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The anthropology of global flows

A critical reading of Appadurai’s ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’

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Abstract
Arjun Appadurai’s essay ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’ popularized the idea of ‘global flows’. He argues that these flows are ‘disjunctive’ and ‘chaotic’ in character and that they supersede standard geographical thinking in social-cultural analysis. Appadurai’s emphasis on disjuncture prioritizes ephemeral and shifting flows, thereby underestimating the relative power of capital and the interactions between different kinds of flows. Likewise, Appadurai’s view of geography assumes that static units are the opposite of flows, whereas a processual geography understands how flows can create, reproduce, and transform geographic spaces. This alternative helps us understand global inequalities and boundaries better than Appadurai’s does, and enables us to broach the topic of differentiated rights and treatments of mobile populations. The goal of a critical reading of this essay is not destructive; rather, we seek to construct a more powerful social-cultural anthropology of dynamic flows and mobilities.

Key Words
Arjun Appadurai • borders • flows • geography and anthropology • globalization • mobilities • transnationalism • world system

INTRODUCTION
Anthropologists are increasingly interested in the escalating pace and intensity of social change. To meet these challenges, anthropologists have developed categories such as ‘flows’, ‘mobility’, and ‘movement’ (Cunningham and Heyman, 2004). In this way, social analysts have drawn attention to movement in a number of domains, including people, commodities, and ideas, that had previously been handled in separated and more particularistic fashions. A good example of these new insights has been developed by students of migration whereby they use ideas of mobility to draw attention to how the...
flux of people forms part of a wider geography of flows of commodities and concepts. The interest in flows has contributed to anthropology’s quest to dismantle concepts and theories that presume unitary cultures in fixed places, a development that has been important to both Marxian political economists (e.g. Nash, 1981; Wolf, 1982) and post-modernists (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, Hannerz, 1996; Marcus, 1995).

In this vein, Arjun Appadurai’s essay ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’ (1996: 27–47, originally published in 1990) popularized the idea of ‘global flows’ with his locution ‘scapes’ – ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes and financescapes. Appadurai emphasizes the chaotic nature of these flows and argues that they supersede standard geographical thinking in social-cultural analysis. There are, in our view, a number of flaws in this conceptualization, and it advances the study of mobility to suggest other approaches that renew attention to geographic processes and forms while transcending the flaws of static anthropology. His view of geography assumes that static units are the opposite of flows, whereas a processual geography understands how flows can create, reproduce, and transform geographic spaces. Our approach, influenced by the theorizing of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz on power, history, and process, emphasizes the making and remaking of locations and social formations. We accept Appadurai’s emphasis on the multiplicity of flows but suggest that in the relative ranking of cause and effect, there is greater weight to flows of capital, especially financial capital, and to a lesser extent the landscapes of centralized political power, rather than seeing complete disjuncture and implicitly causal equality among all the different flows. This alternative helps us to understand global inequalities and the continuing importance of boundaries better than Appadurai’s approach does, and enables us to broach the topic of differentiated rights and treatments of mobile goods and populations.

APPADURAI ON DISJUNCTURE AND DIFFERENCE

In ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Political Economy’, Appadurai briefly sketches world cultural history. Rather than being entirely new, he grudgingly acknowledges the wide ranging ‘flows’ of people over the past 500 years. Prior to the contemporary era, colonists, merchants, warriors, religious proselytizers and traders have interacted on a global scale (p. 27). Appadurai points out that interactions in the past were slowed by limited technologies of transportation and communication (pp. 27–8). The tempo of connection increased with western and non-western expansionism, the peak of European colonialism, and the development of technologies such as the printing press. Despite recognizing continuities in history, he insists that the present is radically different from the past, with the present being placeless and having flows (p. 29), and the past being placed and localistic (p. 28). This is heightened by the contemporary high speed of transportation and rapid flow of information (p. 29).

The context of change and placelessness provides the ground for his principal concern, the imagination and the ‘politics of global cultural flows’. Appadurai echoes the post-modernist claim that contemporary cultural politics is based on unmoored signs, shifting meanings, and complex cultural pastiches. However, he focuses on ‘larger global forces’ that are involved in the ‘complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes’ with multiple nodes (that is, the United States is only one among them, rather than being the center of the world system). The unleashing of the imagination as a global
social practice is, he proposes, something new and critical, which he sees as standing apart from a list of previous uses of the imagination (solace, escape, elite pastime) (pp. 30–1).

Appadurai’s framework revolves around the analytical trope of disjuncture (p. 32). He constantly warns us that the ‘new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order’. Disjuncture and related words appear repeatedly in the essay, on pp. 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43, 44, 46, and 47. There are also related terms, such as chaos, fractal, fractured, non-isomorphic, etc. He believes that focusing on disjuncture provides a powerful criticism of Marxist models that give ordered causal priority to capital accumulation and class relations because they are ‘inadequately quirky’ (p. 33). In particular, this ‘complex, overlapping, disjunctive order’ can no longer ‘be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)’ (p. 32).

