17.7 Is the World Flat?

Source: Thomas Friedman (2005) *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux).

Questions

1. Where is the author when he decides the "world is flat"?
2. What does the author mean when he claims the "world is flat"?
3. What evidence is provided that the "world is flat"?
4. Are you persuaded by the author's argument? Explain.

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman popularized the idea that globalization in the modern era has produced a world that is flat, without the disruptive forces that impeded economic development in the past. He decided that the world was flat while filming a television interview with Nandan Nilekani, the Chief Executive Officer of Infosys Technologies. Friedman and Nilekani were in a conference room near Bangalore in south-central India, the city known as that country's Silicon Valley.

According to Friedman, "The Infosys campus is reached by a pockmarked road, with sacred cows, horse-drawn carts, and motorized rickshaws all jostling alongside our vans. Once you enter the gates of Infosys, though, you are in a different world . . . Glass-and-steel buildings seem to sprout up like weeds each week. In some of those buildings, Infosys employees are writing specific software programs for American or European companies; in others, they are running the back rooms of major American- and European-based multinationals - everything from computer maintenance to specific research projects to answering customer calls routed there from all over the world" (5).

The company's conference room resembled a multi-tiered classroom set up with "a massive wall-size screen and overhead there were cameras in the ceiling for teleconferencing." Nikelani explained that from this room he could coordinate a "virtual" meeting involving representatives of the company's "key players" from across the globe including American designers, Indian software writers, and Asian manufacturers, with participants from New York, London, Boston, San Francisco, and Singapore.

The outsourcing on which Bangalore and the Indian Silicon Valley thrives was made possible by massive investments in technology in the 1990s. Computers became cheaper and more powerful, and are now supported by new software, email, the Internet, and search engines like Google. They were dispersed around the world, connected by satellite, broadband, and undersea cables. The newly networked technology made it possible for "intellectual work, intellectual capital," to be delivered from anywhere to anywhere. "That's globalization," Nikelani proclaimed.

For Friedman, all of this meant the economic playing field had been leveled, the world had been flattened. "Here I was in Bangalore – more than five hundred years after Columbus sailed over the horizon, using the rudimentary navigational technologies of his day, and returned safely to prove definitively that the world was round – and one of India's smartest engineers, trained at his country's top technical institute and backed by the most modern technologies of his day, was essentially telling me that the world was *flat* – as flat as that screen on which he can host a meeting of his whole global supply chain. Even more interesting, he was citing this development as a good thing, as a new milestone in human progress and a great opportunity for India and the world – the fact that we had made our world flat!" (7)