

Book Review by Peter Begley:

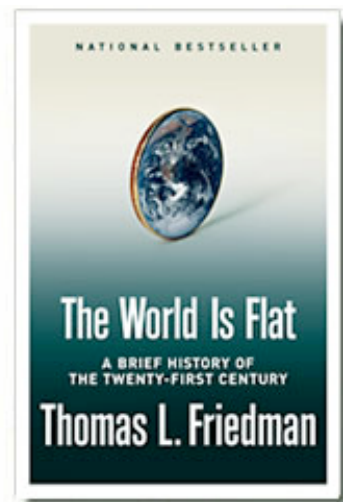
The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century

Author: Thomas L. Friedman

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Overview

Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, attempts to take readers through “A brief history of the Twenty-First Century” in his latest book, *The World is Flat*. The catchy title was chosen by Friedman to “draw attention to this flattening and its quickening pace because [he thinks] it is the single most important trend in the world today.” (Pg 375) The ‘flattening’ the author is referring to is the recent removal or destruction of barriers that have kept diverse parties from completely and easily interacting or exchanging information with one another. An example that typifies the ‘flat world’ would be a computer company in the United States outsourcing its technical support to a company in India, and its just in time manufacturing to various factories throughout Asia, Latin America, Europe and the United States. Friedman populates the text with many such examples and truly makes a case for an increasingly flat world.



In addition to a rich exploration of the many examples of companies, organizations and individuals who are capitalizing on the flattening process, Friedman presents a frank discussion of the many positive and negative realities that tag along. While he maintains that a flat world offers the best potential future for participating societies, he also acknowledges the various downsides the flattening process carries. The greatest downside is realized by those societies, organizations and individuals unable to, or choosing not to, participate in the flattening of the world. Some of the downsides for these non-participants are the obvious

lack of benefits that participants enjoy, as well as the deepening of the divide between themselves and the beneficiaries of the flattening process.

The Relevance of *The World is Flat*

Friedman often makes reference to the past few years (1999 and on) as the period when globalization really started taking off. Indeed, the world is truly in the thick of a very broad flattening and all participants are realizing widespread changes. The economies of China, India and other 'outsourcing' countries are growing quite fast, while those of countries that failed to keep up, such as Mexico and other previous Latin American heavyweights, have been declining. Further, as Friedman describes, the countries and organizations that are keeping up and profiting from the flattening process are the ones that continue to innovate, grow and foster imagination.

The World is Flat will benefit any individual seeking to better understand and effectively participate in the flattening of the world. Executives and employees alike, whether they are part of a small business or a huge multinational, will find in Friedman's book a vast number of examples and historical references as well as practical advice and words of caution. Armed with such information, any individual should be motivated and prepared to participate in the flattening process. Similarly, students or individuals interested in modern history will find ample passages that discuss recent events, though perhaps not in the exhaustive detail necessary, to both inform and pique their interest. Non-fiction enthusiasts will also benefit and enjoy reading *The World is Flat*. The text is both informative and a pleasure to read, lacking the typical dryness of a run of the mill non-fiction piece.

Where Friedman Excels

First and foremost, *The World is Flat* is an incredibly well written and appealing book. The stories Friedman includes are always interesting and effectively illustrate the related point he is pushing. I found the broadness of the stories he included, from catchy anecdotal stories to more emotionally gripping and powerful ones, captivating and clearly motivating me to continually flip the pages.

While I criticize some of his language and the order of the book in the next section, it is worth mentioning that I also thought both were prominent strengths of the book. Though I personally found them annoying, I am confident that they served to keep a wider audience entertained and interested. If a book sticks to pure substance and a structure some would find more appropriate, but as a consequence is read by far fewer people, I think a greater error has been committed. Kudos to Friedman for making the book entertaining and approachable.

Where Friedman Falls Short

Clearly Friedman chose to write the book for a broad audience but in the process might have alienated a very important constituency. I found his repetitive and recursive use of the many iterations of “the world is flat” (e.g. flat, flattening, the flattening process, flatism, etc.) to be progressively distracting and annoying. Truthfully, many pages in the book felt as if there were more references to some form of ‘flatness’ than other content. I often found myself so distracted by the repetition that I missed the core purpose of a passage.

As my frustration grew with each new chapter, and a continued use of the various forms of ‘flat’ as well as the introduction of a few other concocted words and phrases, I realized that Friedman was writing for the widest audience possible. Repetition, catchy made-up phrases, and other like techniques, at least in my admittedly cynical opinion, will push a great yet underappreciated book to the Best Sellers list. In order to get the masses to slog through 400+ pages of stories, facts, anecdotes and history, a bit of repetition, chattiness and fun new words are more or less required. Had Friedman or his editors hacked out everything I criticized, it is likely that the book would be far shorter, more to the point, yet most likely read by a fraction of the population that have devoured the existing version. So while I personally found the “concessions” very distracting, I understand their relevance and would almost always prefer to see a book of this caliber reach as wide an audience as possible.

