

The New Third World (Project Sketch)

Type: Nonfiction commentary (research format)

Premise: *All cities are not created equal.*

History: It all began with a sampling of coffees at Starbucks. My sister Bridget wanted to take home a new blend to try in her French coffee press on this occasion, and the young supervising manager was more than happy to oblige, gladly preparing two distinctively different coffees, with a hope that Bridget would gravitate to at least one. The strategy worked; Bridget and I fell for the Arabian Mocha Sanani, a rich, yet captivating, coffee that the young manager had preferred. She told us that most people she encountered, particularly *down here*, did not care for such a blend because it was too “exotic” and refined for the cultured palate, but to that, I had to laugh, because I am definitely no experienced coffee connoisseur.

It was not Arabian Mocha that sparked my curiosity as much as it was simply the context of her comment. I felt compelled to ask this young woman how, as a manager of Starbucks — one of the hippest and most popular coffeehouse chains on the planet — was her store being received in Houma, Louisiana. Her answer was a mixed bag: while noting that it was a well-overdue addition to the commercial landscape of this city of roughly 100,000, there were still so many among us who did not get it and lacked the courage to try it out. Houma, she said, was a place without an appreciation of culture. And I concurred, adding, “Unless you can find it in a bowl of gumbo, to people here, there is no such thing as culture.” Our conversation went on for a little while longer, morphing from one about coffee blends to one about city blends. The manager explained that she had hoped to move to Raleigh-Durham — hey, The Research Triangle! — in order to partake in



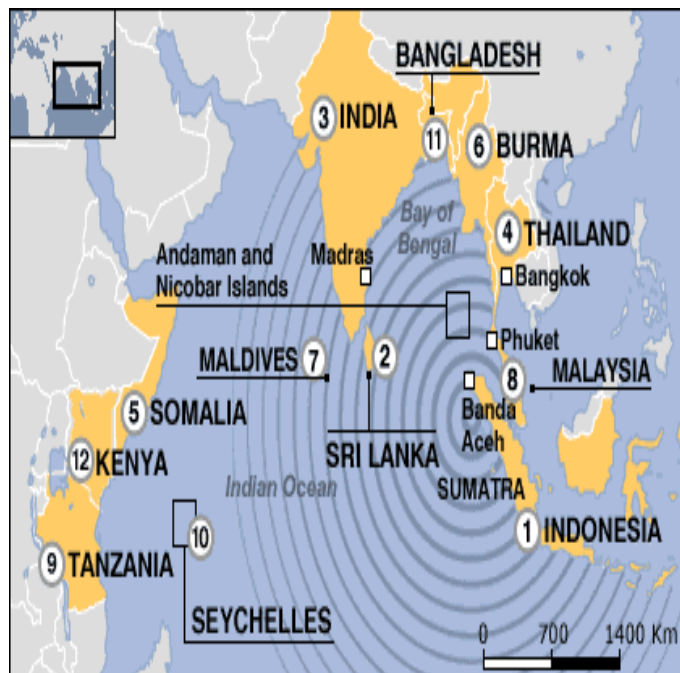
the phenomenal growth taking place in that part of the country, but she could not do so immediately. As it turned out, one consequence of the success in North Carolina was a higher cost of living, and in order for this young woman to make the transition, she would have had to save a whole lot more. (It was simple economics, really: the more successful any region or city becomes, the more it attracts young and ambitious denizens to its environs. The more people it attracts, the more that market experiences a rise in the demand for the basic necessities of life – and, hence, the more it also experiences a rise in the cost of living. Success breeds expense.)

The young manager was very prescient in the comparison of that burgeoning section of the Carolinas and our own little city along the bayous. There was no comparison, she said. Ours was a town that gave little weight to intellectual prowess and vision; people here still got caught up on surnames and which high school someone attended. And when someone seemingly different in thought or appearance came into Houma (or its smaller sister Thibodaux) from the outside, she noted, immediately the defensive walls went up. In short, ours was an area with a long way to go before it could ever hope to compete with a place like The Research Triangle, known for as a forerunner in, well, research for the medical and biotech fields, and touted for an entrepreneurial atmosphere that enables dozens of new companies to start up every year.

