

Uneven and Unfair: A Book Review of *The Power of Place*

By Shannon M. Dodt

De Blij, H. J. (2008). *The power of place: Geography, destiny and globalization's rough landscape*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harm de Blij does not believe the world is flat, and not just because he is an expert geographer. Although he lets Thomas Friedman, author of the bestselling book *The World is Flat*, off the hook in the preface of his book *The Power of Place*, de Blij (2008) attacks the idea from cover to cover (p. 11). When he lived in South Africa during the 1950's, he saw that geography and local attitudes affected the manifestation of apartheid throughout the country, where whites-only rules were ignored in some areas and strictly enforced in others. Although the nation's laws were meant for all South Africans, it was the places that determined the power of its people. The differences in the places where people are born continue to drastically affect the lives people lead.

As de Blij (2008) sees it, 'Ours is a divided world whose obstacles and barriers constrain countless would-be mobals who, as poverty-stricken and powerless locals, have no chance of escape and who cannot influence those who determine their fate' (p. 45). The global core, which de Blij reports has been defined by the World Bank as containing 'approximately 15 percent of the global population but records nearly 75 percent of the world's annual income', is contrasted throughout the book with life in its periphery (p. 30). In the periphery, concerns about disease, violence, and natural disasters are part of everyday life. De Blij suggests that it is place that fundamentally limits inhabitants of the periphery. Popular beliefs about globalization and 'flatness' come from nations within the core itself, where the standard of living is higher overall, and where international cities host wealthy tourists and multinational corporations. Nevertheless, for every success story of globalization, de Blij has a contrasting example. Some nations are promoting medical tourism to attract these global travelers, while their own local people live without adequate access to medical care. English appears to be on its way to world language status, especially in the business world, and those who learn to speak it have greater access to opportunities. However, among residents of Japan, 'one of the most powerful forces of globalization', only 1% claim to be fluent in English, exemplifying that not all people want to give up their nationalism for a global identity (de Blij, 2008, p. 66).

The information presented in *The Power of Place*, through chapters on migration, language, religion, health, geography, gender, urbanization, and political concerns, clarify many of the complicated factors causing disparities among people. As such, I would definitely recommend the book, despite the following few criticisms I have. First, I found it to be lengthy, mostly in part due to the extensiveness of information, but also because parts of the book were overly detailed to the point of getting off-topic. Also, I felt the book assumed I was familiar with, and knowledgeable of, the idea of a flattening world. Since the book does not sufficiently establish that background information or a clear definition for flatness in the beginning, I felt unsure and skeptical of de Blij's passionate assertions.

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One thing I took from the book is that great suffering and injustice are as prominent now as they ever were in some parts of the world, and because population growth is highest in those places, the issues are not flattening at all. I have always found the complexity of the world's problems perplexing. From this book, I gained much-needed geographic and historical context for understanding compelling problems like endemic diseases, religious fundamentalism, and national versus cultural boundaries. Those who say that the world is flat are presenting a picture that people today are standing on an equal footing, in front of a wide-open world. It is this assertion which Professor de Blij strongly, and successfully, repudiates in *The Power of Place*.

Author Note

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