

PART ONE

UNDERSTANDING

THE PLAID PLANET



CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. Age of Globalization
2. A Wealth of -ations
3. What Is Geography
4. What Is a Region?
5. A Matter of Scale
6. So Who the Hell Is the Plaid Avenger?





A Plaid World Intro

1

What is globalization?

How do the interconnections of the global economy and politics affect my life?

Why are some places rich while others are poor?

What does the future of the planet look like?

All great questions, fellow world watchers—questions that deserve great answers. Thoughtful, intuitive and well-researched answers contained in a well-ordered and glibly constructed textbook.

This is not that book.

Welcome to my world. The world of the Plaid Avenger, where seeking knowledge of our planet is imperative, where blissful ignorance is not accepted, and where truth and justice can only be achieved by those willing to learn . . . willing to work . . . willing to fight. It is not a place most are ready to enter yet. But you are here. Good. Read on.

In *The Plaid Avenger's World*, we will strip off the shallow window dressing in which you have been trained to see the world. We will lay it bare to see what is really happening around the planet. We do this in order to gain enough insight about the current state of the world to truly understand the how and why and where things are happening right now. In this world, no single government or press dictates our views; no single political party shapes our opinion; no single religion or ethnicity tints our not-so-rose-colored glasses. We will see the world in plaid: a mystical weaving of facts, figures, cultures and viewpoints from every corner of the planet, culminating into the fabric that is today.

Many, if not most, in our society would say, "Why bother?" Here's why:



AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization: what is it and what does it mean to me? Economically? Technologically? Politically? Socially? Culturally? Morally?

We constantly hear about how the world is getting smaller—is it? Pure poppycock! The world is the same size it has always been . . . *but* it is becoming more connected and more interdependent than ever before. Goods and services and information are exchanged in our local stores from every nook and cranny of our cram-packed planet. For the first time ever, we can travel to any part of the world virtually overnight. Corporations move capital and jobs from one country to the next in a matter of days. News of international significance is reported seconds after it happens. We can communicate in real time with any part of the globe. The world is now one system . . . mostly.

We are the first generation of humans who enjoy foreign travel as a casual part of life, who communicate by direct-dialing to any country on all continents, who receive instant news of world happenings, who expect to work overseas or work for a company that deals overseas. Let me reiterate that—expect; it is not an exception. This is a really important concept, especially to you—the first generation that is living in the postindustrial, highly interconnected age.

Many, if not all of you, will work for multinational companies whose business is all over the world. Many, if not all of you, will work and live outside the United States at some point in your careers. Businesses and jobs are internationalizing as we speak—almost all jobs, not just the fancy ones. You guys are the people who are going to be running the world. You guys are the decision makers—when all is said and done, I'm just a single superhero out thwarting international intrigue. But *you* will be the ones building the bridges, and electing leaders, and stabilizing governments, controlling monetary exchange rates; you may even be setting up all sorts of private, national, or even international businesses/programs/projects that will shape the world and its population.

Make no mistake about it, the AIDS rate in Africa *does* affect you, the increasing coal consumption in China *does* affect you, an earthquake in Japan, and the price of cocaine in Colombia *does* affect you. (allocation of your tax dollars, your jobs, the price you pay for goods, global pollution which affects your health, etc.) Globalization is pretty much a one-way street. We are not going back to medieval times, no matter what isolationists say, do, or think. Ignore the rest of the world at your own peril—you won't be hurting anyone but yourself. How did this globalization happen anyway . . . and how has it shaped our planet?

