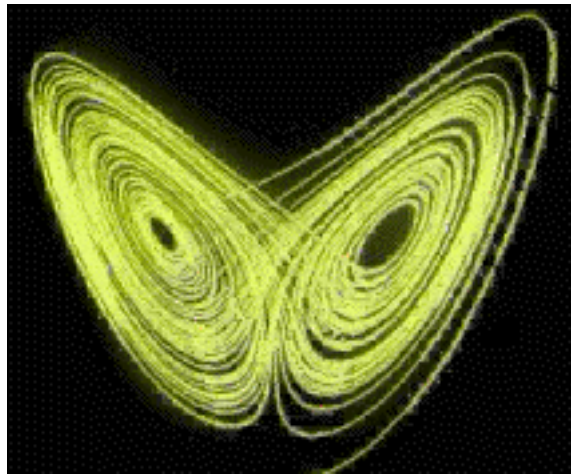


Review

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Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization by Arjun Appadurai.
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xi+229. \$18.95 pb; \$47.95 hb.

But the worl' get small, small, ol' man.
-- George Lamming



The widespread economic, political, and cultural changes that have taken place over the past several decades have made it absolutely essential to make sense of the processes known collectively as "globalization." And there has been, of course, a boom industry in popular and academic publications that propose to do just this. In one sense the world has been slowly being globalized since the moment of Columbus's arrival in the New World. What characterizes the present interest in globalization is undoubtedly the intensification of this process due to the advent of mass-media technologies, which have both collapsed the globe spatially and have penetrated every inch of the earth with images about the glories of consumption. The role of media in transforming the world must then figure prominently in any account of globalization. In Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, the University of Chicago social theorist positions the media at the center of his discussion of the global present; his views on the media alternatively mark both the strengths and weaknesses of the various essays included in this volume.

For those whose profession it is to examine cultural products or even whole cultures (from literary critics to anthropologists), globalization means that new approaches must be taken and new discourses devised to explain the present. Everything is suddenly up for grabs, open to doubt, in need of revision. It is no longer possible to imagine the world as a collection of autonomous, monadic spaces, whether these spaces are imagined as nations, regions within nations, or cultures demarcated by region or nation. Yet it is just this sense of space, and in particular, the intimate relationship of culture to definite, determinate spaces, that continues to be presumed in the disciplinary tasks of most of the humanities and social sciences: literary studies are still divided into national specialties; area studies continue to dominate the social sciences. To think of a world that has been globalized requires a thinking of culture without space--a difficult, complex task, that upends all sorts of paradigmatic procedures and established academic practices.

This said, it is important to remember that globalization is an unequal process, and that some of the celebrated hybrid forms it produces appear as disturbing signs of a continued, even deepened neo-imperialist relationship between the cultures and countries of the "West and the rest." For example, Benjamin R. Barber's list of the top grossing movies of 1991 in twenty-two countries around the world indicates both the dominance of American cultural products overseas, and perhaps also the growing homogeneity of world culture: from Brazil to Poland to Malaysia, films such as *Terminator 2*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Robin Hood* and *Home Alone* held down the top spots, while locally produced cinema or films produced in countries outside of the United States appeared infrequently, if at all.¹ The effects and true dimensions of such "cultural imperialism" is nevertheless a good deal more ambiguous and difficult to assess than some people might believe, e.g., those who find the sight of a McDonald's in Red or Tiannamen Square to be unequivocally a sign of the apocalypse. While in a certain sense it is possible to see the world as being inexorably and unfortunately "Americanized," the responses and reactions to American cultural products in other parts of the world is hardly a passive acceptance of the imperialist relations "hidden" at their core, as was suggested by such early works as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How To Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. And of course it is now difficult to see America itself as possessing a confident, self-assured cultural system that is able to unambiguously and unproblematically force its particular form of life upon the rest of the world. The constitution of the term "American" has itself been more and more directly contested by a broad range of social and cultural constituencies, and not least by newer diasporic groups who are actively attempting to refashion what is perhaps the last remaining imperial center into a kinder, gentler space that is no longer the center of anything.

