Global Media and Communication

INTERVIEW

A man behind scapes

An interview with Arjun Appadurai

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May 2005. I stand in front of the New School University in New York and feel uplifted. I am going not only to interview anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who has become a household name in media studies, but to visit his New School. Appadurai was appointed Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs of the New School in 2004, and also holds a Distinguished Professorship here – the John Dewey Professor in the Social Sciences. The New School was founded in 1919 by a group of independent-minded scholars as the New School for Social Research 'for all intelligent men and women'. Among them was philosopher John Dewey, who once famously wrote that 'of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful'. The School can boast a very impressive list of scholars who have taught there, including Hannah Arendt, Franz Boas, Felix Frankfurter, John Maynard Keynes, Margaret Mead, Lewis Mumford, Harold Laski and Bertrand Russell. Before and during World War II more than 180 scholars and their families found refuge at the New School.[1]

So what could be a more suitable place for Appadurai than the New School University? He is himself an intellectual migrant born and educated in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Appadurai (born in 1949) took his BA from Brandeis University in 1967 and applied then to the New School, but for financial and other reasons went to the University of Chicago where he obtained his MA and PhD (1976). One of his teachers was Hannah Arendt of the New School who taught regularly at the University of Chicago. With Arendt, Appadurai took small tutorial courses with only four or five students on topics like Machiavelli, as well as attending her lectures on the history of the will. Appadurai sees in retrospect a hidden affinity between his undergraduate institution in the US, Brandeis, his graduate institution, and the New School: all of them

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are deeply influenced by a dialogue with European critical traditions, and touched by the experience of holocaust and exile.[2]

Appadurai has taught at the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania and held distinguished chairs at Chicago and at Yale University. He is one of the founding editors, together with his spouse, Professor Carol A. Breckenridge,[3] of the journal *Public Culture*.[4] His best known book is *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), which has been translated into French, Spanish and Italian. His previous scholarly publications have covered such topics as religion, cuisine, agriculture and mass culture in India.

Like most academics in his position, Appadurai is a very busy man and organizing an interview with him is not easy. The friendly and effective administrator has promised me 60 minutes, but Appadurai is running late and we only get 50 minutes. But I finally meet with this man whose famous 'five scapes', my LSE students tell me, will often be the one thing they vividly remember long after they have graduated.

Globalization and modernization

TR: Do you still use the term 'globalization', and if you do, what are the problems, if any?

AA: I do. I do use the term 'globalization', and I recognize that it is used rather loosely in the media and so on. But many terms are, and we don't stop using them because other people are using them: nation, modernity, capitalism, progress. I think there are some special debates surrounding this one, but for me it does refer to a type of interactivity among regions, nations, societies, identified with the last three decades of the 20th century, and of course the first decade of this century, and especially connected with new media, with the net, but also with other macro factors. In my book I suggest migration and also aspects of democratic politics and so on, which together comes to quite a special mix. It doesn't mean that there are no historical precedents or that it's completely unique, but I think we need some kind of name for this period. Maybe the only flaw in the name 'globalization' is that it suggests that the world was never connected before, but anybody who knows anything knows that that's not the intention. So I do take it seriously. I think it is a useful reference.

TR: And do you think that media and communications play a major role in it?

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AA: Yes, I do. And, like many, I think the internet is the most marked feature of this. But I also believe that historically, as new media forms arrived, they changed the whole field of the media. So the arrival of the net and the new electronic technologies also affects all the earlier technologies of communication. I think media is very central because it transforms the conditions of sending and receiving in the old sense, but also because, as I said in my book, it provides a different set of tools for the work of the imagination in a world where media itself creates a new form of problem, but also provides new solutions to identity, to predictability, to self-understanding.

TR: Do you remember when you started using the concept? Nobody seems to remember where they 'picked it up'. Can you remember the text?

AA: Not exactly the text, but I do remember there was a period of about three years, roughly from 1987 to 1989, when the phrase I was using in the context of the journal *Public Culture* was 'transnational cultural flows' and that somewhere in the latter part of the 1980s 'globalization' seems to have arrived. My own recollection is that this was roughly some time in the year 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. I don't know the exact text, but it seemed to me at that time to capture something bigger than the expression 'transnational flows'. We realized that what we were encountering and trying to understand was that which subsequently came to be described by the word globalization.

