

Danny de Vries, April 27, 1999

### **Buzzwords**

Globalization has me in its grip. With my mind wondering about the possibilities of travelling to far away places--Mexico, Guatemala, Burgundy, Amsterdam, Bloomington--neighborhood "spring-day-fun" powerfully tempts me to drop the ball and run to the nearby organic grocery store to buy one of these funky international beers. Out of my window I can see a world of activity: Roemenians bike, Dutch garden, Turkish carrying carpets, Mexicans playing music, Chileans talking to the Guatemalians, African-Americans firing the barbeque and white Americans polishing their trucks. What to do with this multicultural mix of people wondering about in my front yard, distracting me from my quest to make any sense of the condition called "globalization"? For many the term is just one more buzzword flowing around in the spaces of daily life. Something businesses and governments are fond of, but which seems to be only of peripheral relevance to the life of the Todd Street community. At least that's what they told me. Shoud I go ask them? What is the big deal anyway?

For anthropology the big deal seems rather overwhelming. Used to studying the "local, bounded, and far away," its historical niche of filling the "savage slot" with some human decency and cultural relativity seems to have become increasingly marginal. According to Appadurai "standard cultural reproduction is now an endangered activity that succeeds only by conscious design and political will"(1996, 54). In the new globalized order of high speed communication and movement the strong sense of "Other" has come to be replaced by a weak sense of "others," (Harvey, 1990, 301) leaving the Anthropologist puzzled to what exactly has become of the nature of concepts like culture and the local "place." The humble locality on Todd Street seems to at least represent something of this new cosmopolitan world by bringing together people from all over the globe in a sort of Appaduraian "ethnoscape" of moving populations. Would we have ever come to Todd Street if images, stories, airplanes, or monies would not have lured us away from our previous cultural localities? Appadurai would describe our neighborhood as quite transnational, deterritorialized and drenched with "divergent interpretations of what locality implies." Of course one would be naive to think we do share anything else but the very fact that we all live in the same neighborhood. But is

this sharing of place not enough reason to give the ethnographer her preferred locality back to conduct fieldwork in?

Appadurai's point however does not only seem to be the disappearance of locality as a place in which to do conduct ethnographic fieldwork or the increasing occurrence of multicultural neighborhoods such as our own. All these are clear examples of an increasingly globalizing world. But more importantly, Appadurai would point out Todd Street as an example of the shifting nature of this place from an elementary and more contingent reality as it might have been in its golden days to a crossroads of multicultural fantasies and imaginations as it stands today. In the globalized world, the mobilization of fashion, pop art, life styles and histories through television, internet and other media images have become so much part of daily life that we are entrenched to the bone. Where large scale realities have become embedded in concrete life worlds, intersecting imaginations can be traced through the genealogy of our small, microcosmopolitan neighborhood. The ethnographer would be surprised wandering around in the humble Todd Street of Carrboro. Quite a challenge, I would say.

Both Harvey and Appadurai strongly link the emergence of the global village--seen as the capitalist battleship-icon of global competition--to the postmodern crisis, as it is reflected into the disappearance of the ethnographic locality in Anthropology. Although translocal processes and capitalism have for centuries been active in shaping the global world, the recent explosion of technical advancement has drastically elevated this process to quite a different level. In today's world a "disorganized capitalism" (Appadurai) struggles to compete within an increasingly volatile market through the imposition of a flexible regime of accumulation. According to Harvey (298), the breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value has caused a crisis of representation in capitalism itself. The ever increasing speed in which the financial market is organized on a global scale, including the increasing role of credit, motivates extreme eclecticism into labor practices, a rapid deployment of new organizational forms, and an accelerated turnover time in production, consumption and labor processes. Harvey suggests that this should be seen as a high point of a highly problematic intersection of money, time and space in which money as a central value system is dematerialized and shifting, time horizons are collapsing, and space has become confused and mixed up. The resulting "time-space compression" grasps its inhabitants through an

overwhelming sense of ephemerality, fragmentation, instantaneity, and disposability (285). It not only affects the business markets and policy makers in the form of stress as it becomes harder and harder to plan ahead and react accurately to events, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, affects human cultural psychology in the form of a crisis of experience.

According Harvey (305) there is an omnipresent danger that our mental maps will not match current realities anymore. The technological possibility to massively and simultaneously distribute "simulacra" (exact copies, Harvey, 301) in an intensely competitive "global village" has forced capitalism to saturate the market with images of taste and opinion. Advertising and image production has become the major locus of corporate competition, surpassing in importance the commodities themselves. These "commodified images" bring a mass mobilization of fashion into mass markets and cause considerable sensory overload problems: blocking out of stimuli, denial, cultivation of blasé attitude, reversion of images of a lost past, and excessive simplification. Through a Disney World of imagination the simulacra bring together different worlds, while concealing perfectly their real traces of origin (Harvey, 300).

