

A Sense of Place in the Global World

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If everything that exists has a place, place too will have a place, and so ad infinitum.

-Aristotle

The large towns and especially London absorb the very best blood from all the rest of England; the most enterprising, the most highly gifted, those with the highest physique and the strongest characters go there to find their abilities.

-Alfred Marshall

The World is Flat

The world is flat, said not too long ago Thomas Friedman, a journalist at the *New York Times*. This is not a new idea. Many have argued that since the invention of the telegraph and the telephone, the automobile and the airplane, to that of the personal computer (and more recently the smartphone) and the all-encompassing Internet the economic significance of the physical location has been gradually destroyed. Thanks to these technological advances the global playing field is now leveled and anyone can be a player, no matter where on Cruiseship Earth we may reside.

Functional distances on our planet may be shrinking, but our world still shocks us daily when different people's situational differences are presented. One only needs to look at the uneven distribution of natural resources and the unequal availability of opportunity to see that place is still a powerful factor

of where life will take you. Or not. The international economic landscape is not at all flat, no matter how you look at it. The reality of the global economy is that some places offer much better opportunities than others.

As the world renown geographer and the author of *Why Geography Matters* and *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape* puts it,

In their lifetimes, the vast majority will have worn the garb, spoken the language, professed the faith, shared the health conditions, absorbed the education, acquired the attitudes, and inherited the legacy that constitutes the power of place: the accumulated geography whose formative imprint still dominates the planet. (De Blij 2009, p. 4)

In his seminal works De Blij explains at length that the world is not "flat" but indeed it is a "rugged terrain" where things like our place of birth, our native language, our religion or belief, our state of health, and more play a vital role in the unfolding of our life.

One visible proof that while the world we live in is globalizing for some but leaving out others is the explosive growth of cities and urban areas around the globe. In 1800, only three percent of the world population lived in cities; that changed to 14 percent in 1900. Fifty years later, it had reached 30 percent. Currently, the number stands at over 50 percent

worldwide and there's no indicator that this trend will be stopping any time soon. Also, in most advanced countries, the majority of the population is located in cities.

In cities such as Shanghai—a symbol of free-market capitalism in the area—with their high-rise skylines, multilane highways, and shopping malls people may not feel the limitations of place but that only stands in sharp contrast with the devastation of people living in the rural interior in countries like China and India. There, for hundreds of millions of people, escape from poverty is not easy. To this day and for decades now, groups of desperate emigrants climb into unseaworthy boats on the African side of the Mediterranean in hope to reach Europe; in hope of better life.

The World is Flat Only to Some People

According to De Blij, there are three main categories of citizens on Earth.

- Locals—defined as "those who are poorest, least mobile, and most susceptible to the power of place." He goes on to say that the locals "will increasingly outnumber the globals, to whom the

world appears comparatively limitless" or, to use Friedman's term, "flat."

- Globals—described as those "… whether in government, industry, business, or other decision-making capacities, flatten playing fields for each other as they traverse the world…" The globals build security and migration barriers, mobilize armies, and move factories.
- Mobals—these are the "risk-takers, migrants willing to leave the familiar, to take a chance on new and different surroundings, their actions ranging from legal migration to undocumented border crossings, their motivations from employment to asylum." While mobals range from unskilled workers to educated professionals, they are essentially restless locals.

He goes on to say that, "In the world today, wealth is concentrated in a highly urbanized and strongly globalized region extending from Europe through North America to East Asia and Australia, a region often referred to by economic geographers as the *global core*" (De Blij 2009, p. 12).