One of the dangers in attempting to offer a more nuanced account of global relations--one, in other words, which doesn't view globalization as simply another name for cultural imperialism in its most crass and basic sense--is that it is possible to be too enthusiastic about the capacity of other cultures to modify and resist so-called Americanization. It is important not to make global cultural imperialism (one of a number of related imperialisms, e.g., economic, political, technological, etc., that seem to be less discussed these days) into a total system whose rationality critics can perhaps describe, but within which all resistance is either compromised from the outset or is impossible altogether.

But it is possible to err on the other side as well, seeing resistance in so many locations that it becomes hard to understand why Hollywood isn't bankrupt, why television broadcasts don't only consist of sensitive and compelling human stories--why, in other words, the world isn't already fundamentally different.

Appadurai sets out to do many things in the essays collected in *Modernity at Large*. The book as a whole shifts its identity with each passing page. It is--as all books which attempt to diagnose the global present seemingly must be--prophetic, imagining scenarios for the future, predicting, for example, the fate of the nation; it is a sophisticated attempt to recast the terms and conditions of contemporary ethnography; and it is a text that stresses the extent to which the present is marked by a deterritorialization that requires an extensive reshaping of those contemporary critical discourses that remain tied to the persistence of specific cultural spaces. It is also a book that is perhaps overconfident about the possibilities that the globalization of modernity opens up. Appadurai's book faces the millennium looking fearlessly forward. He does not believe that the world will become culturally homogenized, even if, as he explains in one of the essays, consumption has become a new kind of labor that we must all endure (66-85). The nation-state, he suggests, is on its last legs, no longer able to contain or comprehend the profusion of "diasporic public spheres" that threaten its grip on the project of modernization. In its wake, new kinds of yet unimagined social groups are waiting to emerge. And agency abounds. Improvisation is no longer the figure to the ground of *habitus*; it is the stability implied by the term *habitus* that is being everywhere devoured by a modernity that is now "at large."

Modernity at Large is best seen as a book which extends and fleshes out positions that Appadurai first introduces in the essay, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy."² This essay appears, unchanged, as the second chapter of the book. There are two key ideas introduced in this essay that constitute the theoretical basis of most of the rest of the volume. The first is Appadurai's suggestion that there is a new role for the imagination in the present. "The imagination," he writes, "is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (31). The second is to be found in the neologism that Appadurai invents here--a neologism for which he is perhaps best known. This is the use of the suffix "scape-," which when combined with appropriate prefixes--ethno-, media-, techno-, finance- and ideo---offers a framework for examining the "new global cultural economy a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (32). These various "scapes" suggest an alternative spatial rendering of the present, one that is not "fixed" as a typical landscape might be, but which are of various, disjunctive sizes, amorphous, and flowing. They are the "building blocks," Appadurai suggests, of contemporary imagined worlds. If the imagination is associated with the individual and with agency, "the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer" (33).

The imagination is a site that gloomier social theorists have envisioned as being almost completely colonized by commodity capitalism and the fantasy images of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. It seems an unpromising place to locate a meaningful sense of "agency," a term over which the specter of "free will" inevitably lingers. Appadurai's understanding of the imagination, which is given relatively little attention in "Disjuncture and Difference," is discussed in more detail in the first and third chapters, "Here and Now" and "Global Ethnoscapes." What is constitutive of the "rupture" that is implied by the term modernity is, for Appadurai, the joint work of "media" and "migration" on the imagination. The global movement of media technologies into every aspect of individual lives and the unprecedented mass migration of peoples across the world together define "the core of the link between globalization and the modern" (4). Media and migration both separately and together produce an enormous degree of instability in the creation of selves and identities. Appadurai views this as a productive, positive instability. The almost universal access to media images by individuals at all social levels makes resources available for the creation of new identities, the dreaming of dreams that were previously unavailable to ordinary people. Media has democratized the imagination, made it into a daily activity rather than one restricted to artistic elites. When combined with the fact of the contemporary mass migration of peoples, it is possible to see the introduction of a mode of "improvisation" into the lives of both groups and individuals. The conjunction of media and migration means that what is imagined is no longer the "imagined community" of the nation-state, but numerous "diasporic public spheres." Appadurai writes that "[a]s Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers" (4).