TR: And were you aware of other people doing the same thing?

AA: Not really. The person who for me was most nearby was Ulf Hannerz,[5] who I became quite friendly with in 1984–1985, when we happened to spend a year in the US at a kind of think tank together. At that time we were both interested in global cultural processes, though not yet under the name of globalization.

TR: So what was the term you were using?

AA: I think we were talking of flows, global flows, transnational flows. These were the words. We recognized that the idea of transnational flows, too, had a history in the Caribbean. I hadn't known of that, but I subsequently became aware of it. But as for the work of people like Castells (Rantanen, 2005a), Giddens (Rantanen, 2005b), Sassen[6] and

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others, I substantially came to it subsequently, in the 1990s. So when I wrote the essay that came out under the name 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' (1990), I think I did not know that much. I had glimpses, but I still saw it more in terms, for example, of how these ideas about post-modernity, time-space compression, form a coherent set of theories under the rubric of globalization. I think the 1990s created the sense that there was such a field.

TR: But when you mention time-space compression, were you then aware of the work that had been done in geography?

AA: Oh yes. And, by extension, in political economy and to some extent even in media studies. So, yes, my own influences were very diverse. The other interest I brought to it, which was different, certainly, from Castells, Giddens and Sassen, was my own long trajectory in area studies in South Asia. By that time area studies had reached a certain crisis. The crisis was viewed at that time as primarily a crisis of method and so on, but it was also a crisis because the world was changing. So I think that was one reason I didn't gravitate so strongly to the sociological position. Though it was area-driven, it was driven by interests in European thought rather than that of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia. So it was the coming together of some interest in transnational cultural processes with the dilemmas of area studies that produced my interest in what became globalization.

TR: That is very interesting, because I hear different people telling the story and I don't think it's uncommon that there are individuals working on the same topic who don't initially know each other's work. Then suddenly it comes together. So it's in the air, in a way.

AA: That's right. I do think the fall of the Wall in Europe, with all its repercussions, created the sense of two things: that some very large certainties were changing, and that there was a connection. In the late 1980s some of us with area interests were aware that 1989 was the year both of Tiananmen and of the fall of the Berlin Wall – even today these are often seen as totally separate, but they were in the same year. So something was happening that was connecting, interacting, and we didn't have the right words for it.

TR: When did globalization start? Giddens (Rantanen, 2005b: 64), for example, said that he used the word modernity and then got tired of it

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and started using globalization. How do you see the connection between the two?

AA: I think, from one rather neutral point of view, you could say that globalization is the latest phase of some kind of modernization. With all the question marks around the two terms, you could say that, I think, reasonably. But as a concept, modernization certainly – which was part of my training – has a kind of one-way temporality, whereas globalization has more spatiality. So I think globalization introduces spatiality, simultaneity, horizontality into a kind of sequential, temporal, vertical, developmental impulse. I think there is a tension, really, between the two.

TR: It's not a project, in the sense that 'modernization' is (Rantanen, 2005c).

AA: Right. It's not. Although there are those who would say, and do say, that globalization is only another name for modernization and has the same difficulties, and that it's a Western project. I don't quite believe this. But I think that it's a more capacious term in some sense. It's less value laden. The term modernization was very value laden.

TR: But globalization has now *become* very value laden.

AA: That's true. Value laden, but from opposite perspectives. There are people who are very much *not* for it, as well as for it. So it's certainly *about* norms, but it's not all one way within those norms. It's very polarized. That's true also of modernization. But I felt that in modernization theory, at that time when I was writing, and even now with hindsight, there is a clear-cut similar body of globalization theory. There certainly was a very clear modernization theory that was both normative, developmental and evolutionary in certain ways. Whereas globalization, for me at any rate, allows more unevenness, more unpredictability, more contingency. But that, of course, depends on how you understand the term. I could say that in the book *Modernity at Large* (1996) I was trying to get away from some of the dilemmas of modernization theory. But, in using the term modernity and talking about modernity at large, what I precisely meant to say in my title was that modernity was indeed no longer confined by a certain set of conditions, but had become more mobile – and mobile in ways that were not predicted by modernization theory. You might say in retrospect that globalization accounted for this unpredictable spread of modernity.

