

# A Flattening Experience

## *Is it only good news that commerce and communication are facilitated?*

**Book Review by John F. Rohe**

In 1989, Thomas L. Friedman covered the history of hostility *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Then, ten years later, he discussed globalism in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. In 2002, he wrote *Longitudes and Attitudes*, and now his latest tribute to a shrinking world has swiftly ascended to the top of the nonfiction bestseller lists.

Friedman learned “the playing field is being leveled” while visiting an employment center in Bangalore. Here, American jobs have been siphoned to foreign employment centers through a network of fiber optic funnels. Friedman’s discovery inspired an engaging title: *The World is Flat*. He becomes journalist and cheerleader for the flattening phenomenon.

Friedman’s discovery in Bangalore was old news for every downsized, underemployed, and unemployed American worker. They painfully understood the rigors of “flattening” long before Friedman brought it to the national stage.

Venture capital scours the planet at the speed of light. It pinpoints meager labor standards, scant environmental protections, and feeble compensation plans. The outsourced American worker has become a metaphor for middle America. Fiber optics have placed the metaphor in toe to toe, cheek to cheek competition with a burgeoning global work force.

---

*John F. Rohe is an attorney in Petoskey, Michigan with a long-standing concern for the environment. He is the author of A Bicentennial Malthusian Essay: Conservation and the Indifference to Limits, available from The Social Contract Press, 1-800-352-4843.*

Wages and working conditions have no definable bottom in this marketplace.

Propelled by the prospects for economic growth, Friedman loses sight of the growing consequences. A glance over his shoulder would expose the view of an American middle class in a tailspin, a staggering trade deficit, and a waning living wage. He might also ponder whether wealth increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few harbors instability for a 200-year experiment in self-governance.

Friedman examines the infrastructure of flattening forces. Cables spanning the globe connect airline passengers anywhere with lost-luggage phone bank operators in India. In this global maze, suitcases swirling on conveyor belts in air terminals await the prospect of finding their rightful owner.

How did the cost of telecommunications plummet to make this possible?

It became a gift from unwary private investors!

Friedman reflects on the massive transfusion of wealth into fiber optics during the dot-com boom. Then, the dot-com bust led to widespread bankruptcy among fiber optic providers. Their assets were auctioned for pennies on the dollar by bankruptcy trustees. As the cost of telecommunications tumbled, so went the cost of placing a global phone call.

Barriers to international competition have been eroded by the free flow of data in fiber optic vessels. The urgency of data transfers has conspired with the accessibility of a workforce in high fertility nations. The flattening drama empowers entrepreneurs to undercut wages and living standards on a global terrain in a race for the bottom.

Friedman identifies ten forces that flattened the world: First, on 11/9/89 the Berlin Wall fell. Second,

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

by Thomas L. Friedman

New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux  
Publishing  
488 pages, \$27.50



on 8/9/95 when Netscape went public. Third, work flow seamlessly transferred information among applications. Fourth, source codes became the product of open, unlicensed, collaborative communities. Fifth, the threat of Y2K computer crashes enabled programmers in Asia to remedy U.S. software problems. Sixth, off-shoring grew in popularity. Seventh, Friedman calls it “supply-chaining” – the scanned bar code of a Wal-Mart sale in the United States efficiently trips a computer chip in China to activate the production of a replacement unit for the inventory. Eighth, in-sourcing through FedEx and UPS delivery services. Ninth, in-forming through Google, Yahoo, and the MSN web search. And, finally, tenth, “the steroids,” namely, digital, mobile, personal, and virtual devices in our daily lives. Flattening is also given a boost by several billion people entering the digital global market in China, India, and the former Soviet empire.

Friedman is an op-ed columnist. He is no biologist. And it shows. His unfamiliarity with nature’s carrying capacity is palpable. The effects of globalization upon biological ecosystems resides beyond Friedman’s purview. His “flat world” is now met with a flattened resource base. In only one brief passage does Friedman concede that the energy demands of a globalized system will require a radical new approach to energy usage. Failing to do so, we will be courting an “environmental and geopolitical whirlwind.”

His flattening, however, sets the stage for precisely this “whirlwind.” Friedman might have performed a more noble service for his successors by considering meaningful solutions to the energy demands of a “flattened world” before promoting the consumptive plan.

Friedman offers a clarion call for ingenuity. This will become the hallmark of survival in a flattened world. He takes a cynical view of the mundane “vanilla” brand of competition. Curiously, as the tentacles of globalism stretch around the planet, unique cultures with historically sustainable practices dissolve into a human monoculture on the fringe of cyberspace. Friedman has not yet become a cynic of the vanilla brand of humanity plying its craft in homogenized call centers across the planet.

Surely, many of the forces identified in

Friedman’s book are unstoppable. His commentary, however, embraces “flattening” as an unremitting good thing. Friedman finds hope in the image of 11/9 (the date of the Berlin Wall crumbling) and stagnation in the memories of 9/11.

“Without trust,” Friedman chides, “there can be no flat world, because it is trust that allows us to take down walls, remove barriers, and eliminate friction at borders.” It is an oversimplification to assume that borders result from distrust. Every cooperative and trusting relation among nations transcends national borders. Moreover, it might be hopelessly optimistic to believe that the human potential for homespun trust can be fully realized in a virtual world of electronic transmissions.

Friedman leaves the reader with only a vague sense of allegiances in the flattened world. Will we become more consumed by self-referential success? Will individual priorities trump communal concerns? Or will loyalties inexorably spiral upward toward a global ruling force? Garrett Hardin would have cynically asked Friedman to identify the global authority in Geneva to call when the pothole down the block needs to be fixed. ■