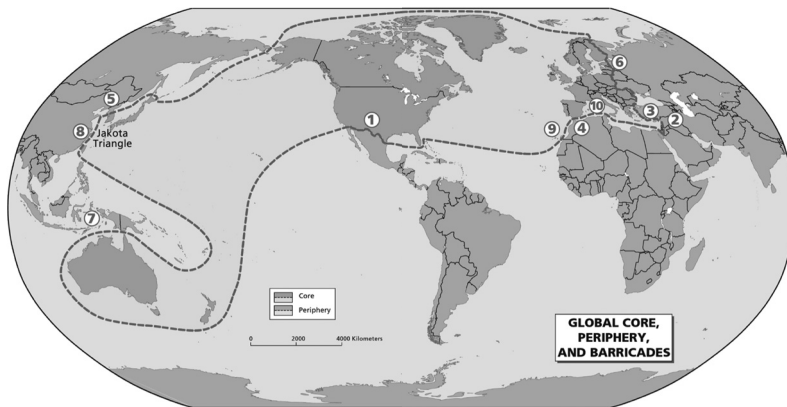


Figure 1. Core and periphery in the early 21st Century according to De Blij. The numbers indicate places where governments ("globals") try to contain illegal immigration ("mobals") (De Blij 2009).

With the map in Figure 1, De Blij wants to show that on one hand the world we live in is separated into core, where the comparatively wealthy globals reside, and periphery, where the locals are destined to spend most of their lives unless they become mobals and try to reach the core, which is usually a risky endeavor. On the other hand, this state has the "effect of walling off core from periphery" (De Blij 2009, p. 16).

The clearest example is (1) the demarcation of the border between the United States and Mexico extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico for a total of 3,145 km in length. Another example (2) takes us to a different part of the world to a border project with even larger proportions, the Israeli West Bank wall (708 km), which Israel considers a security barrier against terrorism but for Palestine it is nothing more than a racial segregation or apartheid wall. Another Green Line (3) has sealed off Turkish northern Cyprus from the Greek south, a separation that not even the 2004 Cyprus accession into the EU could end. The two small Spanish enclaves (4) on the African side of the Mediterranean, Ceuta and Melilla, are protected by barbed wire from immigrants who, now more than ever, try to reach European land with the hope of due process—something that has overwhelmed the EU legal system in recent years. The most well-known embankment is perhaps that of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea (5) that runs across the Korean Peninsula (250 km) and is four kilometers in width. It is so heavily guarded on both sides that in effect no movement occurs. The Eastern limit of the European Union (6) is not as clearly demarcated in part due to the expansion of the EU and the still growing Schengen Agreement, which aims to halt illegal cross-EU border migration covering an area of 4,312,099 sq. km.

This leaves the would-be mobals with a few alternate

routes, including those by sea. Australia, being surrounded by water and thus being left without any land neighbors (7), has had long experience with illegal immigrants reaching its shores by sea, mainly in its north. Its closest neighbors may be Indonesia and New Guinea but the majority of immigrants do not originate from these countries. Afghanistan and Iraq are some of the faraway lands mobals arrive from. The so-called Jakota Triangle (8), which includes Japan, Korea and Taiwan, is the western outpost of the global core. Due to presence of the US military in the area, together with the rise of China's militarization, the Taiwan Strait is no longer a route of choice for migrants. Near the Canary Islands, off the the coast of West Africa, EU vessels patrol the waters in pursuit of returning any African mobals risking their lives while attempting to reach Spanish land that way. Since the Syrian War, Spanish, French, and Italian ships have doubled up in their cooperation in limiting illegal crossings from the North African coast, similar to the Cuba-Florida model.

The World is Flat to Some and Rugged to Many

While the flat-world theory is not completely misguided and the world is becoming increasingly interconnected with more goods being produced than ever before, the average person mainly cares about his or her well-being. And the more people accumulate in urban areas, the more those trapped in the countryside will feel forgotten, looking at the growing disparities in wealth, opportunity, and lifestyle.

National economies in the global core might be thriving but dwindling populations and changing labor needs will call for immigration to counterbalance demographic losses. This is one of the reasons millions of legal migrants have been entering the global core and will continue to do so. The so-called Western Wall along the global core tries to fend off this migrant influx, though this only shows the

growing inequalities between core and periphery. The economic, cultural, and political geographies of core and periphery reveal stark differences that far exceed the similarities. Generally speaking, being born in the core grants certainties and opportunities that remain unobtainable in the periphery.

Biography

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