Appadurai’s meta theory of disjuncture centers on what he schematically characterizes as ‘five dimensions of global cultural flows’ (the previously mentioned ‘scapes’). He assures us that they interrelate but are not causally ordered (being disjunctive). Here, it is worth noting a confusion in the scapes terminology. Scapes, by analogy to landscapes, are the results of processes, given material shape and meaning by human action. Scapes are distributions at any given time, results of processes, but are not the processes themselves. The processes, we assume, are specifiable flows, mobilities, and relations. But this distinction is not always made clear, with the consequent problem that observation of the patterned distribution (people consuming a diaspora’s media products, say) is taken for specification of the flow or relation (the diaspora’s history and its culture industries), which may not in fact have been deeply investigated.

Appadurai’s exposition of scapes is filled with complex and rich analytical remarks, about which we can hardly do justice here. The key conceptual framework is a strong contrast between stability (implicitly, lack of action) and movement, with the latter but not the former seen as worthy of political and cultural analysis of action, relation, and change.

To underline his distance from Marxist models, Appadurai stresses that ‘the global relationship among ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and financescapes is deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable’ (p. 35) because each has its own logic and affects movement in the others. Appadurai seizes on disorganized models of global capitalism (e.g. Lash and Urry, 1987) that represent a significant perspective on the contemporary world economy but are by no means universally accepted (e.g. a more systemic approach to similar phenomena would be Harvey, 1989).

Appadurai extends his argument for disjuncture (in this case, the ‘nonisomorphism’ of the five flows [scapes]) through the concept of deterritorialization (pp. 37–8). Deterriorialization plays an important role in his thinking, since it is simultaneously a process in the actual world and a conceptual break. It is a break with the past (historical and analytical) vision of social groups having definite, consistent, bounded home spaces. Deterritorialization permits diaspora based ethnic politics to communicate and act across the globe, and it enables the diffusion of mediascapes and ideoscapes beyond their narrow origin places into global networks. And, importantly, deterritorialization makes the normal functioning of nation-states problematic and contingent, since their prime challengers are transnational ethnic movements (pp. 39–40).
For Appadurai the ‘central feature of global culture today’ is the endless interplay of sameness and difference, which includes both positive outcomes and (with more emphasis) the destructive struggles of homogenizing states and particularizing ethnic movements (p. 43). Although the essay claims a wider agenda, one suspects that at its heart is a concern with these politics.

Appadurai concludes his influential essay by repeating the idea of focusing on flows, especially across national boundaries, and his five scapes as different and disjunctive. He argues that the traditional anthropological notion of ‘cultural shape will have to alter, as configurations of people, places, and heritage lose all semblance of isomorphism’ (p. 46). Lack of order is the analytical theme: in such situations, the ‘configuration of cultural forms . . . [is] fundamentally fractal’ (p. 46). He suggests that chaos theory might be appropriate (though it is really just metaphorical in this instance) and rejects systems in favor of dynamics, as if they were opposites (pp. 46–7). Then, he raises as a potential Marxist counterargument that there is a ‘pre-given order to the relative determining force of these global flows’, but he rejects this on the basis of his term ‘pre-given’, favoring instead a case-by-case, context dependent ordering (p. 47). Of course, ‘pre-given’ shifts the argument, since even without a teleological bias in doing analysis we may still be allowed to make the case for certain patterns of causal priority based on assembling a number of instances, processes, and results, especially within particular historical periods, such as we face in the present (i.e. the causal power of financial markets). And finally he denies that his approach implies a ‘random or meaninglessly contingent’ approach to the ‘causal-historical relationship among these various flows’, but our work is too premature to recognize its patterns (p. 47).

Despite Appadurai’s insights, his infatuation with multiple and unprioritized flows and his simplistic rendition of history mystifies the actual relationships that lead to differentiation and polarization, which are important in understanding persistent (though reformulated) world inequality. In critiquing Appadurai’s formless globalism that emphasizes chaotic or fractal shapes we examine the strengthening of borders, explore the limitations of an approach that is highly dependent on relegating the nation-state to the past, and look at new forms of movement control and unequal rights of mobility in a world that is seeing new forms of ‘state’ power emerge beyond the bounded national units of recent history.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON APPADURAI: THE USES AND LIMITATIONS OF ANALYTICALLY FRAGMENTING FLOWS

Appadurai not only offers multiple flows and scapes, but insists on their empirical and analytical separation. This is particularly helpful in opening up multiple approaches to the study of mobilities, and certainly is stronger than single-dimensional approaches, whether pure culturalism or mechanical Marxism. However, his insistent drumbeat of ‘disjuncture’ is as reductionistic as mechanical Marxism² and fails to grapple with the interaction between different flows drawing on different logics and having different causal weights. Furthermore, disjuncture is only one kind of interaction; reinforcement or mutual causation should likewise be considered.

Our critique of Appadurai rests on a combined empirical and theoretical analysis of processes (flows) from a particular social theory perspective, a loosely Marxist theory of capitalism (drawing on Harvey, 1982, and Wolf, 1982). We argue that prioritizing the
impact of the various types of flows allows for a more systematic, coherent explanation of geographic processes. In particular, financial capital, the most abstract expression of capitalism, has demonstrable power to impact global society on a greater scale than do the other types of flows proposed by Appadurai. Capital, in its most abstract form, is a dimensionless (purely numerical) comparison of rates of accumulation across production processes, as embodied in the rates of return on investments (often, investments in funding, several steps removed from physical activities of production and reproduction). Of course, actually existing capitalism is by no means always abstract or pure; capitalisms are grounded in particular places, products, and patterns of social relations (Blim, 2000). Furthermore, other sources of determination coexist but are not as strong as finance capital, such as various states and ‘counter-states’, idea networks, specific kinds of transnational corporations, etc.

