BOOK ESSAY: Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*

Can the Global Transmit the Local for Diaspora?
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In *Modernity at Large*, flows of global culture are examined through the neologisms of five various “scapes”: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, financescapes and technoscapes. According to Appadurai, the cross-cultural nature of these strands informs the imagination of social life among both individuals and the collective. Unlike other area studies scholars, anthropologists, historians, economists, sociologists and the like, Appadurai’s project is to investigate the advent of mass media communication as it relates to cultural aspects of globalization. Specifically, he seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the effects of mass migration and media combine to create a force that ruptures our current understanding of the nation-state. To Appadurai, the inevitable break from the nation-state is made possible through the societal sphere of the imaginary that has been formed through images disseminated by mass media. It is precisely the interpretation and conceptualization of these imaginaries by diaspora communities that produce agency and allow for the construction of imagined and material worlds that cannot be understood through the current spatial center-periphery binary.

Early on in his volume, Appadurai provides readers with ample methodological and explanatory framework for his theories and the existing models in which he situates himself. The groundwork for his volume is laid out in an organized and comprehensive manner and directs us towards anticipation of the explicatory cultural intersections of globalization.

For Appadurai, to properly comprehend intricacies of globalization, one must view them through the lens of the reified local. Unlike other accounts of the local, Appadurai posits that it
must be contextualized according to constantly shifting economic, social, political and cultural perceptions, spatial and temporal arrangements and identities. An amorphous acceptance of the local and subsequently, the transnational is necessary for moving beyond fixed notions of global cultural processes. The five “scapes” presented by Appadurai allow for the dismantling of current discourses that maintain the marriage of space and culture as indispensable logical models. The implications of these theoretical instruments are realized in the phenomenon of deterritorialization enacted by “diasporic public spheres”. As Appadurai effectively articulates:

The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterize international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles. The terms with the common suffix – scape also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that are the same from every angle of vision, but rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actions: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families.

In short, to think about globalization effectually, space and culture must be separated due to the inability of the nation-state to provide adequate contextualization for the increasing influence of diasporas and media. Modernity likewise cannot be confined by current limitations of boundaries that demarcate not only lands, but also identities—hence the title *Modernity at Large*.

Appadurai’s theoretical framework provides valuable insight into the ever-changing nature of the local, national and international by taking into account multiple dimensions of culture. The use of neologisms is not only clever, but useful in signifying the disjuncture inherent in each “scape” as it occurs beyond the scope of the nation-state. Appadurai positions himself in such a way that we expect ethnoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, finanscapes and technoscapes to provide the basis for threading together his bricolage through ensuing essays. Yet, this is not the case as the cohesion of his arguments is difficult to ascertain due to
the fact that they often do not refer back to these principles. This could be due in part to the expansiveness of these themes, which arguably could constitute individual (though not independent) projects deserving of further inquiry. Additionally, while these five “scapes” certainly broaden previous notions of global cultural flows, they certainly are not all-encompassing of processes impacting globalization. Moreover, further exploration of these terminologies would have been beneficial in synthesizing his arguments.

While Appadurai claims his reach extends mainly to the realm of culture (which arguably is impossible to limit without problematizing effects in a discussion of globalization), he engages with economic, political, financial, ideological and historical areas. Of course, intricate relationships between these exist and impact the imaginations of people, but the reader is largely left to speculate as to how. Appadurai provides us with a multitude of diverse real world examples that intimate the interrelatedness of these concepts, but does not effectively expound the relationship between not only the five “scapes,” but also other dynamics affecting global cultural movements. In an effort to consider Appadurai’s possible rationale for this seemingly unsystematic theorizing, we could conjecture that it is representative of the disjunctured “scapes” in which he is entrenched.

One of Appadurai’s fundamental tenets lies in the expanding power of diaspora owing to increased migration and mass media. He states, “electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination”\textsuperscript{iii}. For Appadurai, the imagination becomes a key component to the remaking of a culture of dimension and differences rather than a culture of substance. This reshaping of the cultural (as opposed to culture—he prefers the adjective to the noun as it is more “contextual, heuristic”), occurs through the dissolving of time and space as static paradigms, achieved through the insertion of mediascapes and technoscapes as impetus. Media, in the forms of television, radio, newspaper, film and so forth, permit the connectivity of
diaspora with other diaspora as well as their native countries. As Appadurai acknowledges, migration and media present issues of instability in the formation of identities, but he maintains they are beneficial in decentering dominant ideologies as they foster the development of the “scape” of the imagination. Wide access to media also allows for the emergence and preservation of identities due to the democratization of societal imaginings as “ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives”. The imagination then becomes the metaphysical and/or physical space in which dreams of equality, leisure, freedom, etc. can be realized. It is in this space that society, and the individuals that comprise it, have imaginative agency to resist the homogenizing effects of globalization. Appadurai contends that prior to the inception of mediascapes and technoscapes, the nation-state prevented the formation of unified identities between diaspora and homelands due to the geographic boundaries as well as ideologies pertaining to nationalism. Indeed, the last feature of this argument offers a certain level of expediency in a world in which networks have emerged that have been forged through interactions permissible through media.