Bridget was a bit bemused. She could not understand what was stopping Houma – or any spot in Louisiana, for that matter – from becoming a rival to a place like that. Surely the costs of living and starting up were less than what was being demanded in North Carolina. So what was the problem? Why could we not attract the same type of new economy success, or even any different “old” economy success? Why did we just not get it? And then I told her my simple answer, the one that I give thoughtlessly all of the time: “Houma is a part of the Third World.” But then I realized what I said. I realized that there was more merit to those words than even I had noticed ever before. In that moment, sitting in that Starbucks, with Alanis Morissette playing in the background, a cold and disturbing epiphany had just hit with the same stunning force as that car that my youngest sister was driving on that sunny Memorial Day: *Houma was indeed a part of the Third World, and the unfortunate part of that was that no one in this town seemed to realize it.*

Concept: On September 11, 2001, less than two-dozen Islamists, allegedly devoted to their faith, hijacked airplanes in the skies of the United States, and commenced an attack that redefined terrorism and the geopolitical terrain. Though small in scope, their attack touch every life in this country – and, though it is not easily proven, probably every life on this planet. But what is amazing about this is that it did not take them much effort. In fact, they took down several buildings in Lower Manhattan, damaged another in Washington, DC, and dropped one plane from the sky in Pennsylvania – and effectively snuffed out roughly 3,000 lives. But their actions shut down the engines of the whole world. And even when that engine restarted, it sputtered; the economy tripped up into a recession on fears of a long campaign of infinite justice – or, worse, the greater clash of civilizations predicted by Samuel Huntington. Indeed, the ramification of the events on that sunny, yet dismal, day in September continue to play out even today in an unyielding war against terror that is adding to the body count daily and prompting some to call this “World War IV”.

Unfortunately, we humans were not spared our spate of biblical-sized tragedies. In fact, in an event that can only be described as incomprehensible, on December 26, 2004, the waters of the Indian Ocean rose in a way that no one had known for generations, following one of the most powerful earthquakes on record. There was no warning in a number of countries. The tsunami claimed somewhere in the neighborhood of 300,000 lives, stretching a path of carnage from Somalia, beyond



India, and into Thailand. The sheer devastation at the hands of nature — not man, for once — made any big-budget, “Day of Tomorrow” movie look pale by comparison...and yet the world never stopped. Whole towns and villages were effectively, and forever, swept into the sea, but our financial markets did not grind to a halt. Hundred times more people lost their lives than in NYC or the District of Columbia, while vastly more were displaced, but to this day, few nations are meeting their pledges to rally aid to rebuild these countries, or to fight the diseases that have followed fast in the wake of this disaster, threatening to add to the body count. The scars of the tsunami will mark thousands in places like Phuket or Galie or the Nicobar Islands, but few among us still harbor any real interest in what is going on there. Their story is a fading one.

An assessment of these two events prompts one to ask, rather succinctly, *what the hell is going on here?*

The answer to the question might be as tough to digest as the circumstances that lead to the question in the onset. The fact is that, for all of our old ways of thinking, every place is not created with equal significance to our world. The disparity in the two aforementioned tragedies perfectly identifies that fact. New York City and the two towers that stood as pillars of its cityscape, along with the Pentagon in Washington, DC, have a greater meaning to many of us — not just to Americans — than some town that few ever knew existed on the western shores of Thailand, no matter its population. As cold and unloving as it might sound, we focus less on devastation in a place like the Indian Ocean, and pause for a much smaller disaster like September 11th, simply because we have come to grant different levels of significance to different place; all cities and regions are, in fact, not created or thrive equally. And so, when tragedy strikes, the measure of our attentiveness is perfectly correlated to the level of significance that we have given that place.

