CONVERGENCE

The book opens with Friedman on a trip (to make a Discovery Channel documentary) in Bangalore, India. While there, he has an epiphany of sorts, and realizes that the world has gone and changed on him – become “flat” – while he was off writing about the events of the post 9/11 world instead of business. His assertion, that the “world is flat,” is meant to be humorous, as it's evocative of ancient mariners' maps with “Where Monsters Dwell” drawn over the unexplored

parts, but it's meant additionally to evoke a couple of other ideas simultaneously. One: Barriers to global trade and cooperation have been removed and in the absence of walls there is only floor, which is flat, and two; this makes for a "more level (flatter) playing field" for everyone in every country, provided they can adapt and progress. So in Friedman's analysis, the world has gone flat, and this is due to ten "flatteners" and a progression of concurrent events he refers to as "the Triple Convergence."

The ten flatteners are forces that served (and in some cases, continue to serve) to make the world flatter and more accessible to information and trade. He begins with the destruction of the Berlin Wall (Flattener 1), the point at which he sees the Cold War not only coming to an end erasing animosity which is a barrier to free exchange, but also people from formerly restricted areas being able to get their hands on increased information and swim into the economic mainstream. The phrase "the walls came down and the windows came up" is key here, as Friedman also points to the increased technology that was available after the Wall came down. His "windows" here refers to Microsoft Windows, and is used as shorthand to describe the increased availability of IBM powered PCs, a crucial tool in the coming digital age for this part of the world.

His next flattener is the rise of Netscape, at one time the world's most prominent web browser, and the first one I ever used. He points out that Netscape took the Internet from the hands of geeks and placed it into the hands of the world (skilled or unskilled), creating the all-but-unfettered access to information we currently enjoy. Obviously, this is important for "flattening" inasmuch as more people are included, and you don't simply have a flat spot of information in the middle of a lumpy world.

Flatteners 3 through to 9 could possibly be taken together, but the reason Friedman expands upon them here is because he's got either interviews or anecdotes he wishes to throw in as evidence to support his advancement of each flattener. Taken together, they are: Workflow Software, Uploading, Outsourcing, Off-Shoring, Supply-Chaining, Insourcing, and In-forming. Essentially, these are all relatively new business practices that greatly buoy trade, and all are possible because of flattener 3, Workflow Software. Without the advent of the workflow systems we use today, the remainder of the processes would be impossible; in fact, they would have been literally inconceivable without it – like thinking about nails before hammers are invented.

Uploading, now one of the most common things done with an Internet connection (second only to downloading) gets effectively globalizing companies talking to each other, within and without, more effectively, and increases the flow of shared information, enabling them to work together without being together in any more concrete way.

Outsourcing and Off-Shoring are really the same thing, it's just that one is done in the selling and service sectors, (Outsourcing) and the other is done by your manufacturing division (Off-Shoring). In a flat world, anything you can get done or made as well but have done or made more cheaply & efficiently elsewhere should be done or made elsewhere, and all boats rise – eventually. The drain of jobs from one country to another – specifically from America to places like China, Mexico and India is dealt with later in the book.

The section on “supply-chaining” is Friedman's homage to Wal-Mart, and for 15 pages he traces the history of how Wal-Mart maximized the efficiency of their supply chain – comparing it to a flowing stream and an orchestral symphony along the way. The history of Wal-Mart is completely traced in brief, and Friedman points out that America's largest company

doesn't make anything: "the only thing it makes is a hyperefficient supply chain" (pg. 152). Out of those 15 pages about one and a half pages are spent actually addressing Wal-Mart's major problems of low employee wages, lack of comparable health care benefits for its employees, and the wholesale destruction of the hometown storefront.

Insourcing is the word used here by Friedman (and not recognized by my version of Word, but predating his use by at least a year) to describe when a big company internalizes services of another big company, acting like a part of the second company while acting in partnership with it. The example given here is UPS's ongoing repair service for Toshiba computers where Toshiba may never see the busted laptop returned to them; it may make it no farther than a well-equipped UPS hub that fixes and returns it. This kind of cooperative crossing over in service seems to have no downside – as long as those who are skilled at such endeavors continue to be hired into positions applicable to their skill level.

The ninth flattener is In-forming, which he uses to describe the rise of the informational explosion via Google and other web-searchers and web-crawlers. This one has obvious application as the more people know, the more they tend to act upon what they know, and develop a thirst to know more. All of these nine flatteners feed and inform one another, and without the specific examples and interviews, could have fit into a much smaller portion of a book than 151 pages.

Friedman's tenth flattener is what he refers to as "the steroids," the flattener that intensifies and amps up the effects and power of the previous nine. Essentially, this catch-all term is meant to encapsulate every handheld device (smartphones, Droids, Blackberries and the like) plus VoIP, file sharing, and iPods. To me, at least, these things represent such different kinds of informational access that I was uncomfortable with them being lumped together, but I

also sort of understand why he would do this; they're all forms of opening the world to wider informational access, so a wall is being sundered in favor of a flattening, and once Friedman's constructed a thesis, he'll fit just about anything into the framework thereof.

Friedman's Triple Convergence is simply an explanation of factors previously mentioned; the fall of the Berlin Wall and the resultant flow of brains into the global community, the reinforcement of flatteners by other flatteners, and the new business models required to make these things work together in their new forms, which Friedman argues are here to stay. It's a little hard to argue the point either way, since Friedman's point of view is extremely USA-centric, but seeks to include predictors of the behavior of other countries.

CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

Much of the rest of the book is concerned with how the flattening of the world will affect America, and though he seems to be striving to include points of view from all over, still manages to summon up the requisite nationalism to shake his head in shame and admonish the United States for kicking back, taking a break, and letting the globalization train pass us by. In fact, if an American nationalist streak is not present in the reader, much of the assumed outrage simply isn't there. The 2004 US Olympic Basketball squad is used as an example of how the rest of the world is capable - in a flat world, naturally - of seeing our successes and improving on our techniques and examples to come back and beat us - wait for it - at our own game, which I always thought was baseball.

On page 338, he evokes the classicist philosophical view (which I'm currently reading in the work of R.G. Collingwood) that ours is society with too much entertainment and fun, where

work itself has become a boring drudgery, and a “moral disease” (Collingwood) have crept into the foundations of America. Friedman calls for a lot of changes to the way we do things, absorb information and educate children, and a lot of this makes sense. It’s chilling to realize that he’s been calling for them at least since 2007, and I’m reading this in 2011 and thinking, “Yeah, that *would* be a good idea.” He encourages putting more money and resources into education and uses a variation of Hans Rosling’s point about watching trend lines for the results instead of analyzing snapshots of data, which are misleading when they lead anywhere at all. The summation of all of this is that globalization will be okay, even if it seems dark and sinister now.

At this point in the book, I actually thought that maybe the largest point of Friedman’s having written this tome was to humanize globalization and make it less scary, because anecdotal story after anecdotal story of successful and happy foreign capitalists certainly goes a long way to accomplish that. After all, how scary can a process be that helps the Chinese, Indians, former Soviet bloc countries and Mexicans thrive, live better lives, be more successful and help the rest of the world by doing it? It’s not scary when Wal-Mart has sushi, or when you get your new Dell or Xbox assembled overseas, is it?

Friedman then veers into “How do we (as Americans) deal with this crisis?” territory, though, by spending the largest chunk of the back half of this book suggesting that “fear is a good thing” (pg.274) because it motivates people to do better, work harder, and be more prepared. He points out that many of the jobs being outsourced are replaced with new jobs, jobs you’ve never heard of, and that adequate education and training for them is going to be essential. He argues time and time again that we as a country need a stronger educational and political focus (harshly criticizing then-President George W. Bush for his failings in this area) on the sciences, because without them, we will be a country adrift in a sea of globalization that rushes

past us like rapids, leaving us behind. He asserts that we need a return to science-based focus of the 1950s, ignoring that most of our great minds of that period were imports from Italy and Germany (Fermi and Einstein are not names from the American breadbasket), and that the Soviets put Sputnik into space in 1957.

Essentially, he then argues two points, one for companies, and another for anyone wishing to be a responsible citizen. The first is that outsourcing (which by this point, he's arguing is an outmoded term and should simply be called "sourcing") is a natural next evolutionary step for companies everywhere, so companies should get strong or die. As far as being a citizen caught up in globalization's whirlwind of change and worried about the ramifications goes? Well, since globalization lifts masses out of poverty, and the lack thereof actually pushes more people into it as they are left behind by the rest of the world, the only responsible thing one can do is not only go along with the trends of globalization, but encourage them as well. The cheerleader has become the pastor, bringing the wayward into his flock.

CONCLUSIONS AND CRITICISMS

It's obvious that Friedman lost me early on with his writing style full of poorly constructed narrative tension-builders and "aw, shucks," goofiness. The repeated asking, "What do I mean?" Sound bite quality lines like "from hotlines to help lines" and "India vs. Indiana" proliferate, exuding false cleverness into the book, page after page. If, though, that was the intellectual limit to my criticism of Mr. Friedman, I'd be ashamed of myself.

He also falls into the trap of Chimamanda Adichie's "single story," applying sweeping economic generalizations about all of Africa, and making broad statements about Islam, and how

Muslims train and educate themselves. This latter he cleans up a little bit by pointing out that where Islam exists alongside democracy, very rarely is there violence – it’s when Islam is repressed or used as a tool for expressing the rage of a society that it becomes a flash point. None of this makes a statement (like the one on page 481), “That [referring to the creation of an unflat world], of course, is precisely what the Islamists want,” forgivable. You can’t chastise Bush and then talk just like him.

Technology is a wonderful thing, but Thomas Friedman fancies himself to be someone along the lines of Marvel Comics’ Iron Man – a futurist who can see technology going in places other people can’t see yet. Technology is not an oracle, it’s a tool, and while it deserves the respect of a tool that can damage things when used incorrectly, the worship of technology is out of the question.

Finally, and possibly the largest point to be made here, is that the world is not flat. There is still rampant income disparity among peoples, inequality abounds, institutionalized roadblocks are everywhere for people, and “glocalization” (a phrase used but not coined by Friedman to describe the incorporation of elements of another’s culture) will not erase or assuage this. What Friedman means to say is that it’s possible for the world to be flat, that the potential is there, and that we can and should move in that direction. His naïve optimism does nothing to address real problems, though, and when you pay lip service to ecology and conservation of resources with a section shorter than the one that details how your personal laptop was assembled – which does nothing not already accomplished in spades to support your point – then you are guilty of the worst kind of reportage, where you gloss over the stuff that doesn’t help your point in favor of repeating the stories that do help you until they stick.

SOURCES

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