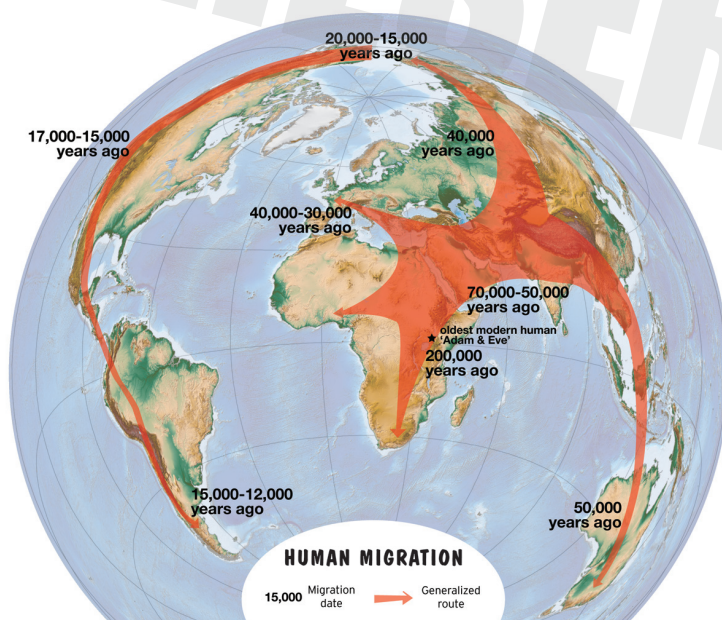


A WEALTH OF -ATIONS

Of all the organisms hanging out on this blue marble we call Earth, us human-types have been the biggest modifiers, movers, shakers, benders and breakers of our fair planet. We grow food, we congregate in cities, we move around, we plan, we build machines, we communicate, we educate, we procreate . . . and do it faster and more thoroughly year after year after year at a larger and larger scale that has inevitably consumed the world. The idea that globalization is merely a modern phenomena is pure poppycock; all of human history can be seen as a relentless drive to expand our tribe to every nook and cranny of the planet, and to increase the non-stop interactivity between peoples, for better or for worse. Think about it. Civilization, migration, urbanization, industrialization, modernization, communication: all have served to organize, spread, and interconnect us. What a wealth of -ations that all feed into one grand scheme of globalization!

You probably have learned about a lot of these -ation terms in other places, but I want you to think about them again for a few minutes in the context of this globalization concept. Without getting into too much tedious detail, I tell you that humans have been doing this globalizing gig since the birth of the species (or since a naked dude and a naked dudette were plopped down in a garden, if you prefer). **Migration** of humans started when the first modern *Homo sapiens* started trucking their tribal units to new turf outside of Africa over 70,000 years ago. Humans subsequently spread to all continents and all major islands, and this process of movement and interconnection is still going strong today.

Humans used to migrate in order take advantage of new unpopulated lands, untapped resources, or to follow game; in today's world, they migrate for jobs, for security, for a better life in a richer place. Wait a minute—is there a difference between those migration motivations? Maybe not. Did you really think that “illegal” Mexican migration to the US or African migration to Europe was some new thing? Ha! We’ve been on that route forever. But let’s be civilized about this, which brings me to . . .



The Migratory Circle of Life is nearly complete.



Take a bite of this apple, and let's get this globalization ball rolling!

Civilization, a process that wildly impacted the human experience. See, we used to be the ever-expanding, ever-migrating, hunter-gatherer types living in small unconnected bands scattered across the planet, but around 12,000 years ago, some folks stumbled upon agriculture, and that was a game changer. Humans did a radical lifestyle shift from hunters to farmers. From that point forward, we hairless ape types turned into peeps who were developing cooler and cooler tools, growing more and more food, congregating together in bigger and bigger pools. We call that human civilization, fools!

Specifically neolithically, we refer to this slow cumulative process that occurred independently in many different locations between 10,000BC and 3,000 BC as **The Neolithic Revolution**. The nifty Neolithic! Neo for “new” and -lithic for “stone.” The New Stone Age! And those humans were totally new-rocking it out!



Early iPad prototype: the iPetroglyph.

See, all that extra food surplus as a result of growing plants in a predictable cycle led to folks settling down in a permanent place. Then some smart peeps who did not have to waste their whole lives just finding food began to pursue their passions . . . and thus they invented the **domestication** of animals, the wheel, pottery, tin-smithing, the Bronze Age, written languages, architecture, engineering, legal structures, religious institutions . . . you starting to get the picture here? Oh yeah, 'cuz they would have been painting pictures as well.

