

CIRCULATION ≈ FORMS

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Arjun Appadurai is interested in the ways in which locality is produced in a globalizing world characterized by high degrees of connectivity and circulation. He argues that it is important to consider both the circulation of forms and the forms of circulation, and to evolve a theory that relates the two.

Cultural objects, including images, languages, values and hairstyles, now move ever more swiftly across national and regional boundaries. This acceleration is a consequence of the speed and spread of the Internet, and the concomitant growth in travel, cross-cultural media and global advertising. The power of global corporations to outsource various aspects of their activities, ranging from manufacture and distribution to advertising and finance, has meant that the force of global capital is now multiplied by the opportunistic combination of cultural idioms, symbols, labor pools and attitudes to profit and risk. This volatile and exploding traffic in commodities, styles and information has been matched by the growth of global forms of cultural politics, visible most powerfully in the discourse of human rights but also in the new languages of radical Christianity and Islam, and in the discourses of civil society activists who wish to promote their own versions of global equity, entitlement and citizenship.

The dynamics of commoditization remain an essential feature of global cultural flows. Global corporations now compete for markets in areas such as bio-technology, digital media, drinking water, energy credits, financial derivatives, and other commodity markets which barely existed before 1970. At the same time, illegal or unofficial markets have emerged everywhere, linking societies and states in different parts of the world. These latter markets, which involve traffic in human organs, armaments, precious metals and child sex workers, to name only four examples, make extensive use of the powers of the Internet, of satellite-driven cell phones and other sophisticated communications technology. They also take full advantage of the differential policing of national frontiers, of the destruction of many rural economies and the corruption of state elites in many parts of the world. Such illegal commodity circuits, for example in Africa, also link apparently desolate economies to major ports and commercial hubs, such as Rotterdam, through the global movement of everyday commodities such as refrigerators, air-conditioners, cars and other consumer durables. The diamond market, which has long consisted of sophisticated networks linking diamond mines in poor countries to cutting and marketing middlemen in India and major dealers and showrooms in London, Antwerp and New York, is now also deeply connected to instances of extreme social violence in such places as Sierra Leone, Congo and Angola.

It is important to appreciate that these varied commodity circuits are themselves mutually connected. Thus, the capacity of global financial players to move large sums electronically across national boundaries and to create and exploit new financial markets across the world, has also produced new inequalities in some of the world's mega cities (such

as Mumbai, Hong Kong and Sao Paulo). These inequalities fuel the growth of large urban under classes which are potential fodder for the work of global crime syndicates engaged both in traditional forms of smuggling and cross-border trade, and in the politics of urban terror. One example of this sort of politicized criminal activity is provided by the criminal networks which grew out of Mumbai and are now located in Karachi, Dubai, Katmandu, Bangkok and beyond, thus creating a new geography linking the Persian Gulf to different parts of South and South-East Asia. These criminal networks are directly involved in the politics of violence which exists in Kashmir and elsewhere in South Asia. It is to this family of commodity links that we also owe the financial infrastructure of networks such as Al-Qaeda, which was originally built through the globalized construction enterprises of the Bin Laden family.

The more general theoretical conclusion that can be drawn by inspecting these multiple commodity networks and chains is that the newer forms of circulation, exemplified by global financial markets, instruments and regulations, also affect the overall capitalization of older commodity chains, both legal and illegal, such as those involved in the flows of labor, drugs, arms and precious metals. What globalization does is to create a more volatile and blurred relationship between finance capital and other forms of capital and a more dangerous relationship between global commodity flows and the politics of everyday security and peace in many societies. The other major factor which affects all global commodity chains, ranging from the simplest to the most sophisticated, is the explosive growth in sophisticated tools for storing, sharing and tracking information electronically, both by the state and by its opponents.