This conjunction between media and migration is essential for an understanding of the need for a vocabulary of "scapes," or as he puts it elsewhere in the book, "flows" or "cascades"--a discourse drawn from fractal geometry and chaos theory. "The phenomenon of diasporic public spheres," Appadurai writes, "confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes" (4). If modernity is "at large," it is because it now exceeds the boundaries and determinations of the nation. To make sense of contemporary global phenomenon requires, then, an examination of something other than the limited space of the nation, and social theories must rework themselves in light of this new deterritorialized world. A retreat to the "local"--one possible site of retreat from the nation--is not without its own difficulties, as Appadurai points out in "The Production of Locality." Ethnographers, for whom the local is an essential artifact of investigation, should focus instead on "translocalities" (192), or, in a related mode, they should attempt to "capture the impact of deterritorialization of the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences" (52). In addition to rethinking the "site" on which inquiries of globalism must take place, what is also placed into question are all straightforward, cause and effect accounts of political and social phenomenon. It is not that Appadurai suggests that cause and effect relationships are suspended. To view political events as the result of the unequal movement of a whole series of global flows, however, makes any such account infinitely

more complicated. As in the chief explanatory metaphor of chaos theory--the flapping of a butterfly's wings in China creating the conditions for macro-weather patterns in North America--major political eruptions may be seen in a deterritorialized world as the outcome of what might have been thought to be relatively minor events half a world away.

In the chapter "Life after Primordialism," Appadurai shows the potential explanatory power of such a discourse of deterritorialization. One of the recent issues on which both journalistic insight and academic expertise has foundered is in providing an explanation of the virulent ethnic violence that has broken out in places such as Bosnia and Rwanda. Most theories of ethnic violence rely on a primordialist argument in one form or another. This argument rests on two, interrelated assumptions about what drives the behavior of large groups. First, it is assumed that collective identity is simply a magnification of the deep sentiments that connect families and kinship groups; second, that like individuals, large groups have an "unconscious" that is the repository for every slight and injury experienced over millennia. Chance events and contingencies enflame these repressed hatreds, while the intimate bond between all those who share this group unconscious ensures that the conflagration will be both irrational and sizable.

As Appadurai points out, there are numerous problems with the primordialist argument as an explanation of recent ethnic strife. Beyond the modernizing, developmental assumptions on which such an argument was based--a model in which "mature," modern nations are those that are connected on a rational basis, and whose unconscious is better held in check--this fails to explain why ethnic violence occurs when and where it does. As long as such unrest is confined to supposedly more "primitive" nations in Asia and especially Africa, this failure does not reveal itself as such; since the countries of Europe are all assumed in the terms of primordialist theses to be "adult" nations, it is then the case that Bosnia has created a real embarrassment for Western social scientists, journalists and politicians. As much contemporary writing on nationhood has suggested, the modern nation is an "imagined" one. In this way, too, Appadurai suggests that ironically "the creation of primordial sentiments, far from being an obstacle to the modernizing state, is close to the center of the project of the modern nation-state" (146).

In attempting to fashion an explanation for ethnic violence, "the challenge," Appadurai writes, "is to capture the frenzy of ethnic violence without reducing it to the banal and universal core of inner, primordial sentiments" (149). Appadurai's account of ethnic violence, which he describes as "implosive," rather than "explosive," is linked to his understanding of contemporary politics as globalized and transnational. Utilizing the theories of James Rosenau and S.J. Tambiah, he locates the drive behind ethnic violence in the complex and confusing feedback loop between global and local. Rosenau's notion of turbulent "cascades" created at the multiple interaction of multiple levels of a statecentric and multicentric system, when combined with the parallel processes of "focalization" and "transvaluation" described by Tambiah, in which specific events are stripped of their context and assembled into aggregates, provide a beginning point for an understanding of how a once friendly neighbor can turn into an enemy seemingly

overnight. On the one hand, "focalization and transvaluation take their energy from macroevents and processes (cascades) that link global politics to the micropolitics of streets and neighborhoods"; on the other, these cascades "provide material for the imagination of actors at various levels for reading general meanings into local and contingent events, just as they provide the alibi for inscribing long-standing scripts about ethnic manipulation and conspiracies onto apparently trivial street events" (153).

