How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective

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1. Global Cultural Flows

Cultural objects including images, languages, and hairstyles now move ever more swiftly across regional and national boundaries.* This acceleration is a consequence of the speed and spread of the internet and the simultaneous, comparative growth in travel, cross-cultural media and global advertisement. The power of global corporations to outsource various aspects of their activities, ranging from manufacture and distribution to advertising and commerce, 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. Additionally, this volatile and exploding traffic in commodities, styles, and information has been matched by the growth of both flows of cultural politics, visible most powerfully in the discourse of human rights, but also in the new languages of radical Christianity and Islam, and the discourse of civil society activists, who wish to promote their own versions of global equity, entitlement, and citizenship. The dynamics of modernization remain an essential feature of global cultural flows. Global corporations now compete for markets, such as bio-technology, digital media, drinking water, energy credits, financial derivatives (as we now know) 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 lateral markets which involve traffic in human organs, armaments, precious metals, and sex work, to name but four examples, make extensive use of the power of the internet, of satellites using cell phones and other sophisticated communications technologies. They also take full advantage of the differential policing of national boundaries, of the destruction of many rural economies, and the corruption of state that characterizes many parts of the world. Such illegal commodity circuits, for example in Africa, also bring apparently desolate economies to major ports and commercial

* This text is based on a lecture the author held at the opening ceremony of the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" at Heidelberg University on October 20, 2008.

hubs, such as Rotterdam, through the global movement of everyday commodities like refrigerators, air-conditioners, cars and other consumer durables. The diamond market consists of sophisticated networks linking mines and armies, cutting and marketing middlemen in India, as well as major dealers and showrooms in London, Antwerp, and New York; it is now also deeply connected to instances of extreme social violence in such places as Sierra Leone, Zaire, and Angola. (De Boeck 2001; Nordstrom 2007).

It is important to appreciate that these varied commodity circuits are themselves mutually connected. Thus the capacity of global financial players to electronically move large sums 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 and significantly fuelled the recent precipitous global financial melt-down. These inequalities–I think of cities such as Mumbai, Hong Kong or São Paulo–fuel the growth of large urban under-classes, which are potential fodder for the work of global crime-syndicates, engaged in traditional forms of smuggling, cross-border trade and the relatively new politics of urban terror. The latter kind of politicized crime is perpetrated by the criminal networks, which grew out of Mumbai, and are now located in Karachi, Dubai, Kathmandu, Bangkok, and beyond. They create a new geography relating the Persian Gulf to different parts of south and south-east Asia; they are directly involved in the politics of violence, which exists in Kashmir and elsewhere in South Asia and, in conjunction with the abovementioned types of commodity links, they underpin the financial infrastructure of networks such as Al Qaida, which was originally built through the globalized construction enterprises of the Bin Laden family.

From inspecting these multiple commodity networks and chains we can conclude that the newer forms of circulation exemplified by global financial markets, instruments and regulations also affect the overall capitalization of older commodity chains, both illegal and legal, such as those involved in the flows of labor, drugs, arms, and precious metals. Without making too big a case out of this: these new things ride on older things, transform and reinvigorate them. Globalization creates 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 warfare, security, and peace in many societies.

The other major factor in all global commodity chains, ranging from the simplest to the most sophisticated, is the explosive growth in highly

advanced tools for storing, sharing, and tracking information electronically both by the state and its opponents. For the world, the complexity of global cultural flows has had deep effects on what I once called the "production of locality" and the production of local subjectivity (Appadurai 1996). These flows and networks confound older models of acculturation, culture contact, and mixture, since they also brought new materials for the construction of subjectivity. The traffic of images of global suffering, for example, creates new communities of sentiment, which introduce empathy, identification, and anger across large cultural distances. For example, in Europe, wearing a veil, itself highly varied in different parts of the Islamic world, has become a flashpoint for education, fashion, and state authority in countries such as France, which was historically quite comfortable with sumptuous 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. This process is of special interest in the history of anthropology, since it brings the social fact of cultural difference square into the realm of politics and links cultural diversity to the most essential and universal human rights.