Solar powered internet café

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Furthermore, the complexity of global cultural flows has had deep effects on the production of locality and the production of local subjectivity. These flows and networks now precipitate themselves in far more than the rapid spread and adoption of cultural elements from outside, previously somewhat separate, cultural worlds. They confound older models of acculturation, culture contact, and mixture, since they also provide new materials for the construction of subjectivity. The traffic in images of global suffering, for example, creates new communities of affect, which introduce empathy, identification and anger across large cultural distances. For example, the veil in Europe, an item of clothing which is itself highly varied in different parts of the Islamic world, has become a flashpoint for education, fashion, and state

authorities in countries such as France, which, in the past, were quite comfortable with sumptuary markers of religious identity.

A powerful example of a global discursive flow is the spread of the discourse of human rights into the center of the vocabulary of politics since the birth of the United Nations. In the half century since that time, virtually every known society has generated individuals and groups who have a new consciousness of their political status within the framework of human rights. Minorities of every kind, including women, children, immigrants, refugees, political prisoners and other “weak” citizens now have the capacity to exercise pressure on the state to respect their human rights and this pressure is often mobilized in the name of universal human rights. This process is of special interest in the history of anthropology since it brings the social fact of cultural difference squarely into the realm of politics, and links cultural diversity to the most essential and universal “rights of man”. This can be seen, for example, in many crucial documents produced by UNESCO on behalf of its member-states.

This process is not altogether benign since, in many cases, the capacity of “small numbers” to press large political claims in the name of cultural difference can produce ethnonational mobilization and some part of the conditions for genocide. Europe has seen a variety of these reactions since the violence of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990’s, including the rise of an openly anti-immigrant right in France, Austria, Sweden and many other countries in Europe. The global flow of human rights is also a sign of the complex new forms of law and legality that now determine the volatile relationships between order and disorder in many societies undergoing rapid transformation.

In short, global cultural flows have lost the selective and cumbersome qualities that they have had for much of human history, in which most societies found ways to accommodate external systems of meaning within their own cosmological frameworks, producing change by dialectic accident and structural accommodation. Today, global cultural flows, be they religious, political or market-centered, have entered into the very manufacture of local subjectivities, thus changing both the machineries for the manufacture of local meaning and the materials that are processed by these machineries. Thus, ideas about refugee rights are debated in the United States by citizens, lawmakers and old immigrants, in terms of ideas about multiculturalism, dual patriotism, diasporic dignity and cultural rights that are as new as the debates they seek to mediate.

Likewise, this period is characterized by the flow not just of cultural substances but also of cultural forms, such as the novel, the ballet, the political constitution, and divorce. The flow of these forms has affected such major world historical processes as nationalism, but today it also affects the very nature of knowledge, as whole disciplines, techniques and ways of thinking, move and become transformed in the process. Examples of the global flows of such knowledge forms include the spread of Internet gaming in China, the growth in day-trading of stocks in emerging economies, the writing of constitutions in post-monarchic societies such as Nepal, and the popularity throughout the world of visual forms such as manga. What is important here is the relationship of the forms of circulation to the circulation of forms. So, such forms as novels, films, and the newspaper, may flow along well-established circulatory paths produced by prior circuits of reli-



“Online Manga.” A photo donated by Partyzan XXI in Toronto, Canada, to Wikimedia under the under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

gion, migration and trade. But other cultural forms, such as ballet, animation, fashion photography, and grassroots political activism, create new forms and circuits or circulation, which did not exist before. Thus the twenty-first century is witnessing new tensions between the cultural forms, which actually circulate, and the emerging – partly culturally formed – circuits or networks which shape and govern the multiple paths of circulation.

This dual structure of global cultural flows also creates what we may call the “bumps” or obstacles with regard to many global cultural flows. The Chinese state is bent on curbing the Internet on the grounds of its own right to regulate information and enforce social morality, just as Falun Gong uses global techniques of protest and communication to undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese state. Opponents of slum demolition use the full force of their global allies and circuits to impede the capacity of local and city governments to displace slum popula-

tions. Proponents of women’s rights are in a daily race against those who use global cultural circuits to argue and legitimize their own views in the name of the value of cultural difference.

