‘Is the world really shrinking?’ transcript

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When they began bombing Baghdad to start the first Gulf War I watched it, live, in my front room. (I think that was the first time you could watch a war, from both sides, on television).

I’ve got friends with families spread between continents, who keep in constant contact by email, phone and satellite.

Financial trading around the world can happen in an instant.

And with the globalisation of markets you can buy the same things everywhere, and wonder maybe if places are becoming all the same.

So huge changes are happening. We can travel and we can communicate further and faster than ever before. We are more globally interconnected.

No doubt about any of that. But changes like that give rise to really grand statements, things like: ‘The world is getting smaller’; ‘We live in a global village’; ‘Speed-up has conquered distance’.

And books have been published with attention-grabbing titles like *The Death of Distance: The Communications Revolution and its Implications* or *Global Financial Integration: The End of Geography* or *The World is Flat: The Globalised World in the 21st Century*.

That last one was written by Thomas Friedman, and it’s a prize winning international best-seller (and it celebrates the flatness). In fact, in Heathrow last week, I was confronted with a massive ad that proclaimed: ‘The world is flat’.

And not long ago there was another advert that said: ‘Geography is History’.

So … is the world shrinking?

Is geography dead?

Well, I’m a geographer as Isabelle said and obviously I’m biased - but it’s not just because I want to keep my job that I want to argue that things are by no means that simple.

Let’s take this question of speed-up - that because of increased travel; the internet; ‘the communications revolution’, geography and distance don’t matter any more. Is that true?

Well …

The most obvious reservation one might make to that is that this ‘shrinking of distance’ is highly unequal.

It depends where you’re going and it depends who you are. So just take travel.

Yes, it’s quicker and easier now to get from London to New York, but if you go pretty much the same distance but eastwards from London you get to Dushanbe, which is capital of Tajikistan. And you phone your travel agent and flummox them as I did, about how to get to Dushanbe.

It can even take longer now to get to some places than it did before. I’ll never forget reading about Pitcairn Island in an article by the travel-writer Dea Birkett. (This was in the 90s and things might have changed now, but the point is a general one.)

Pitcairn Island is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean – in other words the ocean that is increasingly becoming the new hub of the world economy. More and more airlines link the two coasts of that ocean, the Americas on the one side, Asia on the other.

But, wrote Dea Birkett, that very increase in linkage, the new speed of connection across the ocean, had increased the isolation of many of the island communities, like Pitcairn.

Because of the increase in air travel, shipping had gone into decline. ‘What’ asked Birkett, ‘about those the planes fly over, on their islands 5 miles below? They have never felt so far from their neighbours’.

And the same is true more parochially, too. The fast trains don’t stop at intermediate stations any more. So it can take you longer, sometimes, to go a shorter distance.

Moreover it depends on who you are.

Take connections with China: business people, architects, all kinds of professionals are in a hurry these days to go to China to seek out new markets, new contacts, cheaper sites for production. It’s the new growth area that they can’t ignore. They go there by plane and it’s easy.

But compare that with the journey that must have been made by those cockle-pickers who came to work in Morecambe Bay. And it’s not just a question of speed. It’s about all those other things: the border controls, and the paperwork, and the regulations about migration, and who can pass and who cannot.

There was another book, published in 1990, by Kenichi Ohmae called The Borderless World. Again, a book that got a huge amount of attention, and again, I would suggest, a title that overstates the case. For again: it depends on who you are and where you are.

And just one last example because I can’t resist it. There was a report just a few days ago in the newspaper, in *The Guardian* actually, about another journey from China. One that’s being made actually at this moment.

This time it is a huge container ship – the biggest ship afloat, the report said, and it’s on its way to us on its maiden voyage, from China to Europe. It’s carrying 11,000 containers, 3,000 of them destined for Britain. And among the kind of mind-boggling range of things it is bringing are: potato mashers, cat food, 12,800 MP3 players and 1,886,000 Christmas decorations.

Now on this massive scale this is a new connection so in that sense it is an element in a shrinking world – part of the shifting pattern of expanding global trade

Though in this case it’s actually quite a slow connection (it is not exactly part of speed-up)

And here ‘shrinkage’, if we want to call it that, is being argued over politically – remember all those debates about what we should allow to be imported and what not.

So ‘shrinkage’ is differentiated, it’s contested, it’s negotiated, and it’s not thereby inevitable.