Yet key components within capitalism, Appadurai’s financescapes, tend toward an abstract logic (Carrier and Miller, 1998) that, precisely because they are so abstract and mobile, have a powerful effect on more grounded kinds of capital and other flows. Dimensionless finance capital moves almost instantaneously and with few barriers (of course, a goal of neoliberalism is to reduce all those barriers except those needed to regulate ownership and other ‘rules of the game’ enabling flows). Since dimensionless finance allows for instantaneous numerical comparison across space, such capital has an enormous advantage in terms of taking the initiative (that is, in causation) over other potentially mobile categories, such as working people, natural resources that can become commodities, etc. The cost comparison between badly paid labor in Mexico and worse paid labor in China is easy to make, causing the shift of light manufacturing from one to the other, whereas Mexican workers cannot meaningfully compare their lives and move to China. To take another Mexican example, similar workers can and do ‘choose’ locations, by moving to the United States, but even there they adapt their choice of locations to follow previous locational decisions by capitalists such as large meatpacking firms after a period of refinance and restructuring (Stull et al., 1995).

This is not to say that finance capitalism is all determining. Ideas can move quite quickly on the infrastructure provided by capitalism, and although some are rather obviously orchestrated by marketing capitalists and nation-states, what people communicate and what they envision of the world is not so easily determined or controlled. Appadurai points to the dimension of imagination as standing out in a distinct fashion among cultural flows. And we can come up with a number of other, parallel instances of non-determinism for other scapes. Without denying these points about the incompleteness of causal coherence – with which we agree – we are simply arguing, from the perspective of a flexible Marxism, for a partial hierarchy in the mutual interactions of mobile elements, centered on the peculiar powers of dimensionless capital. And we offer this less to vindicate academic Marxism than to demonstrate that we need to go beyond the rhetoric of disjuncture or irony. Simply taking the flows apart into a kaleidoscope of categories and suggesting that they intersect in unpredictable ways is energizing, but in the long run analytically unsatisfactory. We should seek, rather, painstakingly to specify relationships among processes in grounded places and times.

More problematic is Appadurai’s approach to recent history. His argument takes the form of an epochal change from a simple, static, localistic past to a radically mobile, complex, global present (see Friedman, 2003: vii–viii on this pattern in the
globalization literature generally). It is a bit difficult to make our characterization stick, for he is careful to acknowledge movement and interconnection in world history, but the overall rhetorical structure points strongly to this position. We concede his point that mobility of people, ideas, etc. is much faster now than in the past, and that this poses challenges for cultural reproduction and place-making that were smaller (but not absent) before. However, we do take issue with the notion of change in essential character (and accompanying theory) from past to present, especially locating this change in a very recent, almost immediate time span.

The central problem is not the dramatic statement of the present, though that is rhetorically exaggerated, but rather that this approach obscures and simplifies the past. In this perspective, the present demands a complex theory of flows and scapes, but for the past, theories of grounded and unitary culture were appropriate. Thus, it neglects how intersecting flows have helped constitute human cultural settings all along (see Mintz, 1998). Furthermore, because such past mobilities lead into the present, it obscures how the shift from past to present involves reworking of older patterned flows into new set of flows. It is not that flows or globalization have recently emerged, but that the content, intensity, and consequences of movement are constantly evolving. Motion is not new; rather, flows build on flows build on flows. Thus, it matters what flows were there before to what is happening now and how people experience the change.

The historical mutation of past networks of movement into present ones is a profoundly important analytical task. For example, the development of transnational US–Mexican migration and cultural flows has attracted much analytical attention (Goldring, 1996, 2002) and has been portrayed as an epochal change from modern to post-modern culture (Rouse, 1991). However, we prefer to understand such processes as instead a redirection of flows that have long linked Mexican people to wider scales of social and cultural activity (e.g. from zones of small holder agriculture to plantations, haciendas, and mines, and later railroads, Mexican cities, and the United States). The recent neoliberal assault on the livelihoods of millions of poor Mexicans and the intensification of labor (and then family) migration to the US does indeed present a dramatic set of changes, not only in economics but in imagined worlds, but this is best understood as a rearrangement of an ever-present network of flows.

Appadurai’s arguments, then, present an ambiguous and at times distorted perspective of history and how the present emerges from it. We find a similar inconsistency in the word ‘global’. This term summons up two different perspectives. On the one hand, global might mean definite connections between definite sites over long (world-scale) distances. In ‘Global Ethnoscapes’ (1996: 48–65), Appadurai discusses female cabaret dancers in Bombay and their complex relations to home communities in south India, drawing on Mira Nair’s film India Cabaret. Likewise, in ‘The Production of Locality’ (1996: 178–99), he briefly explores the circuits of mass media production, distribution, and consumption in various South Asian diasporas, and asks how they might reconfigure a sense of locality that spans several spatial sites. However, at other times (especially in the most aggressive statements of circulation and simultaneity, e.g. pp. 2–4), the global exists as a space that is neither here nor there, has no distributed patterns, and has no internal relations producing convergence or differentiation. It is simply a space that is everywhere at once. While this characterization does an injustice to the depth of his work, it is one on which he sometimes verges. The question is, how might we
construct a more concrete geography and anthropology that address the enormous span of global flows, past and present?