Thus today’s global cultural flows have a curious inner contradiction since they also create some of the obstacles to their own complete freedom of movement and thus they self-regulate the ease with which they cross cultural boundaries. So, in the long historical view, knowing that there has always been flow, exchange and mixture, across cultural boundaries in human history, the most interesting new development regarding cultural flows in the era of globalization is that the same dynamics produce both various cultural flows and those blockages, bumps and potholes that impede their free movement. This fact ought to be a source of comfort for those who are not anxious to see global flows resulting in a single and homogeneous cultural regime that covers the surface of the planet [...].

We live in a world of unprecedented connectivity, in which media and migration – the two forces whose twin effects I stressed in my 1996 book, *Modernity at Large* – are key elements and engines. But our recourse to metaphors of linkage, connectivity and network, the last being the most formal and analytic, do not really catch the hardest part of the problem, which is that we are also living in a world of unprecedented levels and varieties of circulation. One can look at various periods as having been marked by complex forms of connectivity without high levels of circulation, either of people or of technologies. An example is the world of medieval Christendom or of the movement of Buddhism from India through much of Asia. One can also imagine possible worlds in which circulation is high and connectivity is low. An example is the recent round of crises in various

Asian economies, driven by the global movement of speculative capital which created little new connectivity between certain national economies in spite of rapid circulation of capital through their financial markets, through such instruments as derivatives.

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In this perspective, we could characterize the current moment of globalization – or in the history of globalization – as new in the sense that it combines high connectivity with new levels, forms and types of circulation, observable in the movement of bodies and commodities, as well as of ideas, styles and images. It is this dual intensification which may cast the greatest light on the problem of comparison in the era of globalization. This is the problem which I wish to explore here by looking at what I call the circulation of forms.

THE CIRCULATION OF FORMS

By forms I mean to indicate a family of phenomena including styles, techniques, genres, vocabularies, and other widely recognized “containers”, which can be filled or inhabited by specific voices, contents, messages and materials. We all know that “form” is not easy to separate from “content” and I have no intention of tackling this grand philosophical conundrum here. In using the word form, I simply wish to place the issue of global circulation at a slightly more abstract level than it sometimes is in discussions of people, commodities and ideas.

Two of the most recent items to be discussed in this way, both separately and in relation to each oth-

er, are the nation-form and the novel form. Benedict Anderson redefined the entire question of nationalism by linking it to the issue of print capitalism, thus spawning a rich set of debates about nation and narration, reading and citizenship, imagined and effective communities. On the side of the novel, there has been a long tradition of inquiry about how this form has circulated and how it has been transformed in the process, along with other literary forms and genres. The circulation of the nation-form has been the subject of less intense discussion, but Anderson, Bhabha, Balibar and a few others have shown that it too is a form which moves and inhabits local sites in complex ways, partly through the production of new reading publics and new forms of writing and publication. The work of Habermas and Anderson, as critically synthesized by Ben Lee and others, suggests new ways of thinking about publics and publicity as tied up with the circulation of such ideas as the “people”. The great American constitutional formula of “We the People” is not only a performative, as Bonnie Honig and others have shown, but it is also a circulating performative that produces different local imaginaries about collective identity and democratic projects.

The examples of nation and narration are a useful reminder that different forms circulate through different trajectories, generate diverse interpretations and cover different and uneven geographies. So there are novels without nations and nations without novels. Put more abstractly, globalization is never a total project, which never captures all geographies with equal force. Indeed the circulation of forms produces new and distinct geographies, within which forms co-exist in uneven and uneasy combinations.

The lesson here is that we need to move decisively beyond existing models of creolization, hybridity, fusion, syncretism, and the like, which have largely been about mixture at the level of content. We need to ask about the co-habitation of forms, such as the novel and the nation, which in the peculiarity of the ways in which they inflect each other are actually the producers of the local.

