

# Review

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**DECODING AMERICAN CULTURES  
IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

special issue

# AMERICAS, GLOBES, AND THE MYTH OF THE FLAT WORLD

When Thomas Friedman proclaimed in 2005 that the world was flat, his approach to the cultural shifts wrought by globalization was, for some, a challenging and relevant new way to view the significance of the monumental changes brought to our world by the technological innovations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For others, like Martin Sieff, who details his opposition to Friedman in his recently published *That Should Still Be Us: How Thomas Friedman's Flat World Myths are Keeping us Flat on Our Backs* (Sieff, 2012), Friedman's view is 'flat wrong'—only a glib, misinformed and painfully subjective paean on the problems presented by the modern-day encounter between countries of the first and third worlds. In describing the world as flat, however, Friedman both revisits a concept, an early idea encapsulated within the meaning and history of the Americas, and radically alters it for our modern sensibility and perception. That concept is none other than the popular idea that it was Christopher Columbus who gave to the modern imagination the revolutionary (for his time) understanding that the world, then supposedly considered to be flat (or, at best, an enormous disk) was, actually, round. We all know the familiar story, of how the renegade Columbus scraped together enough money and support to go and sail his ships to the end/edge of the world—a foolhardy undertaking that could only have been the mission of the irretrievably insane—then, by not falling off and living to return, found himself the hero of the day and for future generations without end, in proving to all that there was nothing to fear beyond the visible horizon. As the story goes, it is at this

Cyraina Johnson-Roullier  
University of Notre Dame  
USA  
RIAS Editor-in-Chief

historical moment that the world becomes a globe, rather than a disc, and by finding a New World to boot, opens a mighty door to all of the subsequent historical and cultural problems attendant upon this new reality.

The story is so common, in fact, that Friedman's title immediately and effortlessly registers in the collective mind as a reference to the quintessential problem facing the heroic explorer who was to become the father of that New World. In so doing, because of its ability to grab collective attention in this way, Friedman's title also becomes a powerful metaphor for describing the profound impact of the radical social, historical, cultural and economic changes that swept across the world from the 1990s into the 2000s in the wake of the technology boom, and, for Friedman, largely as a result of it. The power of the metaphor lies in its ability to encapsulate, at one and the same time, two very disparate yet focused ideas over a temporal distance of centuries, which yet seek to convey an understanding of one geographical location—America, or the Americas, as the case may be. In the Columbus story are to be found the ideas of discovery, of fantastical, unimaginable new realities, of adventure and newfound understanding brought to life through daring, courage and fearless travel. These ideas are also to be found in Friedman's view, albeit so transformed as to be almost unrecognizable. At the core of both ideas, however, lies an understanding of the globe and the place of America and the Americas within it.

Friedman's deft capturing of the collective imagination is not, however, without its problems. Some of these are made manifest in the fact that there a number of scholars who have invested not a little effort in the attempt to entirely debunk the commonly accepted significance of the Columbus story, by setting the historical record straight. In his book, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (Russell, 1991), for example, Jeffrey Burton Russell sets out to prove, through meticulous historical investigation, that medieval scholars well knew that the Earth was a sphere, and that this was something that they had known since the time of the ancient Greeks. Similarly, in her book, *Flat Earth: History of an Infamous Idea* (Garwood, 2008), Christine Garwood explains that the popular Columbus story, especially its assumption of a flat

earth, had no place in fact or reality, because this was an idea that had already been largely dismissed by the time Columbus was preparing for his voyage. Both Russell and Garwood agree that the commonly accepted Columbus story was actually more or less invented by the American author Washington Irving in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the 1828 publication of his *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, a work that was mistakenly assumed to be fact, and then popularized through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on into the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Given the cultural and historical significance of the concept, however, it may not matter whether or not Friedman is right or wrong. It is, in effect, not really a question of right or of wrong, but rather of what Friedman is able to achieve in making use of what has been termed the 'myth of the Flat Earth'—that is, the Columbus story that many accept as truth, but which is found to be entirely wrong in the context of any critical examination of the historical record from Pythagoras on, perhaps even earlier. That the story is a myth, however, rather than absolutely discrediting it, makes it all the more useful: just as the collective imagination is arrested by the provocative nature of the title, that is, everyone knows the world is round, everyone also 'knows' there was a time when it was thought to be flat, so by restating the flatness of the world as an assertion of fact that ignores common and scientifically proven knowledge of the Earth's roundness foregrounds a violent incongruity, by which Friedman's use of the well-known idea shocks all the more. One must immediately stop and consider Friedman's meaning and form a powerful and compelling question: in what way can the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century possibly be flat?

