

THE CITY AS CONDUIT FOR GLOBAL FLOWS
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Within the world of current global cultural studies, Arjun Appadurai's framework for the five dimensions of global cultural flows is particularly relevant to an examination of cities. Appadurai has characterized contemporary global cultural flows as having five dimensions:

- 1) **Ethnoscapes** - the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons";¹
- 2) **Technoscapes** - the "global configuration ... of technology, ... both high and low, both mechanical and informational, [that] now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries";²
- 3) **Finanscapes** - the disposition of global capital, which flows through the technoscape at the speed of light and in unimaginable volumes;
- 4) **Mediascapes** - the "distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information ... and ... the images of the world created by these media";³
- 5) **Ideoscapes** - the ideological landscape composed of political ideas, terms and images (both of states and movements opposed to states).

These "scapes" are perspectival, in that, like landscapes, they appear different, depending on the angle from which they are viewed and by whom they are viewed. They are "imagined worlds" spanning the globe,⁴ but the same world may look very dissimilar to people located in Tokyo, Toronto or Tenerife. One's perspective will also be affected by one's historical, linguistic or ethnic background: for example, the mediascape as perceived by a Moslem teenager in Paris is quite different from the mediascape as viewed by a Canadian senior in Victoria.

Appadurai's central thesis with regard to this framework is that global cultural flows occur at different speeds and often (though not always) through different channels. The disjuncture between these flows, in his view, is the dominant issue in the politics of global culture.⁵ Certainly, in the public policy domain, this seemingly chaotic environment is leading to what another author, Jake Chapman of the Open University in the United Kingdom, has referred to as "system failure" – a policy environment where the combined effect of increasing complexity makes it difficult to predict the outcome of policy interventions. Appadurai's global cultural flows occur within the complex adaptive systems described by Chapman, where it is difficult to trace a direct relationship between cause and effect and where policy interventions based on the classic "command and control" model often have unintended consequences.⁶

While the five cultural flows are frequently deterritorialized – particularly mediascapes,

¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 7 (1990), p. 297.

² *Ibid.*, p. 297.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-299.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁶ Jake Chapman, *System Failure - Why governments must learn to think differently*, (London, 2002), pp. 11-12.

finanscapes and ideoscapes, which tend to operate in virtual space – they do converge in certain common spaces, and the spaces that most frequently act as conduits for these flows are cities. In today’s global environment, cities function as what Mike Featherstone (quoting Kopytoff and Hannerz) referred to as “global ecumenes” – regions of persistent cultural interaction and exchange.⁷ One could go even further and assert that cities are *created* by global cultural flows. Most immigrants settle in cities because that is where jobs, networks and other major aspects of the financial and technical infrastructure are located. The media and financial markets rely upon the concentration of people and ideas in cities to generate the intangible wealth of the global knowledge economy. In short, flows beget flows, and when things “work” the result is a city such as Toronto. In Toronto the ethnoscape reflects years of interprovincial and international migration which, when combined with the finanscape, the technoscape and the mediascape, has produced what some like to refer to as a “creative cluster” – a concentration of people, industries and cultural attractions that drives innovation and attracts investment to a city.⁸

Two major issues arise, however, out of this description of the city as a global ecumene or conduit for global cultural flows. This first is how any sense of local “spirit of place” can be maintained in such an environment. The second is how the seeds of chaos embedded within these flows can be controlled or at least contained – in other words, what can be done when the flows do not “work”.

Turning to the first issue, what does locality mean in this context, and how do global cultural flows affect it? Appadurai has suggested that locality is “a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and that yields particular sorts of material effects”.⁹ These structures of feeling cannot be separated from the actual historical, political and spatial settings where social life occurs. But, as Appadurai points out, locality is an inherently fragile social achievement. To be sustained, localities must produce both residents that feel connected to the locality and localities that sustain and reinforce the production of such residents. This has traditionally been an historical and dialectic relationship, reinforced by rituals, rites of passage and rules. However, as Appadurai notes, “special problems ... beset the production of locality in a world that has become deterritorialized, diasporic and transnational”.¹⁰

If one accepts Ann Swidler’s and Ulf Hannerz’s assertion that culture is “not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction” but is more like “a “tool-kit” or repertoire from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action”,¹¹ then it follows that the chaotic environment created by global cultural flows will produce a tool-kit of dizzying variety. Within this context, the production of a locality (or structure of feeling) that provides any sort of common base for strategies of action becomes an increasingly daunting challenge.

⁷ Mike Featherstone, “Global Culture: An Introduction” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 7 (1990), p. 6.

⁸ This concept is explored extensively in the work of Richard Florida, see for example, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, New York: Basic Books, 2002.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large - Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis, 1996), p. 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹ Ann Swidler, “Culture and Social Action” in Philip Smith (Ed.), *The New American Cultural Sociology*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 176.

Appadurai suggests that “the production of locality ... is more than ever shot through with contradictions”.¹² Nowhere are these contradictions more obvious than in attempts by governments, whether national, regional or local, to adapt the spatial environment of the city to accommodate global cultural flows. Convinced that culture is no longer a by-product of wealth, but a generator of wealth, many cities are attempting to establish “creative clusters” – areas of cities that serve as incubators of creativity by situating talented artists, software developers, designers and advertising firms in close proximity. These areas are often heritage districts or ethnic enclaves – frequently old manufacturing spaces that are transformed and gentrified by the influx of creative knowledge workers. A quick look at the urban development literature indicates that such a policy is being pursued by cities as disparate as Brussels, Glasgow, Boston, Leipzig and Manchester.¹³ The usual result of this transformation is, however, that property values in the creative cluster rise, driving out the artists, ethnic minorities and small businesses that created the cultural value in the first place. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the creative locality can give way to mega-development and homogenization, or what John Hannigan referred to in his book *Fantasy City* as “sanitized razzmatazz”.¹⁴

Addressing the second issue mentioned above – the inherent instability of living within a conduit – may prove to be even more problematic from a policy perspective. Attempts to attract global cultural flows must be looked at within the context of Appadurai’s disjunctive model, and nowhere is this more evident than in the most famous recent case where all five flows came together in a single, cataclysmic event centred within a major world-class city. The destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York City by two jetliners commandeered by Muslim terrorists on September 11, 2001 illustrates perfectly the negative consequences that can potentially occur when the disjunction among the five global cultural flows spins out of control.

The Muslim terrorists, moving with apparent ease within the global ethnoscape, utilized one of the quintessential elements of the global technoscape – the jetliner – to attack the world’s premier symbol of the finanscape – the World Trade Centre. They were clearly driven by the ideoscape of fundamental Islam, which views much of what a city like New York has to offer as offensive, if not oppressive, and which has spread its ideological roots throughout the world, in part through the mediascape. Almost instantaneously following the impact of the first jet, that same mediascape captured the images of destruction and disseminated them throughout the world, setting in motion a chain of actions within the Western ideoscape that will continue to have major transnational repercussions, possibly for the next three or four decades.

No one who lived through the events of September 11, 2001 will ever forget that their focal point was New York City. It was the city that acted as the conduit and the catalyst for all five “scapes”. In that one searing instant, it became clear that institutions, whether at the international, national or sub-national level, must take into account the quantity, the quality, the velocity and the composition of all five types of global cultural flows when developing policy, especially in the cities where they converge.

¹² *Modernity at Large - Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 198.

¹³ See for example Eurocities Network, *Eurocities Awards on Innovative Urban Strategies 2002 - Culture as a Driving Force for Cities* (available at <http://www.eurocities.org>).

¹⁴ John Hannigan, *Fantasy City - Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis*, (New York, 1998), p. 67.

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