So here is a first step in the conundrum of the local and the global. The local is not just the accidental site of the fusion or con-fusion of circulating global elements. It is in fact the site of the mutual transformation of circulating forms, such as the nation and the novel. And such transformation always occurs through what I called in my earlier work the “work of the imagination” which results in the production of locality. In my 1996 book I stressed that the local was not an inert canvas on which the global was written; but the local was itself a product of incessant effort, part of which involves the creative appropriation of the global. I want to add that this labor, and this appropriation is first of all a matter of forms, styles, idioms and techniques rather than of substantive stories, theories, bodies or goods. Thus the nation form is a more vital circulating ingredient than any specific ideology of nationalism; the novel form more important than any particular author, story or message; the idea of “the people” is more generative than specific interpretations of its actual national instances; the technique of research is more critical than the question of the actual disciplines that may become dominant in one or other place; the idea of “design” is more subversive than any particular style or school. The concept of the market, as an abstract device for valuation and exchange, is far more crucial than the actual forms that market insti-

tutions may take; the idea of a “national economy” is deeper than any particular idea about protection or free trade; the form of the documentary is more generative than the particular subjects that it may inspire in any local context. The principle of “rule by law” is more important than the substantive idea of the separation of powers. And the idea of representation matters more than the particular forms that elections, parties and public politics may take.

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Indeed the local is eventually not a piece of real estate or even a sensibility. It is what emerges when a variety of circulating forms affect each other to form some sort of temporary and interactive project which is the result of conscious efforts to “produce locality” now seen as a deliberate sedimentation of a menu of circulating global forms, not all of which are freely chosen by actors in particular sites.

Thus the circulation of forms draws our attention to the ways in which globally circulating forms – through the work of the imagination – produce localities not by the hybridization of contents – of art, ideology or technology – but by the negotiation and mutual tension between each other. It is this negotiation which creates the complex containers which further the actual contents of local practice. This view of the production of locality needs a few examples to flesh it out.

Take the major formula that still dominates the Hindi language commercial cinema of Bombay, which involves an extraordinary emphasis on the relationships between song, dance and story. Here



Compagnie Le Corps Indice 1
Photo: Le Corps Indice
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what is involved is a special and deliberate effort to produce an Indian viewer whose pleasures are identified with these formal properties, apart from any specific stars, themes or settings.

Or take the ways in which MacDonald's has found a particular set of market niches in different countries in East Asia (a process beautifully documented by James Watson and his colleagues in a book called *Golden Arches East*).

Or consider the ways in which the lower ends of the computer-literate labor force in a society like India have grasped the relationship between literacy, record-keeping and the service industry, creating a whole set of practices around the transcription of medical notes for doctors in L.A. and New York.

Or consider the ways in which human rights discourse as well as environmental discourse is being annexed by indigenous people's movements.

Or consider the discussions that are now emerging worldwide about "critical regionalism" in archi-

tecture in connection with the emergence of new vernaculars. These discussions at the level of the disciplines are efforts to channel the flow of specific architectural fashions, opportunities and debates into a higher order discussion about the discipline of architecture itself, as it finds itself in different discourses surrounding other forms such as housing, planning and conservation, for instance, which are themselves circulating forms and labels susceptible to new appropriations.

These thoughts suffice, I hope, to open the possibility that the circulation of forms – nations, novels, derivatives, documentaries, markets, rights – is the process through which locality is produced as a negotiated structure of these interactive forms, within which various products, contents, messages and structures take material form. In short, locality is the product of the contingent shaping of globally circulating forms into nodes for the lower order process through which actual content is produced, perhaps through the dynamics of hybridity, syncretism and the like.

But this view of the circulation of forms is not sufficient to take us back to the question of comparison and connectivity with which we began. Making that argument, requires us to consider the forms of circulation, the obverse of the circulation of forms.

