

Colloquium Series

The World Was Never Flat: Early Global Encounters and the Messiness of Empire

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Thomas Friedman's 2005 book *The World is Flat* was meant partly as a wake-up call to those in the United States who direct its corporate boardrooms and govern its political/economic state, a warning that globalization has brought about a level economic "playing field" in which the United States might be losing the game. As rhetoric the title certainly works well to raise fears about North America's future economic role. It also works in concretizing a popular view of globalization, a view that obscures its uneven, discordant, and decidedly un-flat processes and practices. In this paper I help deconstruct this view by literally fleshing out the everyday ways through which United States expanded economically in its early (1890-1927) global empire. Based on archival work in Argentina, Russia, Scotland, and the United States, I provide an historical look at encounters between North American business men and women and their foreign customers, students and workers. Focusing on the diverse practices and personal encounters that were critical to the early global efforts of select United States-based corporations, I expose the uneven, contested and messy ways that economic expansion works. By analyzing early global encounters when the economic dominance of the United States was just becoming apparent I am able to highlight the sheer complexity and truly relational nature of United States' expansion in the early 20th century.

**1080 Derby Hall, 3:30-5:00pm
Thursday, October 29**