This process is not altogether benign: in many cases the capacity of what I call "small numbers" (Appadurai 2006) to press large political claims in the name of cultural difference can produce ethno-national mobilization and contribute to the conditions for genocide. Europe has seen a variety of reactions since the violence in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, including the rise of the openly anti-immigrant right in France, Austria, Sweden, Germany and Italy. Gingrich and Banks (2006) have recently succeeded in assembling something of an answer to this problem from an anthropological view. The global spread of human rights values is also a sign of the complex new forms of law and legality, which now effect the relation 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, during which

most societies found ways to accommodate external systems of meaning within their own cosmological frameworks, hence producing change by dialectical accident and structural combination (Sahlins 1987). Today, global cultural flows, whether religious, political or market produced, have entered into the manufacture of local subjectivities, thus changing both the machineries for the manufacture of local meaning and the materials that are processed by these machineries. Consequently, western citizens, law-makers, and many liberals debate ideas about refugee rights in terms of multi-culturalism, dual patriotism, diasporic dignity, and cultural rights–all of which are as new as the debates they seek to mediate. Likewise, this current period–approximately from the nineteen seventies to the present–is characterized by the flows not just of cultural substances, but also of cultural forms, such as the novel, the ballet, the political constitution, and divorce, to pick just a few examples.

The flow of these forms has affected major world historical processes such as nationalism (Anderson 1983; 1998). Today, however, the flow of forms also affects the very nature of knowledge, as whole disciplines, techniques, and ways of thinking move and transform in the process. Examples of global flows of such knowledge forms include the spread, say, of internet gaming in China; the growth of day-trading stocks in places like Tokyo, Shanghai, and beyond; the writing of constitutions in post-monarchic societies such as Nepal and the popularity throughout the world of such visual forms as Japanese Manga.

Crucial to an understanding of these cultural flows is *the relationship between the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms*. Forms such as novels, films, and newspapers meet well-established circulatory paths and circuits of religion, migration, and trade. But other cultural forms, such as ballet, animation, fashion photography, and grassroots political activism create circuits of circulation, which did not exist before. Thus the twenty-first century is witnessing new tensions between the actually circulating, cultural forms, and emerging, partially culturally formed circuits or networks that shape and cover the multiple paths of circulation. This dual structure of global cultural forms also generates what we may call the "bumps" or obstacles in regard to many cultural flows. The Chinese state, for example, is very keen to curb the internet, based on its right to regulate information and enforce social morality, just as members of the Falun Gong movement use global techniques of protest and communication to undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese state. Housing activists use the full force of their global allies and circuits to impede the capacity of local and city governments to displace slum-populations. Proponents of women's rights are in a daily race against

those who use global cultural circuits to argue and legitimize their own views on gender politics in the name of the value of cultural difference. Thus, these global cultural flows have a curious inner contradiction since they create some of the obstacles to their own freedom of movement and strangely self-regulate the ease with which they cross cultural boundaries. To summarize: knowing that there has always been flow, exchange, and mixture across social boundaries in human history, I take the *longue durée* very seriously. The fact that the same dynamics produce various cultural flows and the very obstacles, bumps, and potholes that impede their free movement, constitutes a highly significant, new development in our understanding of cultural flows in the era of globalization; it also ought to comfort those who worry that global flows will result in a simple and homogeneous cultural regime that covers the earth.

2. Some Dilemmas of Method

For some time now, social scientists and area studies scholars, including scholars of built forms, have been wondering about a basic problem: how can we compare social objects in a world where most such objects, whether nations, ideas, technologies and economies, seem deeply interconnected. The classic idea of comparison in fields as diverse as comparative literature, linguistics, and anthropology, relies on the notion that the objects to be compared are distinct and that comparison, therefore, remains unsullied by connectivity. Even in fields like anthropology and evolutionary biology, with their interest in the historical, evolutionary parentage of forms, such as kinship or language, the strategy of comparison treated objects for the purpose of comparison, as if they were formally quite separate. Indeed, comparison was a guide to the study of history and ancestry, rather than vice versa.