Appadurai's description of the complex interaction between global and local is complicated by other considerations, such as the role of the nation-state in legitimating one identity as primary. The processes that produce ethnic "implosions"--"the folding into local politics of pressures and ripples from increasingly wider political arenas" (156)--are also made clearer when they are presented through concrete examples; in the essay, Appadurai briefly discusses the violence in Karachi over the past decade. As interesting and helpful as this explanation of ethnic violence might be, and while Appadurai provides a potentially useful model that does not just account for the pressures of the global on the local, but positions such pressures at the center of explanations of processes occurring at both levels, the loose, inexact language of flows can nevertheless seem either too complex and inexact to utilize practically or resolves itself into explanations that can be arrived at in "simpler" ways. Whether Appadurai's description of the politics of Karachi needs the apparatus of chaos theory--which does usefully introduce notions of caused "surprises" (in the guise of apparent chance events) into political analyses--or whether he is simply suggesting that attention must be paid in any analysis to "a great many other externalities," is one of the lingering questions that the book leaves behind. This is reinforced by the fact that the conclusion to a nuanced and complicated discussion of primordialism is that it is finally "treachery"--the sense that your neighbors have betrayed their identity or your faith in their identity--that is behind the extreme examples of ethnic violence in the world today. And while it is true that Appadurai's account of "treachery" does not tap into the primordialist notion of an existing "substratum of ethnic sentiment," the treachery hypothesis seems a limited, or even under theorized one after such an extensive build-up.

The question of how or why one might apply Appadurai's vocabulary of flows and scapes to the analysis of political, social and cultural phenomenon, and the related question of whether the complexity that he demands is not already located in other discourses that explore the relationship of global to local to global, is less of a concern, however, than his view of the imagination. It is easy, I think, to be horrified by Appadurai's suggestion that the weaving together of one's life through a mixture of action films, the lives of stars, documentaries, t.v. comedies, and so on, produces "agency." I don't think that this horror is simply the product of ingesting too much Frankfurt School or theories of media imperialism. Of course, Appadurai is careful to suggest that his use of imagination is not to be simplistically linked to the use of media as simply "fantasy" or "escape." But beyond all his caveats, and especially in light of his discussion of the work involved in consumption, nowhere does he suggest where the line between fantasy and the potentially productive aspects of the imagination occur, or how individuals are able to maintain these boundaries and so be "agents" as opposed to dreamers of the collective fantasy of late capitalism. Appadurai has a deep faith in his notion of the imagination. It

is important to emphasize that he is not merely adopting a rhetorical position in order to make the argument that there is *some* room for the imagination amidst apocalyptic theories that would see resistance as futile. While he speaks of the way in which Hong Kong and Hollywood martial arts films help to generate cultures of masculinity and violence that in turn help to foster packs of gun-toting youths in Los Angeles and in Lima, there is also the remarkable suggestion that globalization has dissolved cultures--and so also processes of cultural reproduction--to such a degree that there is no longer any remnant of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed *habitus*--that "structuring structure" at the intersection of agency and determination. There is instead "more an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences" (44). Globalization has set all of us free by making the average t.v. viewer able to process its deadened images with the irony, intelligence and savvy of an experienced cultural theorist.

It is on this notion of "conscious choice," a notion whose Sartrean bones were given flesh by *habitus*, that many of the themes of the book falter. If modernity is "at large," no longer at the beck and call of the nation-state, what distinguishes the imaginings in which one is at the center of the action in a John Woo film and those imaginings that are involved in the processes of ethnic or national identity? In the diasporic public spheres described in Appadurai's book, why is it that Turkish guest workers continue to watch Turkish films, and that Pakistani cabdrivers, in their solitary journeys through the modernist monuments of Chicago's city center, listen to prayers recorded in another time, another world?

Notes

1 "Appendix 2" in *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*. New York: Ballantine, 1996: 307-309.

2 First published in *Public Culture* 2.2 (Spring 1990).