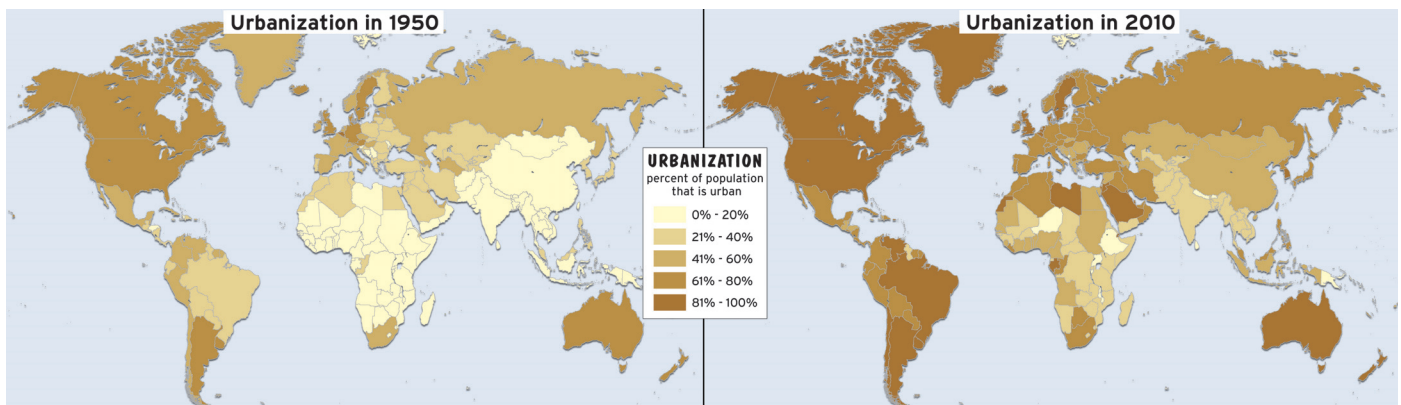
That's what the extra food is really important: it increasingly allowed people to do their own thing . . . to specialize their skills and inventions. This in turn created even better tools/technologies, specialization of work, and increasingly

complex societies and cultures which encouraged trade and cooperation. And not just trade within a single society, but between different ones in different places.

Aha! That was the evolution of intentional interconnections between populated areas in an effort to trade not just goods and services, but ideas and technologies and peoples themselves! Globalization game on! They call this stuff "outsourcing" and "economic activity" and "technology transfer" in today's world . . . but it's all the same stuff as way back when. From the Flintstones to Futurama: Same shizzle, different millennium.