I want to suggest that we need to distinguish the problem of circulation from the problem of connectivity and look at various periods as being characterized by different levels of circulation. For example, there can be periods or contexts marked by a high level of connectivity without a high level of circulation, as in the case of the movement of Buddhism from India to much of Asia in the first millennium of the Christian era. Today, we find ourselves at the other end of the spectrum: we live in a world where both are at very high levels. Many low-tech and geographically isolated societies are limited in regard to both connectivity and circulation. Yet the societies of contemporary Turkey and Germany, with their high-level of circulation of Turkish guest workers to and from Germany, do not show a significant increase in connectivity.

In thinking about area studies, we need to recognize that histories produce geographies and not vice versa. We must get away from the notion that there is some kind of spatial landscape against which time writes its story. Instead, it is historical agents, institutions, actors, powers that make the geography. Of course, there are commercial geographies, geographies of nations, geographies of religion, ecological geographies, any number of geographies, but each one of them is historically produced. They did not pre-exist so that people could act in or with them. Perceiving histories as producing geographies offers a better grasp of the knowledge produced in the humanities, the social sciences, and even the natural sciences about the way in which regions, areas, and even civilizations emerge from the work of human beings. This emergence includes what I previously called the "work of the imagination" (Appadurai 1996), which humans do as they strive to extend their chances of survival, improve their horizons of possibility, and increase their wealth and security. Throughout human history, these activities, which are by no means solely the product of modernity, have characterized what I call the "production of locality": while human beings exercise their social, technical, and imaginative capacities, including the capacity for violence, warfare, and ecological selfishness, they literally produce the environments within which they function, including the biological and physical nature of these environments. The idea that histories produce geographies, which of course then in turn shape what happens to historical agents, holds at all scales including the city scale. In a variety of fields the relationship between circulation, comparison, and connectivity features an inner tension between structural approaches stressing comparison, and what may be labeled "historical approaches," which stress connectivity. The question, therefore, is whether we can develop a method that does not require a choice between the stress on comparison and the stress on connectivity. For an answer we have to return to the relationship between "the circulation of forms and the forms of circulation."

3. The Circulation of Forms

By "forms" I mean to indicate a family of phenomena, including styles, techniques, or genres, which can be inhabited by specific voices, contents, messages, and materials. Unfortunately, the philosophical conundrum of separating form from content cannot be unraveled in this essay. In using the word "form" I simply wish to temporarily place the issue of global circulation on a slightly more abstract level. The most recent forms to be discussed in this way are the "nation form" and the "novel form," whose relationship was forcefully argued by Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1983),

when he redefined nationalism by linking it to print capitalism, nation and narration, reading and citizenship, imagined and affected communities. There have been some additional inquiries into how the novel 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 Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1990), Benjamin Lee (Lee 1997), and a few others have shown that it, too, moves and inhabits local sites in complex ways. The idea of nation also circulates partly due to the production of new reading publics and new forms of writing and publication. The great American constitutional formula "We the People" is not only a performative, as Bonnie Honig (Honig 1991) and Jay Fliegelman (Fliegelman 1993), among others have shown, but 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 yield different and uneven geographies. There are novels without nations and nations without novels, so globalization is never a total project capturing all geographies with equal force. Indeed, the circulation of forms produces new and distinct genre experiments, many of which are forced to coexist in uneven and uneasy combinations. One 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. Instead, we need to probe the cohabitation of forms, such as the novel and the nation, because they actually produce new contexts through their peculiar inflection of each other.