‘Distance’ – in the sense of ease of connection – is not simply shrinking – it’s more like it is crumpling, you know, in all kinds of uneven and unequal ways.

The geography of the world as we experience it is being twisted and contorted so as to bear very little relation to the physical distances that are involved.

So that’s one point.

But geography – the geography of the world – that thing that is supposedly dead – is anyway far more than distance.

It’s also about the immense diversity of the world – the uniqueness of places and cultures. Yes it’s true that town centres are becoming more and more the same, but deeper distinctions remain.

The human aspect of this is sometimes called ‘social distance’ or ‘cultural distance’ – those gulfs that can exist in the understanding and in the history of experiences that we bring to the world.

The social and cultural difference even between Liverpool and Manchester sometimes seems more than the 30 or so miles it measures on the map.

I have to confess here I am a Mancunian. But I am a Mancunian who supports Liverpool FC so I know that distance and those differences well. And there have been times in the past when on my way home from Anfield to Manchester I have judiciously taken my scarf off at Newton-le-Willows.

But that’s kind of a little local issue, though those differences are real. But how much greater those cultural distances can be when we consider the planet as a whole.

In September I travelled to Greenland, in a small ship up the east coast of that country - right up into the Arctic.

One day I was standing on the deck watching the huge dark cliffs of the coast with a myriad glaciers coming down to the sea in every valley, the ice just beginning to thicken all around and fulmars skimming the surface of the sea.

And I caught the solemn face of a member of the Russian crew as he, too, stared out at this magnificence. What thoughts were going through his mind? What thoughts of what home? (He came from Murmansk). What past and what future? I thought of all the convulsions his country has been through in his life – glasnost, perestroika, the imposition of ‘the market’.

Yeah, the ‘shrinking of the world’ had indeed enabled us to be here together (as a child I would never have imagined it possible to go to Greenland – though I would dream of it) - but how different the long social and cultural histories that we bring, even to such meetings-up.

Physical proximity is not necessarily a good measure of social and cultural distance.

Now that, actually, might be a point that we’ve got quite used to.

Many writers have commented, and indeed we all know, that there is cultural diversity within many places today. Indeed some commentators have argued that cultural diversity is ‘no longer a question of others in distant lands’.

No, they say, it is here and now in every society. Well… cultural diversity is certainly to be found within individual places.

But I want to insist that it is implacably also a question of different others in distant lands.

And that immense variety of societies and cultures is part of geography too.

Now what’s more, these differences matter.

Just take an example from very close to home.

The very fact that there are differences, and inequalities, between the north and south of England - the famous north-south divide (though it’s really nowadays more like ‘London and the south east’ on the one hand and what they rather disparagingly call ‘the rest of the country’ on the other) - The very fact of that divide, of that geographical variation, has an impact on how the country works.

And there’s lots and lots of ways one can exemplify this so just let me take a couple of brief ones. So first of all:

Because, unlike the north and the west, London and the south east are so congested, and the economy is tight, that part of the country can be more subject to inflation. Prices rise. So, at the national level the Bank of England puts the brakes on, puts interest rates up, or whatever.

But that can have adverse effects on the north – on Liverpool, on Newcastle – whose economies are not racing into an inflationary spiral.

Had our national economy been spread more evenly across the country, in other words, the brakes would not have had to be applied so early.

Or again, and more simply, the fact that house prices are going up faster in London and the south east than they are (in general) in the north means that homeowners down south are making money hand over fist, far faster than are people in the north. And that contributes to national levels of inequality.

In other words, the geography of the country influences the way the country works. Variation makes a difference.

But there’s another, rather different, way in which we are also sometimes told that geography is dead.

This is the story told by some of the you know, the gurus of the electronic age. What they do is evoke a virtual world: of instantaneous communication and life on the screen, or the net.

So Bill Gates waxes lyrical about what he calls ‘friction-free capitalism’.

Nicholas Negroponte, as director of MIT’s Media Lab, has declared that ‘the post-information age will remove the limitations of geography’.

It’s sometimes called ‘the politics of optimism’.

But think what it means…. In this view space and geography are always a burden (‘friction-free’, ‘the limitations of geography’). In this view, distance, and the materialities of geography, are just things that must be overcome.

I’ve got three main objections to this view.