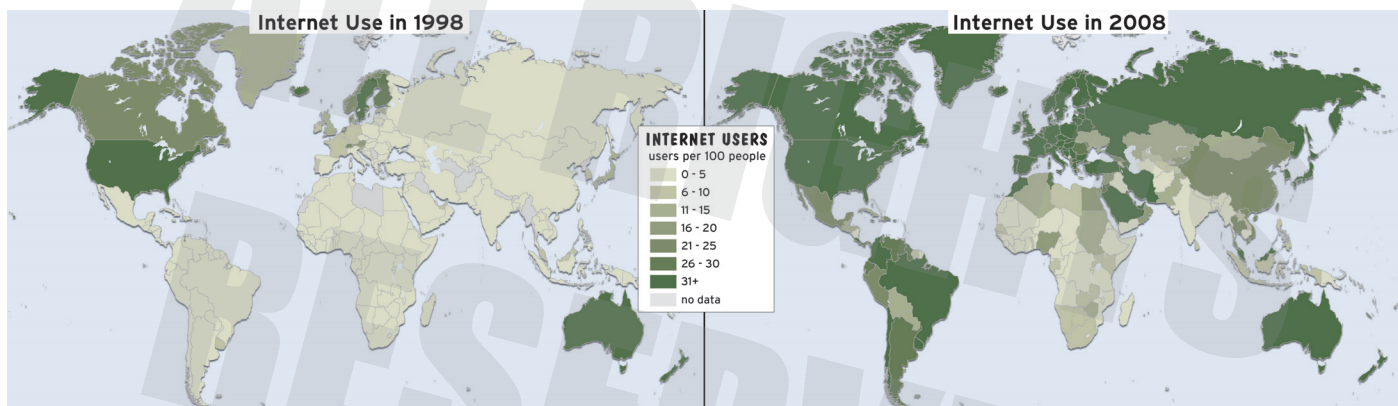


This civilization gig also transforms the geographic organization of human life: we go from small bands of folks out in the wild, to hanging out with each other in bigger in bigger numbers in things called villages, and then towns, and then cities. The first major civilizations that popped up 6,000 years ago in China, Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and Egypt began a perpetual process of population growth and **urbanization** that continues unabated to this day. Translation: humans have increasingly chosen to live in big population clusters in built-up areas that we call cities as opposed to hanging out in the sparsely-populated rural areas we refer to as "the sticks." Humankind reached a milestone in 2009 when, for the first time in human history, over 50% of the world's population now lives in an urban area. That percentage is growing bigger, faster than ever.



This urbanization has intensified human interaction exponentially over time; interaction which has accelerated the creation and transfer of ideas and technologies. New ideas, new inventions, new stuff! Which prompted **industrialization**, of course! Did you ever stop and wonder how it is possible for so many people to now cram themselves into cities, thus not being able to grow their own food or collect their own water or hunt their own bison? Because we invented machines to do the heavy lifting that used to require all our labor, and we discovered energy sources to fuel those machines. Bottom line: one dude on a tractor can grow enough food to feed a million people in the city; ten kids in a sweat shop can make clothes for that million, and oil-powered big machines can build skyscrapers and sewer systems and water lines for that million people. What the heck is left for those city folks to do?

Much like at the beginnings of the Neolithic Age, they have more time to think. To interact. To create. To be inventors, doctors, artists, engineers, scientists, industrialists, priests, rock stars, and whatever else we come up with. That's how we got electricity, the polio vaccine, the Hoover Dam, mobile phones, and computers. Unfortunately, with so much free time and such diverse and bizarre human motivations, we also have nuclear weapons, mustard gas, lawyers, and Sham-Wow. Such is the yin and yang of life. But I digress. This urbanization/industrialization combo has served to link up the globe like never before: more humans compacted into bigger, concentrated urban areas has caused even more interaction within the city, but also increasingly between cities worldwide. Cities are both the engines and the nodes of globalizing forces; the conduit for transfers of ideas, money, technologies, and power, everywhere, all the time.



This "connectedness" is now happening at light speed, thanks to advances in transportation and **communication**. Yep, our last -ation is really the power-booster icing on this globalizing cake. From smoke signals to the Pony Express to trans-oceanic telegraph cables, we humans have spent a lot of time and effort figuring out how to better transmit information to each other across the planet. Let me be the first to tell you, my brothers and sisters: we have almost reached the end-game on this one. With mobile phones, the Internet, and satellite TV/radio, we can pretty much transmit any type of information almost instantaneously to any part of the globe. It's totally insane if you think about it.

More ideas, more information, more interaction between more people than *ever* before. Twittering every second of our collective experience! And more folks are jumping into the system faster than ever before as well. Just look at the figure above to see the speed at which the world is hooking up on-line!

We have essentially set ourselves up as a single huge worldwide computer, wherein all the humans attached to this systems are interacting to solve problems, sell goods, provide news, and everything else! You can chat with friends in Uzbekistan, watch a live news report from Brazil, vacation at the Vatican, have business transactions with South Africa, and share research ideas via Skype with associates in Switzerland. That, my friends, is global connection. That is globalization, made possible by all the other -ations of note in this section.



What does it all add up to? A more fully *connected* world in every sense of the word, in which the actions of any one person affects the lives of everyone. All of the aforementioned -ations have gone from local, isolated or internal concepts to completely planetary themes in scope and practice. In this increasingly populated and interconnected world, it is becoming clear that all "local" problems are actually "global" problems, from the movement of narcotics, to an outbreak of an infectious disease, to environmental pollution, to the existence of nuclear weapons, and so on.

