



A Flat World with Deep Fractures

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Abstract

The Internet manages to connect different parts of the world, defies geographical distances and gives the impression that our planet is flat, but the Internet is there only for the ones who have the possibility and the ability to use it. Our contemporary flat world has deep transversal fractures which, like in many geological structures, make a direct connection between layers with different characteristics. The elites are moving across information avenues with targets set in the future; at the same time, in many parts of our planet, there are people organizing their lives in pre-modern agrarian cycles. Diversity in ways of living and in social organization is a sign of human freedom, not a sign of error, so, having different alternatives to achieving prosperity and happiness should be good news. Holding dear to a society's lifestyle should not push for the destruction of societies with different sets of values.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Thomas Friedman, a New York Times editorialist, visited India to study the miracle of the new IT generation. After showing him the way Internet can help small companies to act efficiently anywhere in the world, a young Indian IT specialist said to him: "Now the land is flat". The book *The World Is Flat*, drew inspiration from this experience, got Thomas Friedman the Pulitzer Prize and became an international bestseller. Many of us still do not perceive the book's ideas. The Internet indeed manages to connect different parts of the world, defying geographical distances, but it is there only for the ones who have the possibility and ability to use it.

I would like to share with you my own experience in India. On the occasion of my 1997 official visit to the country, the then President of India, a very wise and educated man, told me the story of an American company, which organized in India a promotional event for satellite television. With the aid of helicopters and guides, their staff reached some remote villages, deep in the jungle. The indigenous people they found there did not know that beyond the mountains surrounding them lay a different world. The helicopter, the television and the newcomers were perceived to be of divine presence. It was, in fact, the only possible interpretation considering the gap of several millennia of civilization. This shows, in contrast to the first example mentioned above, that the contemporary flat world has deep transversal fractures, which, like in many geological structures, make a direct connection between layers with different characteristics.

Another Indian story, well known today through the Internet, is that of six blind men, who by touching different parts of an elephant—leg, trunk, tusk, ear, belly and tail—described

different parts of the elephant's body. This is an appropriate allegory to describe present reality, which has shocked me several times in my life, whenever I travelled the Earth as a geologist, a statesman or a representative of the civil society.

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1. Different Chronological Horizons

There was an extensive talk about the year 2000 as a verge between two eras, governed by universally accepted rules. Some societies, especially the western ones, moved across it already, while others lagged behind, sometimes by decades, and in some extreme cases even by centuries or millennia. Looking into societies we can see the same picture: there are groups living in different chronological spaces. The elite are moving across information avenues with targets set in the future. At the same time, in many parts of our planets, there are people organizing their lives in pre-modern agrarian cycles.

2. The Galápagos Tortoise

In 2006, while travelling through Europe by car, I stopped at a supermarket. The ads screen near the cash registers was running the latest news. One of the news was about the oldest being on Earth, a tortoise from Galápagos, who died at the age of 250 years. In geological time, 250 years is an insignificant period of time scale, but in human beings' time this is a remarkable feat, which induced me to reflect on the subject.

A fair answer could be found in the unexpected change of certain conditions that stood still at a given moment in an outdated project. When the Galápagos tortoise was born, France was under the absolute monarchy of Louis XV, “le Bien-aimé”, and Constantin Racoviță was the prince of Moldova (I was born much later). In both situations, the interest of the people living in these countries in the Galápagos tortoise was null. When the tortoise's life ended on Earth, the communication technologies allowed the transmission of the news in real time around the world. The progress of science and investigation techniques could even tell the tortoise's birth month, reminding us that we are at the border between the information society and knowledge society. I cannot help but noticing that, while thousands of historians are focusing on wars, political and social conflicts, research and innovation are, unfortunately, only enjoying sporadic attention. As changes in society imposed by innovation and scientific research tend to become increasingly faster, the story of the changes occurring in a human being's life can be useful to a new generation. It is tempting to believe that many traits of the contemporary society are as old as mankind. Of course there is one condition: to accept that not everything each of us have lived through is interesting, just what we learned from our life experience is useful for the rest of humanity.

3. The Shock of Change as a Personal Experience

I was born in 1939. At the age of only 6 months I fell ill with scarlet fever and the fact that I survived was exceptional (only later, in 1945, when I was 6 years old, penicillin began to be produced on an industrial scale and Fleming received the Nobel Prize for his discovery). When I was one year old, General Electric launched the refrigerator with freezer compartment, which was about to produce a food revolution. When I was 7 years old, CBS broadcast the first colour TV program in the USA, but I was 17 when I saw the first black and white television set in Romania. I was 11 years old when Marion Donovan invented the Pampers diapers, but only my grandchildren used them. I was 30 when the first people landed on the Moon and 59 when I received from NASA a small flag of Romania that had been carried into space by American cosmonauts. I was 35 when computers started to be used by large corporations, 42 when the first PC came out and 51 when I first used one. I was 41 years old when Motorola manufactured the first mobile phone and 55 when I had one of my own. I was 72 years old when the iPad and iPhone were sold. I started using them the year they were released. It can be seen that in all the aforementioned cases I referred to the use of these inventions on a large scale, as they have caused important changes in human society.

