



THE ROUGHNESS OF A FLAT WORLD

Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

Reviewed by Mikhail Yakushev

The Russian translation of the 2005 bestseller by famous American journalist Thomas Friedman *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* has been just published in Russia. Its expressive name reflects the main idea of the author—on the cusp of a new millennium we are witnessing an information revolution and an economic globalization that is transforming our planet into a “flat world,” divided by national borders and marked by diverse geographical “roughness.” In this flat world, no technological obstacles will stop the free flow either of people and ideas or of goods and capital. Unlike Christopher Columbus who, according to a legend cited by the author, informed the Spanish monarch that the world was round, Thomas Friedman, in several hundred pages of captivating narrative, again and again categorically asserts, or proves using numerous examples, or simply joyfully, almost childlike, exclaims that the world is flat! And that this is great! It is great for everybody: Americans, Hindu, Chinese, people in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and everyone who has enjoys the achievements of information technology, who shares the values of the free market economy, and who has found a place in the system of the international division of labor...

Generally speaking, it would be possible to stop right here and simply to recommend reading (or re-reading) this book as an example of brilliant journalistic work on the topic of “Globalization and Its Advantages for the Modern World.” Truly, *The World is Flat* is fascinating and intellectually stimulating to read: the reader will encounter the diaries of a traveler to India and other countries. In addition, the reader will find his serious analysis of global macroeconomic processes, his fairly professional analysis of the advantages of different world views in the creation of computer software, and his interesting predictions of events on the planetary scale in the coming decades. However, *The World Is Flat* is interesting not only as an interpretation of the concept of the globalization of information. In the final analysis, there are plenty of “panegyrics” praising information technologies and the free market already (at least, no fewer than those criticizing both). Instead, it is important to concentrate on the way the author presents and proves the book’s main idea, what he has held back, and what questions have not been answered.

Thus, in Friedman’s opinion, in the “flat world” the chance for success is not determined by citizenship or residence, but level of education, talent, persistence, and the availability of information systems. This is proven, for example, by the ever increasing transfer of whole business processes, previously undertaken by U.S. citizens on U.S. territory, to India and other countries where one can take advantage of inexpensive telecommunications and the population’s high level of education. The quality of life in Bangalore, India, is gradually approaching that of California’s Silicon Valley. The author substantiates his argument nearly like a religious sermon. It is no accident that he describes 10 (exactly 10!) so-called “flatteners” (forces that “flattened the world”), from the fall of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of the “liberation from communism” to the development of outsourcing and the distribution of Internet search systems. It is not surprising that he notes the “triple convergence” of (just three!) components in the first



years of the 21st century: technology, professional training and people's psychological readiness to work, and the new availability of human resources in those countries that have only recently overcome a great "turning point" after the end of the Cold War opposition of two social systems. Also, it is not surprising that the book ends with a chapter called "11/9 versus 9/11," where the first date refers to the fall of the Berlin Wall and symbolizes "creative imagination," and the second to the events of 2001, that have already been commonly seen as a "modern apocalypse" for some time now.

In this connection, the sections of Friedman's book dedicated to geopolitics and international relations are of particular interest. Generally, the situation here too seems encouraging: as the international division of labor deepens (for example, the manufacturing of Dell computers and the expansion of the McDonald's fast food network), the reasons for interstate conflicts disappear. The exceptions, such as the antagonism between mainland China and Taiwan, only confirm the general rule. Thus, the reason why the nuclear weapons tests in Pakistan and India in 2002 did not lead to military confrontation was because of the unwillingness of the Indian authorities to bring into question India's reputation as "the central place in the system of global services." Of course, here Friedman's thoughts are only being described in the most general and simplified way (you have to read the book to familiarize oneself with his thoughts), but his approach does immediately raise some doubts. The author calls himself "a technological determinist," and the question arises, to what degree are the solutions to geopolitical problems determined by technological factors? And how important are phenomena related to economics, such as the economically justified distribution (throughout the various countries of the world) of the production of high-tech components.

It would be wrong to say that these sorts of questions have not gotten the attention of the first researcher of the "flat world." Thus, Friedman describes the realities of Islamic extremism in quite a lot of detail, along with the reasons for its existence and development. It is noteworthy that he uses the ethical/philosophical concept of "humiliation" here. The humiliation of individuals, social and religious groups (and, sometimes, whole nations), which is not always deliberate, but sometimes casual and rash, may possibly explain many negative global processes. However, the book does not expand upon this particular hypothesis in detail. Incidentally, this idea could be compared to the theory of "alienation" developed by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century, and used to analyze how the "alienation" of dozens, if not hundreds million, of inhabitants of our planet from the achievements of modern technologies influences their living conditions and the prospect of a change in these conditions. Of course, the book does not conduct such an analysis, but there is a neologism that is quite strange for the Russian-speaking reader, "Islamic Leninism," which, according to the author, makes it possible to explain the existence and destructive behavior of organizations like al Qa'ida. Of course, one can hardly assume that extremist religious organizations are closely acquainted with Lenin's work, and here again doubts arise regarding the degree to which the theoretical constructions that the author uses to explain some of the "roughness" of the "flat world" have been researched.

Is the "flat world" (not in the direct, but in the figurative sense used by Thomas Friedman) reality or illusion? If it is reality, then why is it not so for everyone? To what degree does the "flat world" correspond to the "golden billion" theory: do the two conflict, or can they be reconciled? How can the example of India as a fine inspiration to other countries, a global services center and site of offshore programming, be reconciled with the deep economic, social, and political conflicts inside that country? Does the "digital divide," which is becoming ever more real not only between different countries, but also between social groups, various generations, and regions of individual countries, threaten the movement to a "flat world?" And lastly, there is a question that is not very politically correct: if we admit that globalization currently simply reflects the present stage of the development of the international division of labor, than in what way, not from a technological, but from a socioeconomic standpoint, is this stage considerably different from the situation at the end of the 19th century? Friedman's book provides direct answers to some of these questions, but the author keeps silent on others, suggesting the reader reflect on the answers. Therefore it is not only fascinating just to read this book about the "flat world," but to study it as a full-length portrait of the first years of our millennium, that may not be entirely objective, but is at least written by an enthusiastic and sincere writer. 🐼