It is at this juncture, in the fissure that Friedman creates between belief and knowledge, fact and fiction, myth and reality, that he is able to make his central point. For Friedman, the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is flat because the social, cultural and economic impact of technology has been to foster the development and profound influence of globalization—in effect, to create a new understanding of the relationship between America, the Americas and the globe. That new understanding, in Friedman's view, goes both ways. As US American products and culture are disseminated throughout the world, as the countries of the Americas continue

Cyraina Johnson-Roullier  
University of Notre Dame  
USA  
RIAS Editor-in-Chief

to rise in economic power and importance, so too, through technology, do countries in other parts of the world begin to make their presence known and felt more strongly than ever before. As this enormous change takes place in the objective world in which we live, so too does it have a proximate effect on the world of ideas. And it is because of this effect on the world of ideas that Friedman's use of the 'myth of the Flat Earth' can be seen to be especially illuminating.

As a myth, the idea of the Flat Earth is one whose familiarity is so intimate as to be almost comforting, especially in terms of common conceptions of the meaning and significance of American culture. Especially in the context of US America, the notion that America itself represents the dawning of a never before seen world-understanding would seem only right, given the historical ascendancy of American exceptionalism and its seemingly indestructible influence. Digging deeper into the meaning of this intimacy, however, reveals a hidden comment on the foundations of knowledge itself. This is because embedded within it is a very telling yet less-than-evident question: what is the idea of the Flat Earth, if it is a representation of what is known—what can most radically be known—at a particular point in time? Encapsulated within the myth of the Flat Earth, then, is also an understanding of the zenith of knowledge of the natural world *at that time*. It is because of this subtle signification that it does not therefore matter, whether or not the myth is actually true. What is important is that it represents a form of a truth, a belief in a particular truth about a particular aspect of reality at a *given point in time*.

From here, then, it is very easy to begin to understand a deeper and more suggestive significance within Friedman's use of the myth of the Flat Earth. As a myth, the idea takes on more of the character of a kind of creation story, a story of origins. Myths are often considered as being so old that their origins are shadowed in such obscurity that not only does it not matter that the actual truth of those origins can no longer be ascertained—actual truth no longer even becomes an issue, as such myths become their own truth by virtue of the shadows in which they are ensconced. The myth of the Flat Earth, then, being one such 'truth,' which also has the virtue and added power of having been enshrined

as such in arbiters of truth like history books and classrooms, maintains a forceful claim to truth as knowledge. As such, then, the idea of the Flat Earth itself contains a powerful suggestion that knowledge of the Earth *of its time* was also *circumscribed* by the Earth as it was conceived *at that time*. For example, the 7<sup>th</sup> century T-O map of the Bishop of Seville, which depicts Europe, Asia and Africa with the Mediterranean, the Nile and the Don Rivers lying between, represents extant understanding of the world, *circumscribed* by the parameters of the known world, *of the time*.

What happens, however, when we consider deeper the etymology of the word ‘circumscribe’ in this context? The Oxford English Dictionary identifies this word as coming from the Latin *circumscribere*, i.e., *circum* meaning ‘around’ and *scribere* meaning to make lines or write. The word *circumscribe* has a number of meanings that make it extremely significant when considering its meaning in relation to the question of knowledge. Following is a sampling of those meanings: 1) to draw a line round; to encompass with (or as with) a bounding line, to form the boundary of, to bound; 2) to encompass (without a line), to encircle; 3) to mark out or lay down the limits of; to enclose within limits, limit, bound, confine ... [esp.] to confine within narrow limits, to restrict the free or extended action of, to hem in, restrain, abridge; 4) to mark off, to define logically. Considering the word *circumscribe* from these perspectives suggests the notion that just as in the myth of the Flat Earth, an invisible line is drawn around the knowledge of the world, one that would seem also to replicate, like a circle, the Flat Earth conceived as a disc (much as it would have been represented in the early T-O maps), so knowledge itself reflects the drawing of an invisible line around a given understanding of what *is to be known*. Within those parameters, inside the invisible line, what is known, then, becomes sacrosanct.