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An important factor of progress is closely linked to reducing the time gap in which technical novelties reach different parts of the world and on this line we can have a discussion about an information society and a knowledge society. Looking back to antiquity, could we say that the Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Chinese, later the Arab or Inca societies, impressive though their cultural and scientific accomplishments, were, each in turn, a *Knowledge Society*? No, because when we speak about a knowledge society we refer to a broadening of public space for knowledge, which became truly possible only after the emergence of the Internet. Clearly, this does not imply the disappearance of cognitive fractures between different parts of the world, just new opportunities for new actors.

4. Paradoxes in Today's World

Our present world faces a series of paradoxes: underdevelopment does not exclude huge military spending, democracy does not eradicate corruption, free market economy fails to stop unemployment and ecological disasters. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, more than 60 years after it has been adopted, is systematically defied, either on ideological pretexts, or under the reason of endemic poverty. It would be inappropriate to leave out a short analysis of what might be called the globalization of vices. Organized crime, traffic of drugs, weapons, radioactive substances, human organs, child prostitution, pedophilia, underground economy, tax dodging and forced emigration are the most striking, but are not

the only aspects of world-wide evil that governments or humanitarian organizations have to battle against, often admitting their inefficiency.

The past shows us that no civilization or social structure in history has just vanished, like the mythical Atlantis. The source of the abovementioned disorders relates more to time rather than to space. On a flatter and flatter planet, deeply heterogeneous collective periods confront each other. The Western countries stepped into the so-called post-modern and post-industrial age, the Eastern Europe countries crossed post-communist times, evolving towards full modernity; on the other hand, many societies of our contemporary world rely on a pre-modern mentality.

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5. Space and Time on Planet Earth

Politics and economy have succeeded in organizing the planet’s space, but not its time. Through agreements, governments can bring together geographically distant countries. Players of the world economy can build the infrastructure necessary to ensure any type of connection between human communities. Physical distances thus become quite relative; however, this is not the case when considering the time perception gaps. These gaps generate contradictory horizons of expectations. People living in industrialized societies wish for a ‘green’ vacation, while the indigenous people living in the unpolluted Amazon forest dream about a motorboat. One individual wants to return to unspoiled nature while the other individual tries to enter technological modernity. No one would object if different perceptions led only to different personal ideals. Unfortunately, different perceptions shape community attitudes, expressed through politically aggressive options. All kinds of conflicts today occur mainly because different parts of our planet live inside parallel timeline histories. The big challenge for this millennium seems to be related to the question: what can we do for the Earth’s inhabitants to become truly contemporary?

How can we explain to those living outside of Western democracies the fact that the ones living there seek to progressively free themselves from the fascination of modernity and are looking for a spiritual alternative that does not exclude a return to traditional values? How could we persuade the West that the pre-modern or the post-totalitarian societies can pass directly to post-modernity, without being confronted with the excesses of the industrial age? We are facing a communication problem. We will not really have a dialogue until we live in the same type of time. But, in order to stand before one another with our particular affinities and needs, it is necessary to establish a universal consensus on universal moral values that protect not only every community, but also every person. How could we initiate a real dialogue to discover it?

6. Conflicting Values and Interaction

We live in an open world, in a world of communication and continuous interaction, in a world whose continuous evolution cannot be withheld. In such a world, closed societies have no chance. Globalization means much more than free trade and homologation of most competitive material goods. Globalization means knowledge, dedication to a fair system of norms and values and—why not?—a

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certain tolerance and mutual understanding. We need to change our way of thinking, we need to evolve beyond the old concept of liberal tolerance, which sets the goal of rational consensus as to the best way of life, and only tolerates a reasonable disagreement concerning it.

I consider the concept of “modus vivendi” more up-to-date and productive. This concept, developed in the year 2000 by British professor John Gray, is built on the acceptance of the existence of different ways of life, in which people evolve and prosper. I speak of much more than accepting different value systems, rooted in different civilizations; this is about recognizing the coexistence of virtues valued differently, even within the context of the same culture. I refer to the contrast between virtues preached in the Old versus the New Testament, between the wartime virtues of Homer’s heroes versus the ones of Socratic philosophers, between the virtues of Brahmanism versus the virtues of Buddhism. Mass migration and communication outburst resulted in open societies, several communities coexisting in small areas. In John Gray’s vision, no political system can pretend to hold the best solution for managing the clash between values. Diversity in ways of living and in social organization is a sign of human freedom, not a sign of error, so, having different alternatives to achieving prosperity and happiness should be good news. Holding dear to one’s lifestyle should not push for the destruction of others. The first step towards accomplishing these ideals should be the construction of a conceptual map of the international political universe, drawing on the different worlds populating our planet: post-modern, modern and pre-modern. On this foundation we can design politics and security strategies, in tune with the fast changing and contradictory world.

Starting with value pluralism as an ethical theory, “modus vivendi” could thus be considered a political ideal.

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