And there are global problems a'plenty on our poor little planet! However, the solutions lie within this connected framework as well.

See, this globalization is neither bad nor good. It just is, and will continue to be. Will globalization result in a homogenization of culture? In a modernization of all societies? In a pacification of the planet? In a disintegration of the concept of the sovereign state? Oh, my oh my, what a delicious stew of other -ation possibilities that I will leave to you to debate . . . and we will return to the tensions of the local versus the global in the final chapters of this book, to see how globalization is playing out in the 21st century plaid world.

For now, I just wanted to spill some of that crazy globalization knowledge on your skullcap to see the sparks fly.

Knowledge is power, or at least empowerment. The more you know about the globalizing world in which we live, the more power you have. It's good to have at least a minimal geographical understanding of our planet. What's that? You don't know what geography is?



An all-inclusive neural network now . . . from a nebulous Neolithic nucleus!



WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?

Geography is one of those words, and subsequently one of those fields of study, which has become so generic that it seems to have lost its own definition in the modern world. The term is so truly holistic in meaning that many other social sciences, as well as a lot of the physical ones, are actually sub-branches of it, as opposed to geography's current designation as a sub-branch of one of them. What am I talking about? Consider for a moment the origin of the word and the discipline; **geography** has its roots in the ancient world, roughly translated as "describing the Earth," and every culture and society with a written record has done just that—described both physically and culturally the environment around them as they understood it.

Be it Greek philosophers calculating the size of the known world in the 2nd century BCE, Chinese diplomats considering trade ties with Southeast Asia in the 11th century, military strategists planning the Boer War in Africa, or American scientists assessing the impact of the loss of Brazilian rainforest on world climate in the 21st century—all are geographers in the sense that they are studying the physical and/or cultural components of their environments to gain understanding and make decisions—just as all of us do every day in our own lives. How do I get from here to there? Should I buy an American car to support the American economy, even though their fuel efficiency is worse than imported cars? What is the foreign policy of the political party I support? Should I donate money to alleviate hunger in Ethiopia? Is this neighborhood I'm in a high-crime area? Paper or plastic? All questions require us to consider economic, social, political, and environmental knowledge and repercussions of that knowledge on the world around us.

I am intentionally pointing out here that the world around us, every place on the planet no matter where you are, has both physical traits and cultural traits that make it unique. Every place has a certain climate, particular landforms, and some kind of soils, vegetation and animal life. These are its **physical** traits, much like every human has some natural hair color, skin color, a certain height and weight, and particular physical abilities—maybe to run fast or jump high. At the same time, every place has languages being spoken, religious practices, economic activities, political organizations, and human infrastructure like roads and buildings. These are the **cultural** traits of the place, just like a human has cultural traits like certain religious beliefs, spoken language, a job, a learned skill like archery, and a favorite flavored ice cream. Just like every human in the world, every place in the world is unique in its own right, kind of like snowflakes. Defining any place in the world, or any region of the world, involves looking at both of these aspects, as well as their interaction with each other.

Every place on the planet is unique in that even when many of these factors are identical—say between two small towns in the Midwest located only five miles apart—there will still be tangible differences. Each town has a different history. The weather may be pretty much the same, but one will get more rainfall than the other. The people may all be of the same religion, but there will be different churches that do things just slightly different. The economies may both be based on corn, but there will be different business names, and different storefronts. There



We are unique!

will be at least one Chinese restaurant in both towns, but they will definitely have different tasting General Tso's chicken. Like human identical twins, no matter how much is the same, there are always distinguishable differences upon closer examination. To understand our world, we will look at the physical and cultural traits of regions of the planet, how these traits converge to form a distinct region, and perhaps more importantly for our assignment, how these regions interact with each other.

So what the heck is a region?



WHAT IS A REGION?