A CRITIQUE OF APPADURAI’S CONCEPTION OF GEOGRAPHY: FLOWS, CAPITAL AND PROCESS

As noted, Appadurai moves from the anthropological rejection of localized, bounded cultures to the opposite extreme, seeing ‘the configuration of cultural forms in today’s world as fundamentally fractal, that is, as possessing no Euclidean boundaries, structures, or regularities’ (p. 46). In addition to mixing up a shift in theoretical perspective with a putative historical change, his position bypasses a fundamental effect of flows: that they actually constitute, reproduce, and reconstitute geographic-cultural entities (a point consistent with ‘The Production of Locality’ [1996: 178–99]). It is not just that deterritorialization occurs, but also reterritorialization. Even seemingly static territories such as international borderlines require constant flows to reinforce them.

The inverse of landed, bounded cultural phenomena is thus not just formless flux but the continual creation of geographic formations. Such formations, of course, may have novel shapes that differ from previous entities, and they may involve the decline of older concentrations in favor of newer ones. They may also reinforce and rework already existing patterns. Recent work in the field of geography emphasizes precisely this point. Geographic spaces and scales, whether localities, regions, nations, or even the globe, are historically constructed, rather than inherent and given (see Agnew and Corbridge, 1995; Brenner, 1999; Marston, 2000; Smith, 1984, 1992; Taylor and Flint, 2000; Tuathail, 2000).

‘Disjuncture and Difference’ emphasizes the tearing down of differences, not in the direction of global homogenization but toward a kaleidoscopic blending that cuts across geographic units or erases any specific geographic referent. Appadurai refers to deterritorialization as a ‘central force’ (p. 37), and has devoted much of a later essay to it (2003). So his thrust is to eliminate narrow geographic units (it is ‘de’ territorialization) in the interests of superseding a bounded, localistic sense of culture, but he is unconcerned with exploring the processes of a more complex geography. We are told what is putatively not there, but not what we might constructively look for. An important reason for this emphasis seems to be to challenge the nation-state as a cultural unit, both in terms of transnational and subnational cultural phenomena. We will discuss the politics of this move below. Here, we examine how the new work in processual geography replies to these themes and provides stronger means for studying the relationship between movement and spatial entities than the purely ‘fractal’ approach does.

The crucial starting point is that movement does not necessarily mean the decline of geographic spaces, and that the existence of such spaces does not necessarily signify closure or stasis. Appadurai, because he is reacting to a predominant (but not universal) position in 20th-century anthropology that each culture has a fixed, bounded place, emphasizes the mobile components themselves (e.g. flowing ideas) but not the routes through which they move (what we will call passageways) nor the places that are momentary endpoints. In his broad view either there are places or placeless flows. We come from a different anthropological starting point, being much influenced by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute/Manchester school and by Latin American historical political economy, in which social-spatial forms are continuously created and transformed.
through various kinds of interchange and movement (of people, commodities, ideologies, etc.). Following Friedman’s discussion of ‘system’ and ‘concrete interconnections among places’ (2003: x), then, we seek to characterize how mobility shapes fluid components, passageways, and endpoints.

Mobilities of various kinds may, first, help create spaces. An example, which we elaborate on below, is that of Mexican drug trafficking ‘plazas’, locational spaces cum social networks though which networks of traffickers transport cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana from production sites in various parts of Latin America to staging areas on the US border and ultimately to US cities. Smuggling, in turn, has in both past and present helped create the ‘border’ as a distinctive region.

Second, mobilities may reproduce spaces. As we mentioned before, corporate cultural-political formations within Mexico depended on the constant coming and going of labor migrants and commercial agricultural products. It is not just that mobility reproduces particular spaces, but that it may reproduce the difference between and arrangement among spaces, rather than erasing these differences – for example, the enduring distinction and yet connection between rural zones of reproduction and urban zones of paid labor.

Finally, of course, mobility may empty out spaces, bring about a radical rearrangement of them, or replace them with new scales or units of organized space. Heyman (1991) documented one such case in Sonora, Mexico, where the partial departure of one fraction of capital based on mining, and the movement of another fraction into global assembly plants, sparked a permanent relocation of working class families, spatially re-arranging northeastern Sonora from an interior to border focus. The overall point is that mobility does not obliterate geography but rather forms an ineluctable element of constitutive and processual geography.

Importantly, the existence of marked, even bounded differentiation between geographic loci does not mean that they are unconnected; it can and often does imply a particular arrangement of flows, that of combined and uneven development. The very linkage itself – of resources, labor, information, and so forth – creates and reproduces divided, unequal spaces, such as rural Mexican migrant sending areas and US agricultural labor and urban and suburban service-consuming areas (Palerm and Urquiola, 1993). Appadurai does not broach this problem, but it is worth recapitulating what he does say that might be relevant to this topic. He speaks of the tension between cultural homogenization and heterogenization in the contemporary world (p. 32). This is a productive formulation, since by setting up dynamics between two tendencies it allows us to explore unfolding of outcomes in a processual way. By homogeneity he means increasing uniformity on a global scale, while by heterogeneity he means cultural processes that splinter off from the dominant global pattern, whether at national, ethnic, regional, or other geographic scales. In his concern, mostly with ethnic identity politics, heterogeneity is a reaction against homogeneity – and thus their relation is one of opposites, a tug of war.

