



Book The Power of Place

Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape

Harm de Blij
Oxford UP, 2010
[Listen now](#)

- play
- pause

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

Harm De Blij, a geographer and a philosopher, is passionate about how place shapes a person’s destiny. He parses statistics to fill in details that maps only hint at telling. He employs rich demographic information to illustrate his thesis about the makeup of the current and future Earth. While some of his conclusions are revelatory and might change the way you think and act regarding certain world phenomena, others seem a bit obvious. The book ping-pongs between mind-blowing insights and yesterday’s news. Despite its hills and valleys, it provides a fascinating new take on the world, how it has changed, and how it will change or not. *BooksInShort* recommends De Blij’s worldview to political scientists, investors, health care practitioners, nongovernmental organizations, those who love to collate data, and those who love to study maps and see what revelations lurk within their folds.

Take-Aways

- Earth’s future depends on the ongoing interactions among “globals, locals and mobals.”
- Globals are internationalized people or entities, locals are people who stay in their birthplaces, and mobals are “transnational migrants.”
- The world is composed of a thriving core of prosperity and a desperate, poor periphery.
- Technology may virtually connect millions, but place defines billions.
- Most people speak the tongue, wear the garb and adore the religion of their native land.
- Of the world’s seven billion people, fewer than 200 million “live outside the country of their birth.”
- Most of those who leave their birthplaces are desperate immigrants, fleeing the worst possible situations to try to find something slightly less awful.
- English has been and will remain the international language, but being monolingual will be increasingly disadvantageous.
- Women and men in the same place likely experience vastly different lives. For instance, in 2008, 70% of India’s men could read, compared to only 40% of its women.
- The global disparity of opportunity has a deep impact and presents a growing risk.

Summary

Your Place in Place

Place determines so much in your life. Despite the modern myth of the mobile society, the vast majority of the world’s citizens will die in the country of their birth. Most of Earth’s inhabitants will speak the language, wear the clothes, observe the mores, practice the religion, relish the gifts and lament the drawbacks of their nation of origin. Those born in abject poverty will most likely die in it. Billions of people born in poor places suffer more disease, have less available health care and will live

shorter lives than the millions fortunate enough to be born in better lands.

“Globals, Locals and Mobals”

Thomas Friedman argues that the Earth is flat, meaning that culture and technology are erasing differences among peoples and nations. But globalization has a terribly unequal reach, and the disparity in access to its opportunities creates worldwide risks. From “rebels...in remote mountain caves” who desire “destructive means once monopolized by superpowers” to floods of immigrants fleeing permanent degradation, the inequities of place have worldwide repercussions.

“For all the liberating changes that have already occurred, place of birth still has a powerful influence over the destinies of billions.”

In fact, most of those who leave their birthplaces are not businesspeople or artistic expatriates; they are desperate workers, fleeing the worst possible situations to try to find something slightly less awful. These “transglobals,” who go from one imprisoning nation to the next, searching for minimal security, are mobals. As they move among nations, tensions arise. For example, the American states that border Mexico face numerous issues stemming from the mass migration of workers from Central America. Globals created much of that tension by moving their factories or entire economies from one nation to another as market conditions dictate. Often, globals have little concern for their host countries or their citizens, the locals. When globals and globalization fail, the burden falls on mobals and locals. For example, when overheated economies collapsed, as in Dubai, many badly treated foreign workers were doubly displaced, being both far from home and unemployed. Yet even as the mobal migrants of Central America, the Middle East, and Asia draw press and political attention, the fact is most people stay where they are born. Of the planet’s seven billion inhabitants, fewer than 200 million live outside the countries of their birth.

“Core” and “Periphery”

Categorizing countries as “developed” or “developing,” or as First or Third World nations, is derogatory, reductive, and anachronistic. Numerous countries, including China, house both modern areas and backward, poverty-stricken regions. The modern zones have all the hallmarks of so-called developed areas: skyscrapers, mass transit, cutting-edge medical care, a multilingual workforce and new-media saturation. The neglected areas offer what backwaters have always suffered: disease, poverty, ill-paid work, shortened life expectancy and little chance of escape.

“The overwhelming majority of us die under the governmental, linguistic, religious, medical, environmental and other circumstances into which we were born.”