The world is just too darn big and filled with a heck of a lot of things going on and way too many facts and figures and images and names and places for us to know and comprehend everything all of the time. You can't possibly even know all the facts and histories and physical variables of your own home town, much less your county, your state, or your planet. There's just too much, and the story is added to and updated daily. But don't give up hope! Nil desperandum, my dear friends! Across the desert lies the promised land! The human mind has a coping mechanism for this overflow of knowledge, which of course has gotten much worse with the advent of global communications and the 24-hour news cycle: We assess importance. We filter. We generalize. We are going to do the same geographically for the planet. By synthesizing and systematizing vast amounts of information from parts of the world and making pertinent generalizations, we create a unit of area called a **region**.

Regions are areas usually defined by one or more distinctive characteristics or features, which can be physical features or cultural features, or more often than not, a combination of both. We could identify a strictly physical region such as a pine forest, the Sahara Desert or the Mississippi drainage basin. Conversely, we could form up an area that we would identify culturally like the Bible Belt, a Wal-Mart store service area, or even Switzerland (defined by human-created political borders). However, since we have already pointed out that every part of the planet has both types of traits, most regions are identified as a combination of physical and cultural characteristics, such as the regions we refer to as the Midwestern US, tropical Africa, or Eastern Europe. These names typically make one think of both physical and cultural traits simultaneously, and may actually be meaningless in a context of just one or the other. This last type of world regional delineation is what we will mainly utilize in our journey.

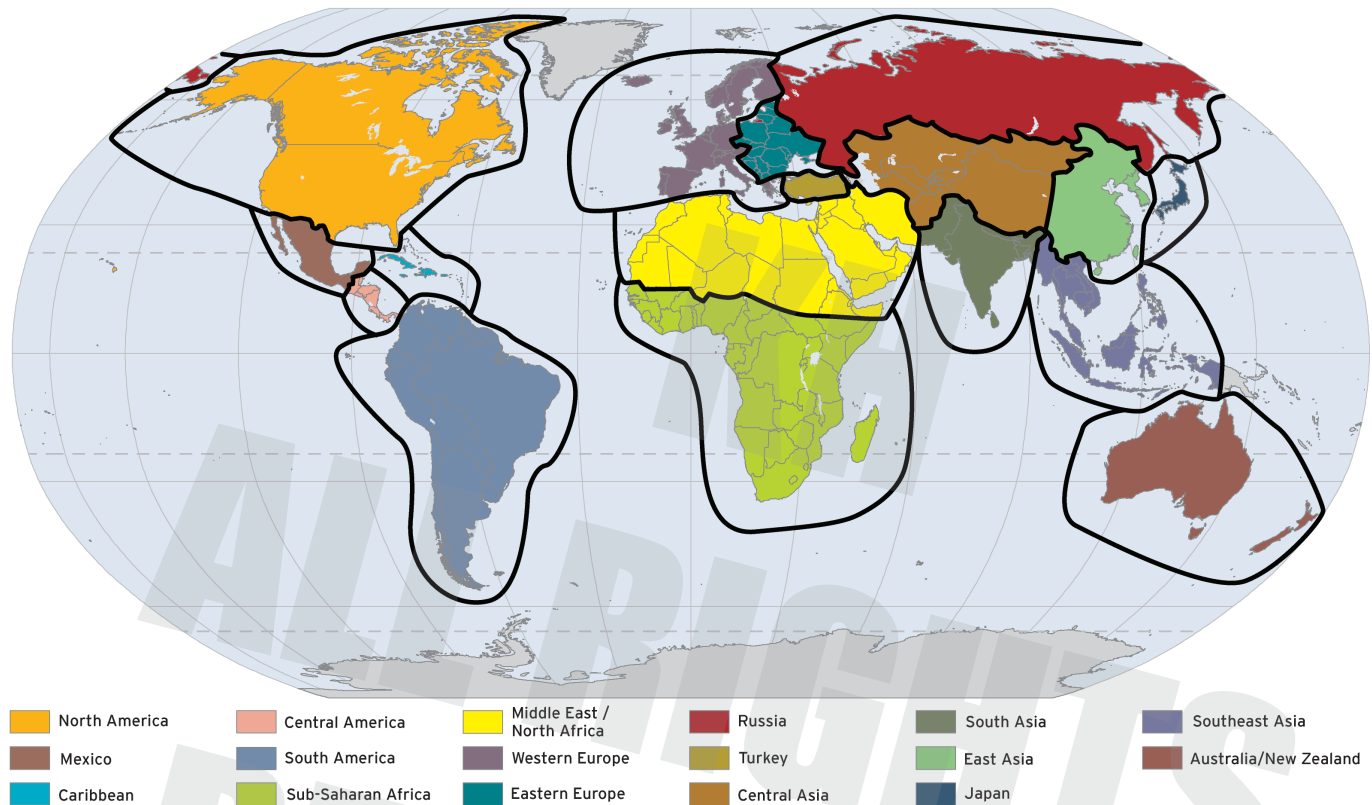
That is a good jumping off point for what we will consider a region for our global guidebook. A region has three components:

1. A region has to have some area.
2. A region has to have some boundaries—although these boundaries are typically fuzzy, or imperfectly defined. Where does the Middle East stop and Africa start?
3. A region has to have some homogeneous trait or traits that set it apart from surrounding areas. This is the most important component to consider!

The user (that is you!) defines what trait is homogeneous. You can define any place on earth as being in an infinite number of regions, depending on what trait you pick. Your current exact position could be described as in a distinct political region like Charleston, California, or Canada. Or perhaps you're in a distinct physical region like the Everglades or the Appalachians or the Badlands. Simultaneously you may be in a distinct socially defined region like the Bible Belt, the Rust Belt, or the "The Beltway"—what region do you think you are in right now? Play this exciting "name your region" game with all your friends, and you will be the toast of the town. Or perhaps a big geek. But I digress.

Here is a quick breakdown of the world regions we will be examining:

FIGURE 1.1 WORLD REGIONS AS DEFINED BY THE PLAID AVENGER



Why these areas? Why these borders? Why these regions? Because they are defined by homogeneous traits as picked by me. These are the Plaid Avenger's world regions. The bulk of this book will be explaining these regions and their homogeneous traits. Your world regional map may be different than mine depending upon what traits you want to focus on. Don't like my regions? Then go write your own bloody book!



A MATTER OF SCALE

When we are being geographers, or defining regions, or even just trying to get from point A to point B, we must always keep the **scale** of our endeavor in mind. How much area are we talking about? Are we examining someone's backyard in Australia, or the entire Australian Outback? That is a big shift in scale! Does this description of the environment in my hometown scale apply to a larger scaled area like my state or country? It rarely does. Thus, we must always be wary about how far we can push our analysis. Changing scales typically calls for reassessment of the area being considered.

The other reason to pay attention to scale is because it plays an important component of our definition of regions. Since we have already expressed that regions have some sort of homogeneous factor that defines them, we must consider at what scale does this homogeneity apply—because the scale itself defines it. Let me give you an example.

A couple presidential elections ago the USA, by majority, elected Barrack Obama—a Democrat—to the presidency. Since more than half voted Democrat, we could say that the US, at the country scale, is a Democratic region, based on that singular homogeneous trait. However, if we looked at the state of Texas, it voted predominately Republican—so at a smaller scale, you are looking at a Republican region. The city of Austin, a smaller region within Texas, is a hip liberal art-sy town that voted predominately Democrat, thus, in that smaller region, you are back to a Democrat-defined area. Maybe most of the

people in a certain city block in Austin, a smaller region still, voted Republican, so at the block scale you are in Republican territory again. Thus, defining regions based on voting preferences *demand*s that you state the scale of focus. Most importantly, the larger the region you define, the more exceptions to your homogeneous trait you will find within your region.