THE FORMS OF CIRCULATION

Circulation itself has some formal properties. These properties have something to do with the circuits through which circulation occurs, the speed with which it occurs and the scale on which its effects are felt.

Not everything moves through the same circuits: humans move in boats, ships, trains and cars; pictures,

words and ideas through a variety of circuits, which now include cyber-paths of various kinds; technologies move through complex mixtures of old and new technologies, as we can clearly see in the containerized, depopulated working of the most modern ports, such as Rotterdam. Blood circulates through certain circuits, money through others, arms, drugs and diseases through yet others. The panic about the SARS virus shows us how intimately these various circuits are imbricated with one another.

Speed is another property that shapes the circulation of different forms. It is an element of the forms of circulation. The invasion of Iraq is a study in the uneven speed of a host of messages, materials, manpower, mediated images and weaponry.

Spatial scope is another key formal feature of circulatory processes. Linguistically mediated forms tend to have certain geographies and produce effects over certain terrains. Visually and electronically mediated forms can have a much larger reach in the era of the cell-phone, the Internet and the digitalized image.

In my own earlier work, I suggested a scheme of scapes to try to capture the fractal dynamics of the globalizing world: ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ethnoscapes, financescapes. I would now argue that we need to see these scapes as momentary sedimentations of various circuits of circulation. By suggesting that finance, ideology, media, technology and ethnicity are not just things which move, I had wanted to open up the possibility that they are also shaped by expectations, aspirations, horizons and the like, which, being contingent, will always yield new inflections and diacritics. I furthermore tried to suggest in my earlier work that the relationship between material forces and ideas could



Female Afghan police officers qualification 2010

Photo: U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Sarah Brown; U.S. federal government, public domain.

be more deeply explored if we moved beyond fixed models of locally separable configurations of base and superstructure to a less deterministic sense of the relationship of how material flows are mediated by subjects and projects.

Today, by bringing up the forms of circulation, I want to propose that these various scapes, which also sediment the inevitable heterogeneity of globalization, are in fact forms of circulation, with different circuits, speeds and spatial reach. Thus circulation not only involves the movement of forms, but itself is characterized by formal properties, whose indeterminate, open-ended interactions, also greatly affect the conditions under which locality is produced.

I offer a few examples to make this argument more vivid. Consider the training of M.B.A.'s in different parts of the world. Or consider the movement of AK-47's. Or consider the movement of the AIDS virus. In each case, the unevenness of the formal properties of circulation creates unexpected conjunctures which we characterize, in some sense, as local.

Here then are some provisional conclusions. In order to look at how locality is produced in a globalizing world, we need to consider both the circulation of forms, which I have stressed, and the forms of circulation. In fact, what we need to move towards is a theory that relates the forms of circulation to the circulation of forms. Why should we care? Because it may tell us something, in the end, about why universities move less swiftly than AK-47's and why "democracy" is a more esteemed element of the American presence in the world than McDonalds.

And where does comparison come into all this? I began by suggesting that we cannot any more separate the problem of connectivity from the problem of circulation. We have some pretty good understandings about the logics of connectivity. We are less advanced in our understanding of the logics of circulation, and so I have tried to push forward some suggestions in regard to circulation.

To really take on the challenges of comparison in a context characterized both by high degrees of connectivity and of circulation, we need to understand more about the ways in which the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms create the conditions for the production of locality, as a site, a context and a container for the negotiation between forms. Only then can we come up with a robust theory of mixtures, hybrids, and other fused practices, which recognizes that forms precede and enable products. Localities, in this view, are temporary negotiations between circulating forms, and are thus not scalar subordinates of the global, but the main evidence of its reality.

This is an excerpt of a keynote lecture delivered on September 28, 2007, at a Conference on "Loose Canons", New York University, Department of Media, Culture and Communication.