A more realistic reference point is to regard areas as either in the core or on the periphery. The world’s wealth “is concentrated in a highly urbanized and strongly globalized region” encompassing the US, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Scandinavia, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the coasts of China – that is, Europe through North America, plus East Asia and Australia. This area is “the global core.” The periphery is everywhere else. The cities and megalopolises with the best living standards are in the core, while other exploding megalopolises – Lagos, Kinshasa, São Paulo, Cairo, and so on – are in the periphery. The 15% of the world’s people who live in the core generate 75% of the world’s income. Millions of mobals try to leave the periphery for new lives in the core. Locals try to keep mobals out. Globals encourage or discourage mobal movement as suits their corporate needs.

Disappearing Languages

Language contains culture. As regional languages die, countless people lose the language of their past and the culture it contains. The death of regional tongues means the rise of lingua francas and global languages. During the colonial era, English became a global language and, sometimes, formed combinations with native languages. In Britain’s far-flung colonies, English was the lingua franca, the general language of administration and power. Locals who wanted to advance in business or society had to learn the language of their occupiers. Then, as now, if you grew up in a peripheral hamlet with little opportunity to learn the argot of the cities, you suffered a life-long disadvantage. Mobals must know multiple languages to have any chance of a better life.

“Language is the essence of culture, and culture is the epoxy of society.”

Japan and France jealously guard their languages against English encroachment. Less than one percent of Japanese are fluent in English. Japan’s economic power shows that “you can have globalization without Anglicization.” Estimates suggest that soon one-third of all people will learn English, but native English speakers – now the least likely people to speak another language – will need to learn a second tongue to function in the coming multinational landscape. Some predict that, one day, Mandarin Chinese will be a dominant international lingua franca, but evidence suggests otherwise and says that the world will keep speaking English, “the Latin of the latter day,” for a very long time. Perhaps not even half of Chinese people know Mandarin. China’s urbanized eastern core areas are hotbeds of Mandarin, but few speak it in the periphery. China’s billions of citizens speak hundreds of deeply entrenched local and regional tongues – not dialects, but languages; if Mandarin cannot conquer China’s citizens, it is unlikely to conquer the world.

Dominant Religions

A mapped overview of the world’s religions reveals that two faiths dominate: Christianity and Islam “prevail over 70%” of Earth’s inhabited regions. Christianity is the foremost religion across scattered parts of the globe, while Islam forms an almost contiguous territory through the Middle East and Africa. Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia are not connected to the vast Muslim landmass, but they demonstrate the religion’s long reach. Buddhism has the third-most adherents, around 400 million. Judaism has “fewer than 20 million members.” North and South America illustrate the Catholic versus Protestant split of the first European colonizers. Catholic Spain colonized most of South America, Catholic France had outposts in the Caribbean, and Protestant England and the Netherlands settled in the north. Those religious preferences continue to hold sway. The US is predominantly Protestant, and South America is predominantly Catholic.

Diseases of the Periphery

“The poorest and weakest on the planet are also the sickest.” Place makes vulnerabilities. In some regions of Africa, HIV/AIDS shortened life expectancy, wiped out most of a generation and “orphaned 20 million children.” Those born in prosperous, non-tropical countries – say Denmark or Canada or New Zealand – don’t worry

about malaria, which ravages hundreds of millions of people who live in tropical poverty. Malaria's life-long debilitating effects – profound weakness, recurrent fevers and shattered immune systems – make many sufferers unable to perform normal work functions, thus denying them a chance to improve their lives. In 1946, a high risk of malaria existed in the southern US, much of Eastern Europe, the Middle East and China. Today, malaria hits only the poorest residents of the periphery.

“In countries where the official language is ex-colonial, capacity in that language is the sine qua non for membership in the governing, administrative or commercial elite.”

Dengue fever, an enduring and illustrative periphery disease, is on the rise worldwide. As peripheral populations expand with no improvement in their living conditions, the number of dengue fever cases grows with them. Dengue moves from mosquito to human; a mosquito bites an infected person and injects the infected blood into the next human it bites. Dengue's initial flulike symptoms precede crushing headaches, nausea and joint pain. No antiviral cure or preventative medicine exists, only preventative behavior.

“Males and females in the same locales have widely varying experiences, their destinies diverging in sometimes agonizing ways.”