The first is that it’s impossible. They don’t even live up to it themselves. The tales of total cyberspace are contradicted even by its own, very material, necessities:

The world of ‘friction-free’ money-flows is organised from places like the City of London and Canary Wharf, where the physicality of location, the implacable materiality of those pompous buildings, even the symbolism of the precise address, is of fundamental importance;

The locations of hi-tech production – likewise – are often set apart, manicured, advertised precisely as exclusive, the cachet of the place up-holding the authority of those who work within it.

So, no, actually: the materialities of place, and the differences between places, matter hugely to the promoters of the virtual world

And those examples if you like, are from the elite end of the new economies and new technologies. But the same is true at the other end of these companies, where the more routine work is done. They move their production plants, and their call-centres, with ease from place to place – from continent to continent indeed – at the slightest whiff of lower costs.

So, rather than erasing the importance of material location, it could well be argued that current trends in the world economy have in some senses reinforced its significance because as companies become potentially more mobile (that is, technically they can move about more easily) so they can respond to even the smallest differences between places.

So that’s the first objection: It’s impossible anyway.

But second, instead of just thinking of distance as a problem, what about the pleasures of movement and travel?

Instead of just thinking of distance as friction and geography as a limitation, what about the pleasure of movement?

Even on aeroplanes! On long-haul aeroplanes do you remember when, unlike now, they used to have the film at the front of the cabin on one big screen so you all watched the film together and you plugged in your little thing for the sound.

How often on planes like that have I stood craning out of a window at the back because I have been banished from my seat because of my refusal to pull down the blind (‘but, madam, everyone wants to watch the film’).

And below there is the Sahara, or the Laurentian Shield, or the vast intricacies of the Indus river. But the staff just want you to close the blind, and actually, probably, most people just want to reach their destination.

The current overwhelming emphasis on speed is the same – it’s a denial of the pleasures of movement itself.

While I was writing this lecture I began to think maybe we ought to start a kind of slow travel movement, to match the movement for slow food. And I don’t just mean slow travel like being hung up because there’s a points failure! I mean deliberate slow contemplative enjoyable travel.

But third, this fantasy of a virtual world seems to want to transcend our earth -boundedness just when we are faced with global warming, with huge changes in prospect to the actual physical geography of the Earth; when just last week we got the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change. Given all that, somehow the notion of a retreat into a virtual world seems, curiously, almost ‘out-dated’ and certainly irresponsible.

As I said, I’m a geographer, and for me ‘space’ is a crucial concept.

And for me, one important aspect of space is that it’s the dimension of things (and of people) existing at the same moment. If time is the dimension of change then space is the dimension of simultaneity.

It’s the dimension of the fact that, right now, in China it’s already the end of the day. As we sit here, right now in China, people are preparing for the night

It’s the dimension of the fact that, right now, somewhere on the planet, in Iraq maybe, things are going on that we shall learn about later on the news

It’s the dimension of the fact that, right now, in Greenland the darkness of the Arctic winter has closed in. The wind is screaming over the rocks. There’s a small avalanche down a scree-slope with no-one to witness it (a spy-satellite, maybe).

Space is the dimension of all these things happening at once.

Space is the dimension, then, that presents us with the existence of others.

And it’s a source of delight, and it is also a challenge. It poses that most basic of social and political questions: how we (humans, and natures in all our diversity) are going to live together.

It’s definitely the case that this huge diversity is being immensely reworked, as we travel, trade, migrate more, as we become more interconnected.

But it continues: that massive simultaneity of other peoples and other things.

It is the challenge of space.

It is the challenge of geography – and it has not disappeared.

But in that increasing encounter with diversity, maybe the story of the shrinking world can lead us to underestimate the kind of challenge that we face. Maybe all the travelogues, and the travel, and the media coverage, can give us the illusion that we already know other peoples and other places.

We visit for a while, maybe, and do our best to go beyond the beach. There is that dismal flattening of the world that can indeed occur when we begin, as Susan Sontag once said, ‘to think of Vietnam as just another country’.

Or journalists report to us from Egypt, say, but they’ve got just two days in Cairo to file their story.

Or there is the argument that the global market has made us all the same anyway because there are the same burger bars and coffee shops and fashion outlets in every town centre and on every continent. (But that is to reduce culture simply to material consumption. It is to reduce culture to coffee and fashion chains and burgers. And surely we are more than what we consume?)

So maybe this immense crumpling of space – the vastly increased connectedness that undoubtedly has happened – has given us an illusion of knowledge – a presumption that can be both dangerous, I would suggest, and potentially imperial.