But what if unifying processes in one regard – say, the flow of financial capital – were to result in heterogeneous spaces in terms of labor and living conditions, and in terms of lived and identified cultures, in another regard? In this perspective, homogeneity and heterogeneity are not opposed tendencies but simultaneous, mutually reinforcing tendencies. We have in mind the Marxian analysis of combined and uneven
development here (see Smith, 1984), in which flows of surplus value from some social
groups, often (though not always) in distinctive organized spaces, to other, more
powerful and privileged groups and spaces, lead to simultaneous differentiation on the
two ends, while at the same time engaging in high degrees of mobility between them.
Combined and uneven development makes the simplistic view of flows as always
blurring geographical and social difference untenable. We focus on unequal relationships
not because polarization is the only outcome of systemic processes – there is also pene-
tration and hybridity, without question – but because it demonstrates that a dynamic,
flow centered analysis can in specific historical circumstances result in relatively coherent
and contrastive forms and units.

FLOWS, BORDERS AND TERRITORIES
The idea that movement, and the scapes that it creates, can actually produce and repro-
duce linked difference across space helps us address the topic of borders more adequately
than Appadurai does. Though his references are scattered, he consistently sees borders
as disappearing (p. 46: ‘possessing no Euclidean boundaries’) or as symbolizing flows and
not inequalities and barriers (Appadurai, 2003). He also repeatedly emphasizes deterri-
torialization (pp. 37–9). Of course, deterritorialization involves the erasure of clear
distinctions between one bounded territory (read, nation-state) and another. It is worth
noting that he sees labor immigration as a key component: ‘Deterritorialization, in
general, is one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring
populations into the lower-class sections and spaces of relatively wealthy societies, while
sometimes creating exaggerated or intensified senses of criticism or attachment to
politics in the home state’ (pp. 37–8).

Much of this statement is quite right, but it seems badly attached to the concept of
deterritorialization and the implicit erasure of boundaries in the contemporary world.
In fact, flows of various sorts are simultaneously reinforcing and challenging organiza-
tion by geopolitical borders in the contemporary world. First, Saskia Sassen (1998) has
shown that capital mobility across borders helps produce labor migration circuits,
shaping both departing and receiving ends, and the transportation and information
paths in between. Second, increasingly strict territorial boundaries between rich and
poor have accompanied heightened labor migration, rather than disappearing, as one
can readily see in Europe’s outer borders (e.g. southern Spain) or the US–Mexico border
(Andreas and Snyder, 2000; Heyman, 1999; Nevins, 2002).

Third, labor migration enables rainfed peasant agricultural regions to survive by
exporting labor while the rich and prosperous benefit from their efforts – in other words,
a prime example of combined and uneven development of two geographic spaces
pivoting precisely on cross-border flows of value (see Heyman, 1994, 2001; Kearney,
2004). Fourth, the new laborers are creating new visions of national and local culture,
challenging bounded imaginaries (constructed national cultures from the recent past),
and insisting on redefinitions of citizenship and political participation (see, for example,
Flores and Bienmayor, 1997; Goldring, 2002). In turn, border policing is strengthened
by reactionary politics (in a literal, not pejorative sense) seeking to re-establish those
national cultural imaginaries.

In other words, the image of ‘borders’ as crossings that signal the decline of fixed
nation-state units is far too simple (see Heyman, 1994; Vila, 2003). We can find in the
US–Mexico instance all the different processes – deterritorializing capital, reactionary nationalist reinforcement, and combined and uneven differentiation of social spaces – about which we spoke in the preceding paragraphs. Flows do not necessarily obliterate the territories that they cross, and indeed may help constitute and reproduce them. Flows of various sorts both build up and tear down territorial units. They contribute to the persistence and even strengthening of borders in many cases. Hence, the crisscrossing and remaking of borders, while significant, does not mean that their territory-delineating role is disappearing – if anything, a number of borders are stronger than ever (Andreas and Snyder, 2000). Overstated rhetoric, though filled with insights, needs to retreat in favor of a more complex, processual view of the forms and consequences of global flows.

With this in view, we need to be concerned that the way anthropologists and other cultural theorists write about mobility and border-erasure obscures new patterns of inequality, especially of political rights while in movement, an inequality that is likely to also affect class relations and social honor. Appadurai argues that flows, and the complicated cultural scapes that they engender, are undermining the coherence of national units. The epochal framework in which this is presented makes it seems as if the past were distinctively peopled by coherent cultural units, notably nations. By implication, in Appadurai’s conceptualization, contemporary flows render a situation with unequal and conflicting groups but without clear, bounded, and unequal sets of people. Lacking standard social scientific units, such as nations with insiders and outsiders, to give them foundational shape, inequalities and conflicts are endlessly, recursively complex, and have no consistent form, at least according to Appadurai.

However, this gives nations too much power and depth in history, so that their erosion takes an excessively dramatic role in analysis, and it ignores the gradual transformation of existing inequalities of movement into new configurations of bias that do have forms – rather marked ones. To take up the first point, nation-states represent a set of political projects, often times incompletely realized and short-lived, using a political form diffused from France and the United States. This includes various projects aimed at forming self-recognizing and culturally marked national citizens (see Joseph and Nugent, 1994). These political projects were and are highly contingent, and do seem to be particularly challenged in the current climate of neoliberal, globally mobile capitalism and transnational electronic communications. However, the retreat of the nationalist project (with an angry reactionary defense) does not mean that distinctions and inequalities have no forms, since the cultural formation of people as political beings was never so reliant on the national form as a reified view of singular ‘societies with cultures’ would have had it, and also because there are inherited and newly developing forms of political inequality outside the national form. Interestingly, they seem to be centering on unequal rights of and risks in movement (Pallitto and Heyman, 2008).