It is in this context that some of the fears and anxieties associated with globalization, both in terms of Friedman’s understanding of the arrival, induced by technology, of all of the cultures of the globe on a level playing field, and in terms of concerns that the advent of globalization also marks an increasing, worldwide cultural standardization whose challenge to the specificity of cultural and ethnic diversity threatens it with all but total disappearance,

become glaringly evident. Although the expression of such fears and anxieties is not always accompanied by a recognition of their impact on our understanding of the meaning and significance of knowledge, nevertheless the problems raised by this issue remain both conspicuous and unresolved. If knowledge is conceived at least in some part as the drawing of a line around something that is to be known, then what exactly, in the context of global cultures, is to be known? By the same token, how, in such a context, is that one thing to be known, to the exclusion of other things that can also be known, especially in relation to each other? In other words, if 21<sup>st</sup> century culture cannot be understood outside the context of globalization, how then may the line be drawn around what can be known about one culture and what can be known about another? In the context of globalization, where many such lines must necessarily intersect and overlap, such a line would seem to become hazy and indistinct, at times perhaps even invisible. In such a context, it would seem that the more insistence placed on the necessity of such a line, the less useful and meaningful the line must become. Yet, the desire to know, and to know by demarcation, remains. Or does it? For Russell, part of the goal in writing *Inventing the Flat Earth* was to investigate why and how, despite all objective knowledge to the contrary, the myth of the Flat Earth could persist, even to the deepest reaches and recesses of common knowledge. In Russell's view, part of the answer to this question lies in the idea that the '... terror of meaninglessness, of falling off the edge of knowledge is greater than the imagined fear of falling off the edge of the earth. And so we prefer to believe a familiar error than to search, unceasingly, the darkness.' For Russell, then, the popular belief in the myth of the Flat Earth reveals that it is more comforting to 'know' the known and the familiar, than to fall off its edge into the unimagined and, perhaps, even unimaginable reality beyond its recognizable confines.

We've chosen to explore this problem by reaching back, in this special issue of the *Review of International American Studies*, to recuperate a select number of the most provocative essays from the 4<sup>th</sup> IASA World Congress, which took place at Beijing Foreign University in Beijing, China in 2009. In so doing, we hope to link some of the very fruitful ideas that were shared at the Beijing

conference with ongoing discussions of the same and similar issues that took place at the more recent IASA 6<sup>th</sup> World Congress held Summer 2013 in Szczecin, Poland, issues which continue to remain timely in the increasingly global world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. What exactly does it mean to consider American culture(s) in a global context? What issues are highlighted within this context that may be obscured in others? What aspect of American culture(s) come to the fore that we might otherwise overlook or ignore? What does or can the imbrication of the idea of 'global' change about our understanding of American culture(s)? Does considering American culture(s) in global context help us to understand the other cultures with which they come into contact? Does it help us to understand American culture(s) it(them) self(selves)? These are just some of the questions addressed by the essays included in this issue. In their examination of the global context, each of the essays in its own way addresses the 'boundaries' of knowledge, of what can/should be known about American culture(s), especially as these are seen to stretch far beyond their own geographical locations, especially in their interactions with other cultures. Near and far, high and low, through the brave and bold explorations of their authors, these essays seek to move our understanding of American culture(s) into new vistas of the global imaginable until they disappear beyond the recognizable horizon of the known, leaving behind them a beguiling invitation, contained in their cry, 'Land, ho!'

*Cyraina Johnson-Roullier*  
*University of Notre Dame*  
*USA*  
*RIAS Editor-in-Chief*

Cyraina Johnson-Roullier  
Editor-in-Chief, *RIAS*

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