So why is the view of a simply shrinking world so widespread?

Well I would argue that one reason is that this is the world of, and the geographical imagination of, the global free marketeers, of a global elite.

There are some statistics that we hear really often and yet it is almost impossible to give them any serious meaning. But here’s one of them.

The 2005 United Nations Human Development Report calculated that the world’s 500 richest people own more wealth than the poorest 416 million. It’s almost impossible to do anything with a fact like that. And it’s not just in the West.

Over the last year – that’s 2005 - the number of millionaires has increased across the world in all the places. It’s gone up, some examples: it’s gone up more than 17% in Russia, by nearly 20% in India, and by nearly 12% in Africa as a whole and within all of those places, as in almost every part of the world, inequality between top and bottom has increased.

This is an elite that thinks of itself as global and it constantly moves between the luxurious locations of the world. These are the investors, the leaders of markets, the billionaires of technology.

And bits of the world are being made the same – yes – they are being made in their image in a sense, as governments and local authorities everywhere desperately try to attract them.

There are the huge hi-tech developments outside of Hyderabad, stretching for miles into the incredible pink hills outside that city. A spacious western, so-called international, development in total contrast to the old city.

There are science parks in some of the poorest places around the world – with watered lawns and private schools

There’s the westernised gentrification of city-centres around the planet.

And I would suggest that it is out of this world – a kind of global necklace of islands of luxury and of self-assurance - ‘enclaves, actually’ – it is out of this world that comes the thesis and the celebration of ‘the world is now flat’.

It’s also a world that can almost rework the way we think about differences between places.

The long history of the development of a place’s character, the mix of influences it brings together to give it uniqueness, can, under the relentless pressure of competition for growth, be reduced just to ornamental heritage or local colour.

And if this world comes true; and if it is believed to have come true; and if it is felt to have been imposed without regard to local circumstance, it can itself provoke a kind of defensive/aggressive reassertion of the local. A kind of reactive assertion of local difference that can range from a real militant rejectionism to this little item that I found in the paper just the other day, the second of November:

‘Bangalore the centre of India’s booming software industry is to be renamed by local politicians alarmed that its cosmopolitan nature is submerging local culture. The city’s anglicised name will be replaced by Bengalooru’.

 A kind of, a feeling of a necessity to reassert one’s own local specificity in the face of the input, of what is there, called cosmopolitanism.

But I would argue anyway that this particular version of the shrinking world is not just a description of the world as it is, however correct or incorrect. It’s actually part of a project. It is geographical mythmaking, to convince us of globalisation in its current form. It’s a description that is promulgated precisely to help make itself come true.

Now that argument implies something else – that the ways we imagine the world (our geographical imaginations) matter: they have effects.

So let’s look at another, and very powerful, example of this:

When the supporters of today’s form of globalisation are questioned about why, if it is such a progressive force, there is still so much poverty and inequality in the world; you ask about Mozambique, say, or Honduras, they are likely to reply: Do not worry, they are behind, give us time, they will catch up.

Now look at what is going on here.

The whole variegated and unequal geography of the world is being reorganised into a historical queue.

Geography is being turned into history, space is being turned into time.

What’s more, there is only one historical queue - one model of development.

And it is one defined by those ‘in the lead’, the most powerful voices (the ones who designed the queue in the first place).

Again, I think, this is a kind of geographical mythmaking. And it has serious effects.

First, it makes it more difficult for those who are defined as ‘behind’ in this queue (and who will have less powerful voices) to carve out a path of their own. Their future is foretold. Effectively they will be like us.

Maybe they would – but maybe they would not, wish to follow where the West has led.

And it’s this geographical imagination I think that underpins the assertion that ‘there is no alternative’. There is only one singular linear history.

Secondly, this turning of space into time, and of seeing poorer countries as in some way ‘backward’ (whatever euphemisms for backward het to be used), ignores the fact that this inequality is being produced now.

It’s not a question of catching up. And that not only makes it less likely that a majority of ‘others’ can catch up because inequality is being produced now, but it also cunningly ignores our own present day implication in that process.

Third, that geographical mythmaking I think, kind of, it makes more bland and less pressing the differences and inequalities that there are between us.

The differences between the rich of the West, say, and the poor of Guatemala.

That difference, that huge difference, is reduced to place in the historical queue.

And what that does, I think, is something absolutely crucial.

It denies equal standing.