As with malaria, dengue's greatest allies are stagnant water, heat and urban overcrowding. Dengue thrives where humans lack window screens or mosquito netting, where monsoon rains flood poor drainage systems and where global warming keeps temperatures high. Rising numbers of people in peripheral nations are undergoing shocking increases in rates of dengue infection. Mexico suffered a four-fold increase between 2001 and 2006. The poorest South American country, Paraguay, reported 10 times more cases in 2007 than in 2006. From 1980 to 2000, the Mexican states bordering the Rio Grande River – the dividing line between Mexico and Texas – reported more than 62,000 cases. During the same period, the Texas counties on the river reported 64 cases. The lack of air conditioning, clean water, window screens and general healthcare made a thousand-fold difference in dengue infection between the core and peripheral sides of the river.

“Mantras of globalization are often at variance with reality.”

Projects that began under the banner of modernization contribute to creating diseased populations. “Dams, artificial lakes, irrigation schemes” and the like slow water down. Sluggish water breeds mosquitoes and the freshwater snails that spread schistosomiasis (bilharzia), a crushing disease. Some 200 million in the periphery suffer schistosomiasis, “second only to malaria as humanity's most serious infectious disease.” Any contaminated water can pass along this infection. The catchment area of China's massive Three Gorges Dam has long been tainted with schistosomiasis. Millions regard India's polluted River Ganges as sacred and cleansing, and bathe in its hopelessly dirty water daily, and then suffer the expected resulting illnesses. Because of a paucity of clean water in the periphery, more children die annually from diarrheal sicknesses than from malaria or dengue fever, though these diseases draw less worldwide press or political attention. Providing clean water to vast, growing peripheral cities remains the world's single most intractable, far-reaching health problem. Unclean water also fomented cholera epidemics. Poor drainage and a lack of sewage disposal encourage every mosquito-borne disease. While people in the core take safe water for granted, one-fifth of the periphery – a billion people – has no access to clean water.

“From personal safety to public health, from compulsory religion to coercive authority, the world remains a mosaic of places presenting widely varying combinations of challenges to their inhabitants.”

Shockingly, “large areas of the periphery are in some ways worse than they were a half a century ago.” One factor in this decline is “medical tourism.” Globals from the core travel to the periphery's better cities for inexpensive plastic surgeries, elective procedures, and so on, performed in posh, private surroundings. Peripheral nations, recognizing the potential income, divert medical resources from the costly care of locals to profitable services for paying customers.

Men and Women

“Even in the same house, the destinies of boys and girls diverge startlingly.” Male dominance seems culturally ingrained throughout the world and can ride roughshod over any notions of fairness. For example, an unintended consequence of China's “one child” policy, which began in the late 1970s, was the selective abortions of tens of millions of girls. China's thriving international adoption industry supplies primarily baby girls whose families abandoned them. “Today, China has a demographic surplus of 20 million boys.”

“The Earth is one small planet, but seven billion people still inhabit vastly different worlds.”

In the periphery, girls suffer. Boys are more likely to receive medical care and a greater share of available food. In Pakistan in the 1990s, 54 girls per thousand died as opposed to 37 boys; in Bangladesh, it was 69 girls to 58 boys; in Thailand, 27 girls to 17 boys. In India in 2008, 70% of men but only 40% of women could read. Women receive less education or training than men, though education is the only way out or up in the periphery. Cultural and traditional norms trap women in poverty, ignorance and ill health. In the worst peripheral nations, 500 out of 100,000 women die giving birth. In North America, by contrast, that number stands at 25 per 100,000.

An Urban Planet

Since 1994 and for the first time in history, 50% of the population is urban. London, New York, Hong Kong and more are “world cities...part of a global urban network.” London is more closely connected to New York than to less-significant urban towns in England. Likewise, Miami “interacts more with São Paulo than Jacksonville.” Core and periphery areas exist side by side in cities. Brazil reflects these stark inequities. 10% of Brazilians own two-thirds of all the nation's land and half of its wealth. Brazil's poorest 20% live in the worst conditions on Earth, worse than the slums of Nairobi or Lagos. However, sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing the world's highest rate of urbanization; South and East Asia keep pace. By 2020, sub-Saharan Africa's population will top one billion, with most people living in unmanageable cities. Lagos has no urban core; it seethes with chaos and congestion. Sadly, it seems to be the standard for future urbanization in the periphery.

About the Author

Harm de Blij is the author of *Why Geography Matters*.

