

The Role of Place in the World:

Despite globalization, geography and place exert formidable power.

By Harm de Blij
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In recent years, the notion that the world, if not flat, is rapidly flattening as a result of the forces of globalization has gained currency to the point of becoming a platitude. So mobile, so interconnected, so integrated is this new world that historic barriers are no more, interaction is global, ever-freer trade rules the globe, the flow of ideas (and money and jobs) accelerates by the day, and choice, not constraint, is the canon of the converted. Join the "forces of flattening" and you will reap the benefits, say Thomas Friedman and others who advance this point of view. Don't, and you will fall off the edge. The option is yours.

But is it? In truth, though the world has changed dramatically in the last 50 years, we are still parachuted into places so different that the common ground of globalization has just the thinnest of topsoil. One of some 7,000 languages will become our "mother tongue"; only a small minority of us will have the good fortune of being raised in a version of English, the primary language of globalization. One of tens of thousands of religious denominations is likely to transmit the indoctrination most of us will carry for life. A combination of genetic and environmental conditions defines health prospects that still vary widely around the planet.

Some of us will be born in places of long-term peace and stability, while others will face endemic conflict in our homelands. Hundreds of millions never in their lives escape the threat of mayhem. The horizons of a life that starts in a village of a low-income tropical country differ vastly from those of an infant in a modern city of a rich country. And in every locale on this planet, even in the most favored, the combined powers of place mean something very different for women than they do for men. The rising tide of globalization may lift all boats, but most of the crews are male.

If it is obvious that the world is not flat, the question is: For whom does it appear flat? Countless world-flattening globalizers move every day from hotel lobbies to airport limos to first-class lounges to business-class seats on intercontinental airliners, laptops in hand, uploading, outsourcing, offshoring as they travel, adjusting the air conditioning as they go. They are changing the world, these modern nomads, and they are, in many ways, improving it -- depending on one's definition of progress.

But are these "globals" invariably agents of access and integration? Are they lowering the barriers to worldwide participation or raising the stakes against it? Have their influence and effect overpowered the imperatives of place, so that their very mobility symbolizes a growing irrelevance of location -- and geography, in the view of more than one observer, is history?

Not yet. Even as the powers of economic globalization homogenize urban skylines from Berlin to Bangkok, another force is transforming the world, dividing it into a core of haves and a periphery of have-less or have-nots. It is not difficult to visualize this global core, even without a map: It is anchored by North America and flanked by Europe across the Atlantic to the east and Japan and Australia across the Pacific to the west. It contains the vast majority of the urban nodes of globalization, including the three dominant "world cities" of London, New York and Tokyo; its economic power is defined by data such as this: With about 15% of the world's population, the core earns some 75% of all annual income. Population growth in the global core is far below the world average; the national populations of many countries of the periphery continue to burgeon. Over the remainder of this century, the world may add more than 3 billion to its present numbers (of about 7 billion); 90% of this natural growth will occur in the periphery.

Small wonder that the global core is the coveted destination for millions who seek ways, legally or otherwise, to leave their abodes in the hope of finding a better future. But the core itself is taking on the worldwide manifestation of one of globalization's uglier local manifestations: the gated community. From the "security fence" between Mexico and the United States to Israel's 490 miles of walls, and from maritime patrols off northern Australia and southern Spain, and for reasons ranging from economics to safety, the global core is ringed by barricades.

Coupled with the difficulties that would-be migrants encounter when they do try to secure visas or work permits to enter globalization's fortress, these constraints are remarkably effective. United Nations data indicate that, worldwide, only 3% of all citizens live in a jurisdiction other than that of their birth. The overwhelming majority of the passengers of Cruise Ship Earth still die in, or very close to, the cabin in which they were born.

This means that geography and place still exert formidable power over the huge majority of the world's people, whose mobility remains constrained, their cultural baggage commonly unadaptable, their resources limited, their health imperiled, their hopes dimmed. More than a billion of these people are the poorest of the world's poor, the sickest of the sick. Another billion live on the edge of penury. At a time of reviving ideological (this time religious) extremism and dissemination of weapons of mass destruction, this is a ticket to catastrophe. Proclamations of a flat or flattening world may cheer the literati in the core, but not many beyond the barricades.

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