Another fairly large issue that I have with the book is the order Friedman chose to introduce various topics. Midway through the text, I found myself wondering when he was going to address the negative aspects of globalization. Further, I also felt that it was highly inappropriate that he had yet to imply a need for greater social responsibility by corporations

deeply profiting from the flattening process. Without a forward or preface to indicate the full scope of the book, and without section titles that clearly describe their contained content, I was left wondering until Chapter 9 what Friedman's complete intent was.

Almost all of the content prior to Chapter 9 deals with stories about how companies and individuals are moving and shaking in a flat world and also how the United States needs to change in order to keep its edge. However, a number of important issues are ignored. What about the individuals that are left out? What about the countries that are left behind when the new *low-cost option* appears? What about the destruction of local cultures as everything starts to meld together? What about labor exploitation? Corruption? Environmental damage? Etc., etc., etc. I grew so tired of reading about the positive aspects of globalization and about all of the participants that are at the front of the pack, pushing things forward, that I almost stopped reading.

The importance of stressing social responsibility, exploring the realities of labor exploitation, discussing corruption and other localized abuses that are endured on daily basis, is so great that I personally feel they should have been the first few topics covered. However, such topics, especially when they comprise the first few chapters, rarely allow a title to reach the Best Sellers list, regardless of the quality of writing. An alternative that would have made *The World is Flat* far more enjoyable in its existing form would have been to include an introduction or preface that clearly indicated the book's full scope.

While I appreciated many of the stories and facts Friedman included illustrating his points, I found some of them to be somewhat misrepresented or incomplete. A good example appears on page 315 where Friedman cites statistics from the World Bank regarding the population of China living in "extreme poverty" in the years 1990, 2001, and a projection for 2015 (the population for this group decreased dramatically from each period to the next). He also cites similar drops for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The statistics are powerful yet lack an important qualifier — Friedman states that individuals living in extreme poverty survive on \$1 a day or less, and it is then assumed that with each population drop for this group (1990 to 2001 and then to 2015) the individuals are then surviving on more than \$1 a day. What isn't clear is *how much more*. It is entirely possible that these individuals are still

scraping by, but with \$1.50 a day. Without a clear picture of to what level of income the population moved to, the World Bank statistics are very misleading.

Two pages later, Friedman makes a similar statement with statistics that are equally misleading: “To begin with, you don’t grow your country out of poverty by guaranteeing everyone a job. Egypt guarantees all college graduates a job each year, and it has been mired in poverty with a slow-growing economy for fifty years.” (Pg 317) While the correlation between Egypt’s poverty and slow-growing economy may be directly related to the fact that all college graduates are guaranteed a job, there is nowhere near enough information presented to substantiate that claim. How many college graduates are we talking about? What about other factors that could impact the economy? Is Egypt’s impoverished population in such a state only because college graduates are guaranteed a job?

My last major criticism involves the overall viewpoint and voice of the book positioned from an American perspective. Candidly, this issue bothered me the most as I was making my way toward Chapter 9 and was desperately waiting for some mention of the downsides of globalization, but I nonetheless think it is an important issue to point out. Friedman continually reverts to an American perspective and uses “our,” “we,” and “us” often when telling stories, clearly making the assumption that the reader is an American. While it is possible that more inclusive versions of the text are altered for international distribution, as an American, I found the US-centric viewpoint quite frustrating. Again, I think there is a correlation between this approach and a book’s position (or existence) on a Best Sellers list, but I would still have appreciated a more inclusive voice.

My Recommendation & Closing Thoughts

Despite my fairly extensive criticisms of *The World is Flat*, I would eagerly recommend it to anyone who is interested in globalization or modern world history. However, I would take the time to prepare them for the onslaught of ‘flatisms’ and also assure them that the last few chapters in the book are worth hanging on for. Given such preparation, I am confident that this book will be enjoyable and beneficial to almost anyone.

Based on my experience with *The World is Flat*, I am interested in reading more of Friedman's work, including *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. There is a very important place in society for books and information sources that tackle meaty issues such as globalization and world history. Friedman poignantly closes the book with a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree: "...the world needs you to be forever the... generation of strategic optimists, the generation with more dreams than memories, the generation that wakes up each morning and not only imagines that things can be better but also acts on that imagination every day."

Notes:

1. Graphic of *The World is Flat* book cover sourced from thomasfriedman.com.
2. All page numbers and references pertain to the First Edition hardcover, 2005.
3. *The World is Flat* can be purchased online at amazon.com.