In reaction to the primordialist notion that every culture (as collection of people) has a singular and specific home place, recent work has to one degree or another treated people as if they have no spatial constraints at all, as if people float freely, exist in several places at once, or are truly placeless. To be fair to Appadurai (2003), his key example, Sikh identity (‘Khalistan’) in transnational networks in India, Britain, and Canada, does not particularly focus on lived political rights to move across national boundaries and dwell in national territories, instead dealing with the construction of a
non-territorialized ethnonational imaginary. Thus, he tells us little about the legal status of expatriate transnational Sikhs, nor about the possibly quite different status of Sikhs who stay in India or those who migrate illegally. Hence, key themes in his work – deterritorialization and cosmopolitans – contribute to the elision of questions of governed spaces and controlled movement, and political rights therein.

Indeed, we face an era of increasingly dense and forceful (but not always successful) migration and travel controls (see Andreas and Snyder, 2000; Torpey, 2000). Some of these reinforce existing nation-state territories, such as the US’s external borders. Some envelop novel territorial entities, such as ‘Schengenland’, the bounded travel space that includes much of the European Union (Bigo and Guild, 2005). Others extend inside and across conventional boundaries, such as the identification checks and physical examinations before boarding commercial passenger flights inside the United States and many other states. Airlines and foreign governments pre-check passengers for the United States long before they reach the US boundary, and there is widespread sharing of information on moving individuals among military, police, and other government agencies around the world. It is hard to assemble the evidence from public sources, but it also seems likely that travel control involves risk classification of whole sets of people, such as young men from Islamic countries. And, of course, there is a vast welter of temporary and permanent immigration and citizenship statuses and treatments.

Our goal in reciting this is not to put the genie of mobility back in the nation-state/society bottle, but rather to point out the new patterns of differentiation in the context of rapid mobility within and across conventional borders (Ong, 1999, 2006). For each fast-moving, legal-rights bearing cosmopolitan, there are many more marginal migrants, temporary visitors and refugees, visa overstayers, trapped undocumented residents, and stateless populations, who are too afraid of detection to move fluidly about their ‘transnational’ world. Pallitto and Heyman (2008) explore the patterns of political subject-definition and subjectivity that emerge from inequalities in movement of political status and rights, identification and documentation, speed and ease of movement, and risks of detection and removal or imprisonment, especially under conditions of contemporary security regimes. Analogous to the points made above about the processual construction of spatial forms, then, mobile people in the contemporary world are engaged in the construction of new, complex politics of location and travel rather than an infinitely disjunct flux. Rather than disappearing, socio-spatial differentiation is gaining in density and strength while also mutating in form and content. Intensive controls vie with counter-controls (such as the drug-trafficking organizations discussed below) in a world that is far from boundaryless.

**DRUG TRAFFICKING ON AND ACROSS THE US–MEXICO BORDER: A CAPSULE STUDY**

Campbell’s ethnographic study of drug trafficking across the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez international border illustrates the richness of a processual political economic approach to global cultural phenomena (see Campbell, 2009). The contemporary US–Mexico boundary is a product of lengthy historical processes from which has developed a dynamic two-sided transnational zone with a strong emphasis on illegalized commodities (contraband drugs and other products) and people (undocumented immigrants). Likewise, ‘imaginations’ of the border as wild frontier, decadent vice zone, site of cultural
hybridity or defense against foreign cultural penetration, or land of multinational, globalized plenty have been made and remade over time.

In Juárez, nearly 1200 people have died, in less than a year (as of October, 2008), during a vicious drug war. Analysts on both sides of the border have scrambled for explanations for the rising levels of violence in this strategic border city. The increasingly bloody drug conflict in Mexico is often interpreted as an unprecedented, recent phenomenon, a disjuncture in Appadurai’s terms. Observers see it as an unfortunate product of the political transition in 2000 from one party rule to full democracy in Mexico, the growing global hunger for illicit drugs, and the expansion of criminal elements into formerly pristine regions. Such a before and after approach, though relevant, limits our understanding of complex, long-term phenomena that transcend local regions, discrete time frames and recent changes in national politics. From our standpoint, the border drug trade is a processually created geography with a specific, not epochal, history. Cross-border trade has mutated over time, but there are elements of reproduction of established patterns through the flows as well. The border drug trade, though dynamic and changing, is a business that is not just new and emerging but historically-rooted and patterned.