However, there is more. In the past, many of us have come to believe that the country might have some bearing on the significance of place. During the Cold War, affectionately now called by some “World War III”, the significance of place classified the world’s population in three segments. The First World was comprised of the U.S. and much of the democratic capitalist Western world, while the Second World was the name given to the spreading Communist states that



had hoped to deter the interests of the First. Meanwhile, there was a Third World, which was by all measure the indirect, strategic battleground of the two opposing forces from the First and the Second. The nations of the Third World, whether in South America or Africa or Asia, were largely less affluent and less militarily relevant than their big brothers, but they bore a bit of strategic importance. That is, they did, until the order changed.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the Second World began to implode. People from Berlin to Prague to Moscow demanded change and opportunity; they demanded the right to liberties cherished in the First World. They wanted the freedom to speak their minds, the freedom to innovate, and the freedom to buy a Big Mac – and they took to the streets to get it. Fortunately, what followed (except in China) was a coup of limited bloodshed. It turned out that their leaders wanted all of these things too, but one would have guessed that they were just too proud to admit it.

At the fall of the Second World, and ironically at the victory of the first Persian Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush told the American people that

this was the creation of a new world order, the beginning of a golden age of globalization and trade that would transform the world. He was right. The world was transformed as multinational corporations and their expatriates morphed into a global herd unseen since before the Great Depression. The new world order also ushered into existence an technological revolution of tremendous importance, one that is still unfolding, and it has brought a wealth of opportunities to dark corners of the planet that, until now, were still trapped in what Alvin



Toffler calls the First Wave (agrarian societies). Cities like Shanghai in China or Mumbai in India, long demurred as backward and hopeless, are now of increasing significance to the global herd, because, as economist Thomas Friedman, points out technology and telecommunication are leveling the playing field. Indeed, from the point of view of a globalist, the world is becoming flat.

The significance of place is no longer a matter largely defined by nation-states, though. The new order, oddly enough, harbors a striking resemblance to an older order that reigned in the time of Jack Morgan and Tom Lamont. In this new order, the significance of place, and hence the measure of our attentiveness, is defined in a city or region's level of contribution to the global community, or its



global relevance. We are largely unaffected by a tsunami in the Indian Ocean, though it sounds cold, because these places supplied nothing unique and did not contribute to the global strategic path. However, when a bomb-laden madman steps onto a train in London and even fails to detonate his wares, we all take a deep breath, because, that city is, after all, globally relevant for any number of reasons.

There is still a pecking order to this new order, one that is as alarming as it is definitive. In the First World, the global relevance is highest, because it is the place of continuously growing corporate decision-making and diminishing political power, the heart of finance and commerce,

and the catalyst of innovation. Places like New York City and London have long occupied this space, but now new innovators like Seoul and Silicon Valley, or even Mumbai and The Research Triangle, are joining these ranks. These cities and regions, and the others that rank among them, are progressive, connected, and affluent. They chart the course for the rest of the world, and gladly the rest follow suit.

The Second World is the support system to the First World. Where as concepts and capital are created and allocated by the decision-makers in, say, Los Angeles or Chicago, the competence (the work and office-back tasking) is relegated to the cities like Nashville or Hamburg. These places are significant in that they are excellent facilitators.



Meanwhile, the Third World is a realm dominated by everyone else. Much like the unaligned states of this space during Cold War, these cities and regions are disconnected, less visionary by proportion, and seem to trail the pack in terms of ideas, education, and competence. What's more, they contribute for less to the overall global community than they seem to consume from it. This field is frighteningly broad, ranging from small-town America to the riotous streets of Lagos, but this field is populated by all of those areas of less significance to the global herd – and

that, I am afraid, is a lot of areas.



Again, the factor of nation-state is of far less significance in this new order world than in the Cold War. Today, there is no definitive global enemy as defined by governments. Hence, companies and investors can define the cities and regions of our world on a more level setting and in terms of their global relevance to the larger community. And they do not hesitate to do so. In fact, though it plans us to admit it, using this measure shows us

that our cities and regions face much more fierce competition than we first assumed. Lafayette, Louisiana, for example, is now in more direct competition

with Bangalore than it is with Lake Charles. And secondly size is no longer a factor. The small town of Bentonville, Arkansas, the home of the most pervasive retailer on the planet, has more in common with Frankfurt than it does with Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And Houma, for all of its delusional trappings about heritage, is just as stagnate and uncreative as Warsaw, and both cities are moving into position with the likes of Caracas, rather than with the like of Austin.

Indeed, the rules of the world are now being rewritten, but few have taken the time to read them before the ink has dried...

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