A first step to escape the conundrum of the local and the global that many scholars are facing may be to accept that the global is not merely the accidental site of the fusion or confusion of circulating global elements. It is the site of the mutual transformation of circulating forms, such as the nation and the novel. Such transformations always occur through what I called earlier the "work of the imagination," which produces locality. In my 1996 work *Modernity at Large*, I stressed that the local was not just an inverted canvas on which the global was written, but that the local itself was a product of incessant effort. Today, that argument is relatively easy to accept, or to agree with, or even take for granted, but I want to add that this labor and this appropriation is first of all a matter of forms, styles, idioms, and techniques, rather than substantive stories, theories, bodies, or books. Thus the nation form represents a more vital circulating ingredient than any specific ideology of nationalism. The novel form is more important than any author or variation of the genre. The idea of "the

people" is more important than any specific populist ideology. The idea of a foundational legal document for a national polity outweighs this or that particular constitution. Finally, the "work of the imagination" and the circulation of forms produce localities not by the hybridization of contents, art, ideology, or technology, but by the negotiation and mutual tensions between each other. It is this negotiation which creates the complex containers which further shape the actual contents of local practice.

4. The Forms of Circulation

In closing, let me look at the forms of circulation. They are closely tied to the circuits through which they occur, the speed with which they occur, and the scale on which they occur.

Not everything moves through the same circuits: humans move in boats, ships, trains, and cars; pictures, words, and ideas move through a variety of other circuits, which now include cyberpaths of various kinds; blood circulates through certain circuits, money through others, arms, drugs, and diseases through yet others. Speed is a property that shapes the circulation of different forms; at the same time, it is an element of the forms of circulation. The 2002 invasion of Iraq, for example, clearly shows the uneven speeds of a host of messages, materials, and man-power, as well as media reports.

Spatial scope is another formal key feature of circulatory processes. Linguistically, mediated forms tend to have certain genres and produce effects over certain terrains. Therefore, recognizing that circulation itself has some formal properties, mainly in terms of time, space, and scale, I would modify my earlier argument that the uneven relationships between a variety of scapes–I used the term "ethnoscapes"–produced these junctures and differences in the global cultural economy. Today, I would make that suggestion more dynamic by arguing that the bumps and blocks, disjunctures and differences are produced by the variety of circuits, scales and speeds which characterize the circulation of cultural elements. Some examples and questions from Asia will illustrate this point: Why is there not greater interaction between the film industries of Hong Kong and Mumbai in regard to plots, characters, narratives, finances, production, or distribution? It is true that in the last few decades Mumbai film makers include Hong Kong, Singapore, and a few other monumental locations in their films, partly to offset the high costs of exotic locales such as London and New York, but also because some Indian filmmakers, especially from

the Madras based Tamil movie industry, are fascinated by the special consumer cultures of East Asia. However, the reverse is not true: Chinese, Japanese, or other major Asian movie industries do not head south towards India to enrich their own fantasies about the modern. The question is, why not? How many mainland Chinese have seen an Indian soap opera? How many Indians have seen and enjoyed a popular film from the mainland? How many Indian intellectuals can discuss India's relationship with North Korea with any authority? Have India's secular intellectuals wondered why communist China has been remarkably harsh with its own religious minorities? These are all questions about blockages, bumps, and interference in what is otherwise seen as a festival of interaction and celebration between India and China. In general, it is fair to say that any fast and heavy traffic is due to the force of the market of commodities and services, of capital and its flows, and the energies of entrepreneurship. Where the traffic is weak, it is generally a matter of cultural prejudices and of various state-policies. All modernities emerge in the tension between heavy traffic and the opposite, slow traffic. In other words, while it is true that histories produce geographies, the shape, form, and durability of these geographies is also a matter of obstacles, roadblocks, and traffic jams. In order to comprehend how alterity 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, I believe, is a theory that relates the forms of circulation to the circulation of forms. Such a theory can tell us something useful about the reason why universities move less swiftly than, say, AK47s and why, globally, democracy is held in higher esteem than the American presidency.

To really meet the challenge of comparison in a context characterized by high degrees of connectivity and circulation, which I believe defines our era of globalization, 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. I stress locality because, in the end, this is where our vitally important archives reside. Localities–in this world and in this argument–are temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms. They are not subordinate instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of its reality.

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