Border drug trafficking did not commence with the arrival in Juárez of the Cartel de Juárez (dominated by the Carrillo Fuentes family) in the 1980s and 1990s or the emergence of the Sinaloa-based Chapo Guzmán Cartel in the first decade of the new millennium. In fact, the contraband economy of Ciudad Juárez (and some other border cities), which exploits the fluid contours between nations, dates to Spanish colonial times. Southwest of Juárez, in the interior of Mexico, Sinaloa, Durango and other Mexican states along the Sierra Madre mountains have been major players in the opium/heroin and marijuana business since the 1920s. Chinese immigrant laborers knowledgeable about opiates brought opium cultivation to the Sierra and northern Mexico from the 1880s onward. Declining supplies of US morphine during the Second World War triggered massive expansion of opium poppy cultivation in the Sierra. The so-called ‘Golden Triangle’ of Chihuahua, Durango, and Sinaloa has been the largest producer of black tar heroin in the western hemisphere since that period. Marijuana – which was apparently brought to the US by Mexican migrant farmworkers in the early 1900s – became a major Mexican cash crop in the 1960s as US consumption levels expanded during the counterculture years. A huge Mexican marijuana production and smuggling business has continued to the present.

The border smuggling business has gone through several historical downturns and upswings, most notably during US Prohibition when Juárez became a major hub for alcohol smuggling – a business that was controlled by what have become some of the wealthiest families in the region. After Prohibition, from the 1930s to the 1970s an important heroin trafficking ring led by Ignacia Jasso González (alias ‘La Nacha’) supplied narcotics to US GIs and other border-crossers and local residents. La Nacha greased the palms of municipal, state, and national politicians in order to maintain control of the lucrative black tar heroin trade. These examples illustrate that the success of Juárez alcohol smuggling and drug trafficking activity has always been tied not just to local initiatives and internecine struggles for control of organized crime, but to political connections in Mexico City and elsewhere as well as changing laws in both Mexico and the United States. Local smuggling activity has also been dependent on
trends in the international forces of supply and demand that link drug-producing regions in South America and Mexico to consumers in the United States. The recent changes and new developments in the Mexican drug trade must be linked to long-term historical processes.

Since 1994 and the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), communications and commerce (including the exchange of illegal drugs) between the US and Mexico have increased dramatically. Neoliberal economic policies and the lessening of obstacles to international trade have facilitated the movement of all manner of goods (legal and illegal) between the two countries and also, to a degree, have stimulated cross-border migration (not least because of NAFTA’s devastating effect on Mexican agriculture, which has forced hundreds of thousands of rural Mexicans to cross illegally into the US). Yet alongside efforts to facilitate border-crossing trade of legal goods have come efforts by the US government – such as the construction of a wall between El Paso and Juárez and increased security measures – to reinforce barriers against undocumented travelers, illegal drugs, and drug traffickers. The latter are often assumed by US authorities to be a potential source of violence or terrorism. As a member of a major US military-civilian interagency law enforcement organization (JTF) told Campbell, ‘where there are drugs there is almost always a connection to terrorist groups’. Hence global economic flows have both stimulated the cross-border drug trade and complicated it as US authorities have attempted to control and manage new flows of people and goods.

Border drug and immigration crackdowns or attempts to secure international boundaries transform local conditions in myriad ways. Thus, US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and local police success in stopping the entry of Colombian cocaine into Florida in the 1970s and early 1980s re-channeled Colombian drugs to Mexican port zones such as Cancún and the beaches of Guerrero and Michoacán from the mid-1980s onward. These Mexican coastal sites and adjacent regions were subsequently flooded with shipments of South American cocaine (and eventually methamphetamine) and poor local economies became the beneficiaries/victims of massive drug businesses, cartel operations, and gruesome violence. These same transit areas emerged as the conduits to the main Mexican border cities (Tijuana/San Diego, Nuevo Laredo and Juárez) which have been ravaged by drug violence in recent years.

Drug production, transportation, and sales (and government responses to them), thus, have profoundly shaped the history of significant regions of the Mexican interior and border cities like Juárez. Hence the current drug violence in Juárez has deep roots that long precede the arrival of Chapo Guzmán and his Sinaloan ‘cocaine cowboys’ and must be analytically situated in local, regional, national, and international frames. Border drug violence is therefore enmeshed in wider webs of national and international power and is neither random nor arbitrary but the visible manifestation of a fight to control an extraordinarily lucrative multinational business. Such a hardheaded, grounded analysis is needed to understand the Mexican border drug trade, whose expanding pop cultural expressions (narcocorrido/drug ballads, movies about drug trafficking, and particular flashy norteño clothing styles) are often interpreted in Appadurian terms as ‘Hispanic’ forms of postmodern pastiche and the free play of symbols in a contour-less globalized world of consumption. Yet, at bottom, drug trafficking, drug-related violence, and cultural configurations associated with the narco
world must ultimately be analyzed as part of a world capitalist economic system – including production and consumption – that makes and remakes regions and nations in systematic, not patternless, ways.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND THE CRITIQUE**

Our critique does not aim at dismissing Appadurai’s work, nor at restoring the scholarly status quo before his intervention. Instead, we suggest that the alternative view of flows and mobilities we sketch here constitutes a coherent and productive alternative that is amenable to synthesis with important themes that Appadurai raises. Geographic spaces are constructed over time, and flows do not only erode geography; rather, they may create it, reproduce it, transform it, or undermine it. This is true even for a period of very rapid transportation and communication. As a result, globalization is usefully understood as a definable network of relations among spatially located entities, allowing for some processes that tend toward multilocality or even truly global coverage. A similarly differentiating and specifying perspective is usefully applied to the kinds of people who move about the world, as mobility involves significant inequalities of speed, risk, rights, and status. Disjuncture and breakdown of bounded social and cultural units are contingent outcomes of processes that may also reinforce social and spatial entities, boundaries, and so forth.