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Disjunctures and differences

TR: Your article 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' (1990) has become a seminal text and is read, I'm sure, not only in media and communications studies, but widely elsewhere. So, can you tell me something about the background: how did you start it, how long did you work on this?

AA: I don't have a very clear recollection of that. I remember I wrote first an article on global ethnoscapes. It was for a different context, for a collection of essays edited by Richard Fox (1991). I think that came first. But the idea, I must confess, was all around 1989, 1990 or so. I think I was struggling to introduce some element of subjectivity into the idea of mindscape. So the distribution of things, especially the material distribution of various things, was not entirely objectively determinable – how people saw, for example, who they were, who mattered, or how ethnicity was being distributed. So, I think if you take ethnoscape, for example, my notion was that ethnicity was not just an absolute and measurable fact, but that you could equally have identified in a certain location some completely other location. And I think I was also at that time preoccupied with the question of how my own interest in global cultural processes, which was in the disjuncture side of the driving question: what's different about the world now, why does culture matter, etc.? It was a somewhat implicit dialogue, of course, but with the whole Marxist way, which was of course a very serious, powerful way, credible, culturally varied.

TR: May I ask, were you a Marxist before?

AA: Not really. Although growing up in India, you know, in the 1950s, everybody was to some extent a Marxist because we grew up in a socialist world, a world where India identified with the USSR. But we were also nationalists, very strongly. So, no, I was not actually officially, or even unofficially, part of the Indian Left – also because I left India very early.

TR: Were you academically a Marxist?

AA: Not really, although I came from India with this kind of vague socialist commitment to democracy, to equity, to directed social change as a social project of the state. These were taken-for-granted assump-

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tions. And then I came to Brandeis in the US, which in the late 1960s was a very fertile anti-establishment, anti-mainstream place, against Vietnam and so forth. Many of the faculty there were either from the New Left or from the old European Left. Marcuse[7] had left in 1966 or so, just before I came, but his presence was very strong. So there was a strong, shall we say, Left milieu there at Brandeis. Even more than in India, because I grew up in Bombay, which was not a very left-wing city. So it was always there, but there was no official engagement. I was not trying to break out of a specific analysis, but I knew that the main alternative to the emerging engagement with world culture was on the Marxist side, wherever it came from. So, as a consequence, in using the scapes I was trying to think about the superstructure/infrastructure in a new way.

TR: It is a departure in a way?

AA: It was a departure, and a dialogue, and a critique. But it begins by saying that the problematic is very serious. So although some readers might well have seen it as perhaps too cultural, very much about flows without recognizing constraints or determinations, etc., I don't see it that way myself. I feel it evokes disjuncture and difference in a direct dialogue. In the same way that you might say that Friedrich Engels was in dialogue with Karl Marx. So it's a homage to Marx. It is rather an empirical observation that the landscape or the distribution of these things no longer conformed to contained geographies of superstructure and infrastructure. The superstructure may be here and the infra-structure may be there, etc. That's what we have to fix, as an empirical fact not as an epistemological fact.

TR: And did you have any idea that it was going to be so influential?

AA: No, I had no idea. I knew when I wrote it that I was proposing some effort to schematize very incipient processes. And I knew that I was offering schemes in an area where there were not many schemes at that time. But, no, I had no idea. Of course, as time passes, and as I get more reactions and readings and revisions from others, I can see now why it would have a lot of impact. But at that time I just thought it was very good for me because it pulled a lot of things together. But it could easily have been seen as very eccentric or over formal or premature or over cultural.

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TR: How long did it take to write it?

AA: I think not very long. I tend to write in very intense bursts. So it probably was not more than a month or so. I had been thinking about these things for a couple of years. I wrote a short version for *Theory, Culture and Society* and a slightly longer version for *Public Culture,* but they were very close in time. I still owe a great debt to Scott Lash and Mike Featherstone (1990) for putting this issue together. I think in some ways it may be very interesting to look at that issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*. It was one of the first inducements for people like myself to say: so what do you think this is about, what's going on here? It was an interesting moment, an interesting thing for that journal to have done at that time.

