

Critique of The World Is Flat

August 9, 2008

Both a sweeping vision of the future and a warning to developed nations, Thomas Friedman's best-selling The World Is Flat presents the case that modern technology will enable billions of people from across the globe to compete in an intercontinental economy. Friedman also urges Americans and other first-world citizens to think again about what careers and skills will be valued in this new economy, and attacks the sense of complacency that could cripple America in a world of intense competition.

The key to this new world, according to Friedman, is a phenomenon he calls the "Triple Convergence." This triple convergence is created by a set of major economic shifts and technological advances that have occurred in the last twenty years, beginning with the breaking down of the Berlin Wall. The technological changes that led up to the triple convergence also include the creation of free and inexpensive Internet browsers, work flow software, open-source projects, the influence of search engines and mobile technology. The socio-economic changes consist of the increases in outsourcing, offshoring, and insourcing, the development of much more effective supply chains, and the rise of China, India, and Russia.

As the term implies, Friedman believes there are three different junctions that make up the triple convergence. The first is the combination of technology and software to enable collaboration between many individuals in many locations on

one project. He illustrates the power of such technology by referring to an advertisement for Konica Minolta's Bizhub, a machine that scans, e-mails, prints, faxes, and copies documents. It demonstrates the advantages of common platforms, whether in hardware or software. However, those platforms often can't be used to full value until company structures change to better use new technology. This is the second convergence, the shift from vertical power ladders to horizontal team-like corporations. Finally, and in Friedman's eyes most important for Americans, the third convergence is the entry of billions of Russians, Indians, Chinese, and others into the global business world. All of these new economic powers have "high ethics of education" and intense ambition finally released after years of some form of authoritarianism. Friedman tells us "...this is no slow motion triple convergence... and there is nothing that guarantees it will be Americans of Western Europeans permanently leading the way."

The rest of The World Is Flat consists of Friedman's suggestions for America's transition to the world of the triple convergence. Though Friedman warns of change, he also embraces it, and argues that with some key changes to American educational and economic attitudes the nation will continue to be a major player in the global economy. One point he makes is that science research should be stepped up to ensure that technological innovation continues here; another is that our education should both enhance students' math skills and teach creative thinking through the arts and humanities. Every person must learn to think, not simply perform a task, he says, because all jobs that do not require creativity and human interaction will be outsourced. Put another way, those who train themselves for the

global economy will still be able to succeed, but those who do not will find a thinner safety-net than in past decades.

The phenomena that Friedman describes are very real, and the global economy is definitely changing. The suggestions he makes for America, especially for American education, are valid, although Friedman is hardly the first to voice concerns over the training of young Americans. However, through all the truth in The World Is Flat there is an underlying question: Is globalization really making the world *flat*? Two prominent rebuttals to Friedman have been written: Richard Florida's The World Is Spiky and the joint work of Ronald Aronica and Mtetwa Ramdoo The World Is Flat? A Critical Analysis of Thomas Friedman's New York Times Bestseller. Both make the case that the powerful tools of globalization actually concentrate wealth and labor, instead of spreading it out as the idea of a "flat" world might suggest. They point to several factors: the increasing urbanization of every nation, the rise of a few great centers of commerce in America, Europe, and East Asia, the poverty that subverts any entrepreneurial spirit in most of the billions that Friedman claims are a part of the world economy. Richard Florida notes that combined, the economic output of America's ten largest cities is larger than that of any other nation's GDP, save Japan. Florida also shows a map with the residences of the 1,200 most cited scientists in leading field. These leaders of science are all living on North America or Europe. Aronica and Ramdoo go on to claim that the very fact that companies can outsource work to Asia to obtain cheaper labor proves that the world is "tilted." If the world were truly flat, they argue, laborers' pay would be more equal.

Despite the harsh criticisms of Friedman these writers make, it's possible that both are right. Florida, Aronica, Ramdoo all look at our world as it is, and rightly conclude that it is not flat, and in terms of population distribution will likely never be flat. But Friedman looks into the future and concludes that someday, soon, factors like geography will be irrelevant and the potential for education, success, and recognition will be even- flat- for those in the same economic strata, no matter where they live. The difference between the two viewpoints is similar to the difference between socialism and capitalism: Florida, Aronica, and Ramdoo believe that flat world means a world in which income gaps decrease and wealth is evenly distributed. Friedman instead sees a world where the *opportunity* to achieve wealth is evenly distributed, but wealth itself is not. In that sense Friedman makes his point well. The change he describes for America is one of focus; we will all need to work intently to take advantage of our own opportunities for success.