Our arguments are thus not meant simply to emphasize the continued existence and force of nation-states and borders, although these phenomena continue to have enormous weight in the world. Nor would we advocate retreating to a concept in which fixed and bounded societies have analytical priority, and flows are thought of as secondarily taking place between them. Indeed, we are more inclined than Appadurai to reject isolated socio-cultural units in regards to the past as well as the present; hence, we disagree with his perspective of this being an epochal change (a matter of time periods) rather than a needed reform in scholarly analysis (a matter of perspectives).

Having laid out these positions, we think it is useful to revisit some of Appadurai’s most provocative ideas. First, he is correct to raise the question of imagination within networks of the movement of people, ideas, and media imagery; one might ask how this conforms to or presses against the bounds of processual geography (the specifiable lines of movement and interrelated spaces of which we have spoken). Second, Appadurai’s sensitivity to incongruence can be carried over into the approach just delineated. We were critical of his repeated emphasis on disjuncture and dismissal of any kind of relative hierarchy of causation, but positing a completely coherent system would be a mistake in the opposite direction. The productive relations of movement that we sketched above may well have important degrees of contingency and incoherence, and these are well worth exploring, including the human experience of contradictions and unpredictabilities.

Finally, Appadurai’s concern with the challenges of reproduction of culture is well-taken, and not only for the contemporary era; if cultural-geographic spaces are contingent, only sometimes being stably reproduced by flows and often in either the process of construction or destruction, and if such processual spaces often involve the flow of people and ideas (as well as goods), then anthropology’s cyclical, unproblematic ideas of cultural transmission need serious reassessment. And if we have taken him to task for over-stating the difference between past and present, it is certainly the case that the
processes discussed here are faster and thus more culturally challenging than they ever have been before.

Notes
1 Ethnoscapes (pp. 33–4) cover the entire range of human groupings, but privileging in particular mobile groups and individuals, such as immigrants, exiles, tourists, guest workers, etc. Technoscapes involve highly mobile (and mobilizing) technologies, including connections across unlikely parts of the world (p. 34). Financescapes are mobile forms of capital, such as investment markets, that are indeed markedly global (pp. 34–5); but to underline his distance from Marxist models, he stresses that ‘the global relationship among ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and financescapes is deeply disjunctive and profoundly unpredictable’ (p. 35) because each has its own logic and affects movement in the others. Mediascapes and ideoscapes are ‘closely related landscapes of images’ (p. 35). Mediascapes take place through the world’s culture industries, while ideoscapes are explicitly promoted by states and other political-social movements (pp. 35–6).

2 Indeed, one senses that Appadurai’s own argument is exaggerated and distorted by an effort at all costs to dismiss Marxian approaches, even ones that partly resonate with his work, such as Wolf and Mintz’s efforts to delineate a world cultural history with capitalism as its focus, without the reified and top-down ‘system’ of Wallerstein (see Mintz, 1977, 1985; Wolf, 1982). For example, Appadurai speaks of a ‘complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models’ (p. 32). Leaving aside the epochal ‘any longer’, there is much justice in critiquing the use of core (or center) and periphery as aprocessual spatial labels that are laid over more complex realities. But this objection holds less water if we view ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ as pointing to a strategic relationship that gives rise, through enormously complex processes, to contingent outcomes distributed unequally across space and social groups. Given the enormous and widening inequality in the world, we would say we lose analytical and political sharpness if we dismiss these relational terms.

3 A dimensional element of capitalism might be a commodity, such as computer memory, at a certain price per megabyte. It might even be a rate of return per unit of time, such as an 8% return on an investment in producing such memory. In each case, the dimensionality implies a certain fixity, even if only temporary, in time and space. But a comparison of two rates of return – say, 6% per year return in Taiwan and 8% per year in Indonesia – cancels the factor labels in each item (return rate, time unit) and results in a non-dimensional ratio (3:4 in this example). Such dimensionless comparisons are fundamental to the global reach of the most advanced sectors of finance and production capital (Heyman would like to acknowledge his collaboration with James Greenberg on this topic: see Greenberg and Heyman, n.d.).

4 Disjuncture works rhetorically to supply a certain pizzazz, a sense of energy and newness, as a way of shocking some readers out of customary ways of thinking (the monolithic, bounded local culture) by highlighting unexpected combinations, e.g. Khalistan, a deterritorialized homeland for Sikhs (Appadurai, 1996: 38). This works better, of course, for the anthropological mainstream than it does for those alternative traditions that have long left such unitary views of culture behind (e.g. Wolf,
And rhetorical shock succeeds more at tearing down old ideas than building new ones, the task that we now face.

5 The structure of Appadurai’s argument has a family resemblance to modernization theory, in its vision of absolute change between stages rather than unfolding processes, and in its erasure of the complexity and dynamism of the past (see Tilly, 1984).

6 We use ‘entities’ as short-hand for a broader set of differentiated and interrelated spatial patterns; we apologize for implying neatly bounded and isolated units, which is not our intention. Our language of nouns fails us when trying to convey this processual perspective.

7 We follow quite closely this statement by Friedman (2003: ix): ‘This is not chaos by any reckoning, and one of our purposes here is to discover the systematic nature of the global as it configures what might appear as chaotic, at most, and disjunctive, at least, on the surface.’

References


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