Five or even more scapes

TR: Why five scapes?

AA: I think, again, part of it is trying to identify the high points of what would have been a Marxist approach – ideology and infrastructure and big infrastructure, a little bit into the main things. And the financescape was because I thought somehow that finance was becoming important then. Now of course we take that for granted, but in 1998 we were just beginning to see the economy of manufacture and so on. But my feeling was more or less that these things were the main pieces of the older Marxian paradigm of what were the important factors or components. But since then I have seen it used, consciously or otherwise, for many things: soundscapes, cityscapes. Of course, in a loose way it allows people to evoke certain technologies or institutions without confining them to a single location. But, in the technical sense in which I was trying to use it in that essay, I would say it should not be indefinitely expanded. It is trying to identify some basic links between the conditions of material life and the conditions of art and imagination. So it should not be indefinitely multiplied, because then you can't keep your eye on the basic issue.

TR: I'm afraid I'm one of those people who have added scapes. I have been thinking of two: timescape and languagescape.

AA: Yes, yes. I don't feel it's a *bad* thing . . . the danger is if you lose sight of the basic tension. But the good thing is that it specifies all those

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categories. In other words it brings more practices in, as with language, and recognizes that these are all, let's call it both subjective and objective distributions. So there are languages, but a scape means you have a view of languages, that you are both a speaker and you inhabit a language, and that you also see other languages. So you are both a see-er and a do-er, so to speak. It's a very useful thing.

TR: I agree with you. You can't expand them indefinitely and you probably identified the most important. But one of them is mediascape. You are an anthropologist and you spotted this mediascape. How come?

AA: Well, I think, you know, it's because, as someone who grew up in India and whose interests were developed through area studies and who was watching India change, and who grew up in Bombay, which is the hub of the film industry, I was immersed in music and film in that particular way. Now everybody knows about Bollywood and so on, but in 1990 how many people knew what Bollywood was? So I think one answer to that question is that, sitting in a location like India, it was clear that this must be really terribly important to social transformation, both through the state and through the private sector. Especially, later, with videos and so on, I would say it was inescapable. People like myself also saw at that time that there was no anthropology of the media. This has been almost completely developed since that time. Now it's a very elaborate field, but in 1990–94 there wasn't much of it. I would say it's all been in the last 10 years or so. So, again, it was very much an ethnographic fact. You couldn't escape it. But it was immediately clear to me that you had to draw on many fields: sociology, communication and so on. And, again, in the journal *Public Culture*, because we had tried to examine these things on a global basis, we immediately realized that many fields were doing this. Not only media studies, but in fact you might even say that media studies, as opposed to communication, was itself coming into shape at this time. As far as I know, you can't really speak of media studies in the1930s or 1940s. Mass communication yes, but media studies no.

TR: Yes, it's a European term as well. But the problem I have been having when trying to use your scapes is the difference between technoscape and mediascape. If you think of media *and* communications, there is both technology and content, and you have this difficulty that communication is in your technoscape and then content is in your mediascape.

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AA: I think perhaps I didn't adequately, then or even later, explain why those look different to me, deserve different names. And, again, I think it was probably due more to my background in India. In the period in which I worked there technology meant more engineering, dams, railroads, huge physical structures. Whereas communication meant messages and so on.

TR: But that was still the period of modernization, wasn't it, and now we are in a different era.

AA: That's completely right. What I mean is, that was probably at the back of making that distinction. But I would say that for me technology, even today, is a much wider thing than media. Media is message-production technology, of whatever kind. But technology is just any kind of technology.

TR: So do you think that, for example, the internet is in the mediascape and not in your technoscape?

AA: I think it would be in both, as a matter of interest. But if you ask me about railroads I would not say they are also in the mediascape. And railroads are still important. Or other large buildings. I would say looking at the World Trade Towers, when they existed, as primarily mediascape is not useful. But certainly tall buildings are a huge matter of technology and the technological imagination and so on. Or if you look at prosthetics. They are part of the technological. You might say in some moot sense that everything's about mediation – what is not? But the internet certainly has to be looked at both ways.