One of my points of departure lies in the images produced by mass media. Appadurai challenges us to view them as positive motivations for realization of the self in context to the local and the global. Yet, he does not sufficiently engage himself with the hegemonic structures informing these images. At times, he considers Americanization and commodification as potentially destructive forces in the formation of identity, but quickly dismisses their deep penetrability by proffering a method of resistance through indigenization.

In an effort to illustrate the potential of indigenization, he explores the sport of cricket introduced to India by British colonizers. Appadurai relies on its inculcation and appropriation by Indian men to demonstrate how it has become a national symbol of Indianness and hence a tool for identity formation that derived from the imagination. Appadurai looks primarily to the radio as a technoscape that changed the colonial landscape of India by transmitting games,
announcements and news pertaining to cricket. While I commend and admire his effort to reclaim a colonial enterprise, I find this anecdote to be of limited utility in forwarding his concept of indigenization for several reasons. As aforementioned, Appadurai fails to take into consideration (but yet mentions) the dominant messages imbued in radio as a one-way medium, namely the use of English as a primary means of communication, the capitalist nature of the spectacle of cricket, the hyper-masculine modes of thinking perpetuated (including an inciting of violence) and the repercussions of racial segregation on the playing field. He does not convince me that cricket has been indigenized or that participating Indians (players and observers alike) have successfully derived their own identity and agency as a result of the sport. Without an examination of the hegemonic standpoints entailed in cricket (specifically those of white colonial Englishmen) and the medium of radio (which McLuhan would argue is most important in this understanding), we cannot conclude that the indigenization of cricket is not simply a product of false consciousness.

This postulation of false consciousness can be related to Appadurai’s perception of consumer society and consequently to cultural diversity as he suggests that media are the avenue for rupturing cultural homogenization. Appadurai situates the media at the center of global cultures in an attempt to separate globalization from imperialism—an undeniably difficult feat, and one I am not sure he accomplishes. Here, he gives credence to diaspora communities as capable of opposing hegemonic ideology such as commodity fetishism and hierarchal systems of power that dictates the terms of consumerism (a diatribe Apparudai embarks on with his “wear and tear” account between the haves and the have-nots). The fallacy of diaspora as the mutable site of resistance lies in the fact that diasporas continually negotiate their own imaginings with those of the real world. Migration generally is motivated by economic, religious, political determinants and even romanticized ideals that promise passageway to the dreamscape (pun intended). This dreamscape (often the West) as a comparison becomes
relative to countries of origin, and is frequently viewed as the materialization of imaginings (or
Westernization) negotiated with the inescapable conditions of reality. To put it simply, diasporic
communities are more inclined to perceive their environments as the best of (available) possible
worlds—a fact that Appadurai seems to overlook. This is not to say that diasporic societies do
not maintain identities connected to homelands, rather that appropriation into the dominant
society is exceedingly difficult to resist based on the justification above as well as due to the
highly influential span of capitalism and cultural imperialism.

This leads me to my last point of departure from Appadurai’s theory concerning the
imagination as a site of resistance and agency. As noted, he concedes that media and
migration contribute to instability in identity creation. But for him, media also provide a means
for democratizing the imagination through deterritorialization of social-life. Again, I will
emphasize the lack of deliberation devoted to power structures (consumerism, division of labor,
racial/ethnic/religious/gender taxonomies and so forth) implanted through dominant ideologies,
mental colonization and imperialism that quite possibly govern the imagination to the extent that
unimagined realities distinct from these coercing apparatuses are not imaginable. In other
words, the imagination is severely vulnerable (and possibly even aspires) to indoctrination of
preexisting normative structures, customs, beliefs and standards prevalent in modern society,
which potentially reduce agency and the occurrence of improvisation.

There are numerous well formulated, innovative arguments in Appadurai’s text,
Modernity at Large, that make it a substantial work worthy of reading. Though it is not without
limitations, Appadurai initiates a significant dialogue addressing the ever-changing effects of
media and globalization as viewed through a cultural lens. The feasibility of adhering to cultural
aspects is questionable as the subject matter encompasses countless other dimensions of life.
However, these essays provide a starting point for scholars to elaborate on the foundational
building blocks laid by Appadurai.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid, 4.

iv Ibid, 5.

v Ibid, 55.