It is a form of belittlement.

It denies respect.

Now let me be clear about one thing here. I am absolutely not trying to argue against any notions of progress or development. Clean water is indubitably better than dirty water.

What I do want to raise is firstly, the possibility of different ways of ‘progressing’ (that theme of geographical variety again) and secondly, and probably in the end even more importantly, the question of who gets to decide.

One real aspect of the shrinking world is that it can be so difficult for alternatives to be developed, and so easy for tentative attempts at alternative ways of doing things to be crushed.

I think, for example, of the attempts that have been made, over the last century – and again now – in Latin America to do growth and development differently and of how those attempts are greeted only with hostility by many of the most powerful voices, who would impose their own model.

In fact I think we should give more attention even to the smaller differences that there are, between for instance, the so-called European continental model of capitalism (more social democratic, more egalitarian) and the Anglo-American model ( which is more purely market-orientated).

And of course, if we did open the space out to consider those alternatives we might take different views on which is better. There would be arguments. And that is my point.

We should be having more debate about it, a debate that is political, rather than submitting to assertions that there is only one way forward.

Sometimes I get the feeling that there’s a tendency, today, to kind of sink into resignation, you know?

That whatever happens is inevitable.

That there are no alternative futures.

And there’s nothing more antipathetic to a Festival of Ideas celebrating Free thinking than the notion that the future is foretold.

And it’s not just the rampant globalisers, ‘them’ if you like, who deploy this geographical imagination – who turn space into time – we probably all do it and sometimes in very ordinary daily ways.

When we talk casually for instance, of developed or developing countries, or in the language of our tourist imaginations and brochures, you know, that mobilisation of the language of timelessness and those things that you get in brochures.

Maybe it can be a way in fact of making it possible for us to deal with the horrendous facts of global inequality.

It would take seven billion dollars to provide access to clean water for 2.6 billion people. Europeans spend more than that each year on perfume. (UN statistics again.)

Turning space into time (thinking it’s just a matter of ‘them’ catching up) perhaps makes those facts easier for us to live with, as we go about our daily lives.

And it’s not the case that there’s no truth in that (that’s why these arguments are so slippery and so difficult) but it’s not the whole truth.

And it can be a way of evading that challenge of space that is the encounter with difference. It makes it more difficult for us to see the ethical and political questions that we should be addressing.

When we first saw that picture of the Earth from space, it did seem so small, and so vulnerable, and we spoke of the need to act together. That we were all in the same boat. But we cannot be in the same boat in our heads, with solidarity, acting together. The world in that sense cannot become smaller while such grotesque inequalities divide us.

Yet in the middle of all this necessary imagining of the planet as a whole we do still live in places and, maybe, we can sometimes feel bombarded by it all.

And one response is to wall ourselves in – you know, to defend the local against the global. That reassertion of local place that I mentioned earlier.

Actually, of course, we know that that is a hopeless task. Places today are meeting places (as Liverpool well knows, they always have been meeting places). They are at the intersection of a host of connections, of trade, of commerce, and of culture.

In this world, warring local exclusivity is no more responsible an attitude than is the assertion that geography is dead.

We have, perhaps, grown used to understanding places as affected by global forces, but we less often think of them as locations where those bigger forces are themselves produced.

And the reason I wanted to mention this here is precisely because we are here in Liverpool, and I think Liverpool is one of the places that has tried in some way to grapple with that issue.

In the debates that have taken place here, for instance about slavery, what’s been at issue is the role of this city (this local place) in producing and sustaining global forces – of slavery and of Empire.

Debates like that are attempts to acknowledge, and to accept some responsibility for, things done in the global past.

But my question is ‘But what of now?’

What of the role of our places in the production of global inequality, or climate change, now?

What of the impact of our local places on the wider world?

Maybe, in thinking about the identity of place in a globalised age, we need to ask the same kinds of questions that Liverpool asked about its past.

Maybe we need to re-think the ‘identity of place’, not only away from it being a claim to exclusive ownership, but towards also, it being a recognition of responsibility - the responsibility of place – within and towards those wider geographies.

The kind of, what I call a politics of place beyond place.

So: the world is indeed more interconnected. We are, indeed, more interdependent, but the variety of this planet and its people has not been eradicated and that is both a source of richness and a challenge (and we should perhaps pay more respect to that).

Economically, inequality is increasing.

And the world is still very much the Earth.

Thank you.