Americanization

TR: I think one of the issues there is that you critique the concept of Americanization and media imperialism, as it is in our field. So, do you think there are any circumstances where the concept of Americanization makes sense?

AA: Oh sure, the critique was to say that it's not the only process of cultural domination that is relevant. There tended to be a kind of isolation of Americanization from other processes. Let's say, to give an example, Japanese popular media overtaking South-East Asia – Americanization doesn't capture that. Or the Indianization of Pakistan.

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This goes on in many places and so that was one of my reservations. On the other hand, I think Americanization is certainly a useful and important term, and today even more than in the 1990s. It's evident that concern about some kind of American cultural penetration of the world is very intimately tied to 9/11, you know, to anger and resentment. So it's clear that there's something surrounding Americanization, an American presence which is very complex and very real. So I certainly would not say it's a bad term. Just that it's not the only process of that kind.

TR: But you think that Americanization now may be even stronger than it was at the time when you were writing the article?

AA: It's a very interesting point. I think it's very powerful. Its political expression is obviously particularly powerful under the current regime in the US, Iraq and so on. But the reason I hesitate to say it is strong*er* is because other world views have become so much more capable of projection on a large scale. So in that sense it's a relative matter. Maybe Americanization has increased somewhat. But some others have come from nowhere to being very powerful.

TR: But when you talk about Russification, for example, that is not what happened when the Wall came down. There is no other super power to challenge the US.

AA: That's perfectly right. But you might say – though I don't like to get into this Two-World view – that Islam now is projected more successfully even than America. It may not be equal in straightforward political power terms, but it's a huge global presence. There aren't many like that, but still America is not the only one that projects itself on a world-wide basis. But, yes, America. The complexity in this is that it's difficult to decide between Americanization and the kind of false American images, symbols and messages and US power, the state power. The two are so closely tied that when you combine them, it seems overwhelming. But if you separate them, maybe slightly less so.

TR: One final question. What are the difficulties when we do research beyond the nation?

AA: Well, I think the primary one is to try to imagine units of study which are not somehow naturalized in the nation. We know that the

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history of the social sciences is very connected to the issue of the nation. The basic unit is always the nation. So, when we compare, we compare nations. Why do we do that? We could compare regions. We could compare half of Finland with half of Japan.

TR: Or cities . . .

AA: Or cities, or many other forms. So I think the first thing is to think of other salient physical, spatial collections of human beings which are significant, which are not the nation and which may be more fruitful to study for purposes of comparison or connectivity. I think that's the main thing. The second, I think, is to deepen our understanding of trans-local identities, partly through immigration studies, but also other kinds of studies. So I think looking at people whose identities transcend a single location, so-called diaspora studies, is quite important. It's important to think about it not just substantively, but methodologically, how you do it. Thirdly, a renewed attention to circulatory processes as opposed to comparing static blocks. Actually looking at circulation – again the old Marxian problematic of widening it. And finally, perhaps – and being an area studies person I think I imply this – thinking beyond the nation means recognizing that everyone today has a picture of the whole and that we don't know enough about the ways in which people in other places see not only themselves but the whole. So, to me, it is a matter of thinking beyond the nation, as I was using the term somewhat more politically and ethically, even if you remove politics and ethics and think of it simply as matter. These will be some of the ways in which it will be fruitful, whether or not one thinks the nation is embattled or in crisis. Now, unlike in 1996 when I was more convinced that the nation was in a kind of terminal crisis – and that may still prove to be true – I often say to people that there is no reason the nation is more eternal than any other form, but what is certain is that we have many other forms of sovereignty. That to me is clear. Whether or not the nation is in crisis there are many competitors in the sovereignty business. That's what I'd say now, as opposed to 10 years ago.

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Notes

1 http://www.newschool.edu/pressroom/history.html, consulted 22 September 2005.
2 http://www.newschool.edu/gf/anthro/faculty/appadurai/, consulted 21 September 2005.
3 http://www.newschool.edu/gf/history/faculty/breckenridge/index.htm, consulted 23 September 2005.
4 http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/dup/pcult, consulted 15 September 2005.
5 An interview with Hannerz will be published in *Global Media and Communication*, 2006, 2(3).
6 An interview with Sassen will be published in *Global Media and Communication*, 2006, 2(2).
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