This is what generalizations are all about—we are going to discuss and define our regions with *generally homogeneous* traits within the region, knowing full well our generalization won't apply to everyone and every place. For example: by any definition, the Middle East region would be identified as an area dominated by Islam. Oops, except for a radical and extremely important exception—that of the Jewish state of Israel. For our travels, we will be pointing out and elaborating on those homogeneous traits which define the entire region, but will also include those glaring exceptions to the rule when they are of particular significance to today's headlines. The other main goal of this guide is to describe each of the world regions' interactions with each other, and their role in the world at large. This is a tall order to be sure, but a goal worthy of pursuit by the mightiest of global superheroes, the Plaid Avenger.



SO WHO IS THE PLAID AVENGER?

Yes, it seems that everything is growing into a singular world system. We speak of a world economy in which goods and services and businesses move all over the planet; they even have a club for everyone: the WTO. We have a great global transportation network that can transport us faster than ever to any point on the planet. We have the United Nations: a world legislative body that sets standards and rules for conduct on the planet (and I've heard rumors that they are also supposedly peace-keeping enforcers of these rules . . . although I won't swear to this). Thanks to mass media and global telecommunications, we can even speak of movement towards a more homogeneous world culture—where in the world can you *not* talk on your mobile phone while you watch MTV and sip on a Coca-Cola?

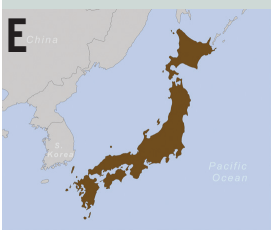
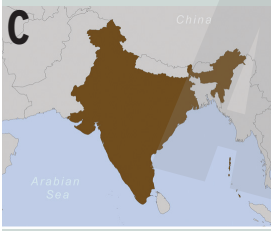
But wait, there seems to be something missing. Hmm. . . . Global leadership . . . check. Global legislature . . . check. Global economy . . . check. Global judicial system . . . Global judicial system . . . Global justice??? Bueller . . . Bueller . . . Bueller? Where is it? I knew something was missing! No justice to be found!

Just as the world continues to become more interconnected, and every event across the globe becomes more pertinent to our daily lives, we also gain more knowledge about inequalities and unfairness around the planet. This comes at a time here at the dawn of the 21st century when conflict proliferates around the globe, multinational corporations grow unchecked and unhindered by law, diseases have the capacity to truly create an unprecedented planetary epidemic, and trade in guns, drugs, and people continue unabated. Yes, even the trade in people . . . you know, slavery. Global inequality may be reaching a new zenith; that is, the gulf between the rich and the poor widens as every day passes, and those poor folks are growing in numbers. You heard of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement? You may live to see an "Occupy the Globe" movement as well!

The Plaid Avenger is a product of this age. Somewhere at a major university on the eastern seaboard of the US, a meek but smartly dressed college professor by day, he toils in an effort to educate the youth of America about the wider world, and their role in it. By night, he roams the planet fighting organized international crime, abusive multinational corporations, and corrupt governments, wherever they may be. The Plaid Avenger: international equalizer and educator. A fighter for truth, global justice, and the international way, he also possesses an unstoppable urge to bring plaid back into fashion.

That brings us to your first assignment: Your first mission to become globally literate—that is, smart—and know the locations of the states of the world. Most Americans call them "countries," but you should start calling them "states" now and just get over it. Look back to Figure 1.1, and get to work. The reason? While I'm not an advocate of memorizing every town, district, and province on the map, we do need to have a working vocabulary to discuss things intelligently. Not that you need to be able to draw a map from memory, but you will be amazed how much more intelligent you appear when you are in a discussion about a news event and you know with authority that Senegal is in western Africa, not in Central Asia. Trust me, your date will dig it. So dig this . . .

Analyzed an atlas or wall map and now know all the states of the world? Got them all down? Then look at the following figures. A straight-up matching game with some sassy style. As the Plaid Avenger must often work undercover around the planet, he has an endless array of outfits to help him blend into the local environs he is investigating. He also



frequently has to foil dastardly plots at famous local landscape.. Study the costumes, maps and photos below. Your mission: match the appropriate highlighted country map to the outfit the Plaid Avenger would be wearing and the appropriate landscape he would be lurking in. Good luck, and see you in Chapter 2.

