



Is the World Flat or Spiky?

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Some people see globalization as creating a fairer economy for everyone. Others view the increasingly interconnected world as one of growing inequality. So which one is it: flat or spiky? You decide.

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Globalization is viewed in many different ways by many people. Some see it as the way of the future, and why not? People are now more interconnected than ever before. This interconnection leads to more teamwork and new ideas. It can create more opportunities for more people. Then again, some argue that globalization has serious problems. It is creating even more inequality than we've ever seen at any point in history. The rich, industrialized countries are getting richer as a result of interconnection. Meanwhile, the poorer developing nations are suffering.

The world is flat

In 2005, Thomas L. Friedman wrote his book *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. It led people to talk about whether or not globalization was helping the world. Friedman is a journalist for The New York Times. In his book he argues that changes in technology have connected the world. He sees this as a "flattening" of the world. In his view, the global economy is now fairer. It allows nations from outside North America and Europe to play a bigger part.

Friedman states in his book that globalization has improved the world. It has allowed more people than ever to work together. People can do "more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet" than ever before. Computers, e-mail, and teleconferencing have made this possible, according to Friedman. "We are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together," he says. He argues that globalization can bring us new ideas and new levels of success.

Friedman also describes globalization as going through three stages. Each is driven by a "dynamic force."

The first stage lasted from 1492 to around 1800, according to Friedman. It begins with Christopher Columbus opening trade routes to the New World. In this first stage, the dynamic force leading to more global connection was what Friedman called "brawn." It included horsepower, wind power, and steam power. Countries and their governments were responsible for putting these forces to use. In this way, governments made the world more connected.

The second stage of globalization lasted from about 1800 to 2000, Friedman says. Its dynamic force was not governments. Instead it was multinational companies. These large companies hired people from across the world. Likewise, they sold their goods all around the world. Friedman says that railroads and steam engines made it easier to move around people and goods at a cheaper cost. That helped connect the world in the first half of this period. The second half was powered by falling telecommunication costs. He says this includes telephones, computers, and the early version of the World Wide Web. This period marks the time when goods and information began to move easily from continent to continent, according to Friedman. A "global market" was created.

This takes us to the current day. In Friedman's view, the third stage of globalization is now "shrinking the world." It is "flattening the playing field." In this third stage, the dynamic force is that the individual has power to compete globally. In this period is that people can work together or against one another all around the world. The first stage was driven by horsepower. The second was built around hardware. Now it is software that is most important, Friedman argues. New applications and fast internet connections have "made us all next door neighbors," he says.

The world is spiky¹

Friedman's ideas sound interesting. Some experts in the industrialized world and the developing world disagreed with many of the book's ideas though. Richard Florida is a professor at the University of Toronto. He wrote a review

¹ Some critics say globalization is "spiky" rather than flat. Others say it is "lumpy". You might see both terms used throughout this course. They aren't exactly the same ("spiky" focuses on economic inequality, "lumpy" focuses more on who has access to ideas as well as resources), but they are pretty interchangeable.

of Friedman's work in *The Atlantic Monthly*. It pushed against the flattening world idea. In his view, the world is actually pretty "spiky" with economic inequality.

Florida says that, "by almost any measure," the global economy is not flat. "Surprisingly few regions truly matter in today's global economy," he says. Florida argues that a small number of cities and regions are driving the world economy. They are growing richer. Meanwhile, the areas that are left out continue to get poorer.

He looks at the large growth of cities for proof. He points out that today up to 50 percent of the world's population live in cities. In 1800, it was only three percent. Urban areas have far more wealth than areas with fewer people. He says that this fact understates the spikiness of the global economy though. The 10 largest U.S. cities by themselves have a larger economy than nearly any country on Earth. At the time Florida was writing, only two countries had a larger economy than these 10 cities. They were Japan and the United States itself. "New York's economy alone is about the size of Russia's or Brazil's," he says.

Florida argues that a spiky world brings danger. There is a serious divide across the globe. It is between the world's growing economic mountains and its sinking economic valleys. Inequality is now creating a political push against globalization, he says.



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Dr. Vandana Shiva is an activist and environmentalist. She wrote another critique. Friedman seems to only focus on the good side of technology, she says. In her view, Friedman leaves out globalization's effects on inequality.

Shiva says that corporate globalization divides people. It divides them by class, religion, culture, gender, and geography. "Never before has there been a larger gap between those who work and those who become richer. Never before has hate between cultures been so global," she adds.

Shiva argues that Friedman's book has a narrow view. It looks only at "information technology." It does not address the "local economies and local cultures which Globalization is destroying."

According to Shiva, Friedman tells "a one sided story." He writes about how 550 million young people in India will have more economic success than Americans "in a flat world." He claims this is because of information technology (IT) jobs. Shiva says that only about a million people in India have IT jobs. In a country of 1.2 billion, that is less than 0.1% of people. Friedman focuses on IT. He does not look at food, farming, health, and education, she says. "Friedman presents a 0.1% picture and hides 99.9%."

Within the hidden 99.9% there are many stories of globalization's failures, according to Shiva. She says 25 million women have disappeared in India. She mentions that thousands of children in India have died of hunger. India had a public system for giving out food. It was destroyed to create markets for big agriculture businesses, she says. "The world of the 99.9% has grown poorer because of the economic globalization."

So which one is it? Is the world flattening or is it spiky? It's not an easy question to answer. What's more, your region, gender, age, and economic standing may shape how you view this topic. We should try to take all of these things into account. Then maybe we can decide on a clearer answer to this problem.

Sources

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Bridgette Byrd O'Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

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