Appadurai (1996) suggest that in the new postmodern world, imagination is no longer mere fantasy, simple escape, elite passtime or mere contemplation, but has instead become a *social practice*: a form of work as labor and culturally organized action and a "form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility." Apparently infinite fantasies and imaginations have replaced the relatively finite set of possible lives provided by that magical concept called "tradition." As a result we cannot think except in fragments (291): volatility and ephemerality make it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity. Brouillard calls it "the triumph of effect over cause, of instantaneity over time depth, of surface and of pure objectivation over the depth of desire" (Harvey, 291).

Both Appadurai and Harvey's claim that traditional Neo-Marxists models which analyse commodity production need to be revisited to be made relevant again. Appadurai claims that the fetishism of the commodity has been replaced by two mutually supportive descendants: production fetishism, the masking of global flows to create an illusoir sense of local and national control, and consumer fetishism, the masking of producer agency to create an illusoir sense of consumer agency. Both fetishisms play into the maintenance of a sense of locality, a regional differentiation, which Harvey (296) describes as crucial

for the capitalist system to feed upon. In such places, the fabrication of locality takes on an entire new dimension when corporatist forms of governance flourish to support musealization and rigidization of what is essentially a manufactured identity. A central paradox of globalization thus lies in the fact that the less important the spatial barriers become, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variation of place within space, and the greater the incentives for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital (Harvey, 296). However, Harvey contends that in the end all we end up with is a serial monotony copying already known patterns into the same ambience from city to city. Appadurai seems somewhat less pessimistic about this, claiming that theories of homogenization often fail to consider the rapid indigenization of new forces. According to him, overemphasis on homogenization can also be exploited by nation states to posit their minorities in track with an ideal of globalization which is more real.

The gist of the argument is however clear: the capitalist global village creates a hegemonic situation in which the "micro" and the "macro" become merged into a system of mutual dependence. This hegemonic capitalist system is built upon imagined worlds (Anderson, 1983), motivated by Disney-like brainwashing and a strongly deterritorializing break with the cultural reproduction of its consumers, while suppressing its exploitative tendencies by pastiche and nostalgia, and an imaginary built around reruns. As Appadurai puts it: "even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanizing of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to play of the imagination" And even when movements of opposition manage to confront the mega disruptions of home, community, territory and nation, the superior command of capitalism over space and time continues to define the dominant hegemony. The fundamental power of controlling time--working time, family time, industrial time, religious time--and space--planning, zoning, travelling--is all pervasive, even despite the Marxist notion that the capitalist system itself is highly unstable due to its inherently inconsistent and contradictory fundamentals (Harvey, 180). Protection against the imposed ephemerality of a highly volatile and competitive market and its spinning flood of images for all players concerned lies in a sort of "habitus with the stress improvisation" (Appadurai, 1996): flexible hiring practices or sub-contracting on the part of the producers, and a resort to deeper questions of meaning and interpretations aiming for the need to discover or manufacture some kind of

eternal truth on the part of the consumers (Harvey, 292). While the home has become "a private museum to guard against the ravages of the time-space compression" (Harvey, 292), images have become to stand for the authority of corporations, governments, and political and intellectual leaders through an all pervasive mediatization of politics.

Where does Anthropology stand in the midst of this ocean of power, media images and fabricated identities? When translated in such fundamental terms as time and space, even the holy cow of academic thought seems highly influenced by the postmodern condition. Traditional disciplinary academic structures seem to be undergoing the same sort of mixing and shuffling of territories, including the masking of funding structures to the benefit of the still pervasive and illusory idea of local control, as is the case in the economy of world politics. For Anthropology, the seizure of the dominant culture concept of anthropology by several other equally competent disciplines (sociology of culture, poststructuralism, culture studies and literary studies), implies an equally chaotic postmodernist trend where it is not "micro versus macro" anymore (Apparudai, 54), but a muddling of fact with fiction. And while the claim of objectivity has remained paramount within traditional disciplines, this poststructuralist tendency slowly erodes the wall of academic neutrality in favor of the same dominant force which has been hijacking the global mind in the past decades.

In the end, Anthropology's role in this new world of "think globally, act locally" seems uncertain at best. However, both Harvey and Appadurai suggest ways to approach the new situation. The significance given by Harvey to the historical analysis of time and space is well taken. Both Appadurai and Harvey share an interest in a revised Neo-Marxist attention to the centrality of commodities--in this case in the form of images--in understanding cultural forms. Appadurai suggests that "ethnography redefines itself as that practice of representation that illuminates the power of large scale, imagined life possibilities over specific life trajectories" (Appadurai, 55), like a habitus with the stress on the improvisation. Interestingly, his proposed macroethnographical model incorporates sophisticated academic images such as fractals, scapes, chaos, and self-organization which seem rather "up to date" considering the arguments laid out (perhaps globalization had him in his grip as well). Appadurai's model for a global cultural theory points to the importance of understanding system dynamics, especially one as widespread,

chaotic and volatile as the global cultural system of today. As such, social theory seems to be getting fairly close to an historical ecological investigation of multi temporal and spatial dynamics of interrelated elements. Harvey's attention to the importance of time in space as organizing forces in human social experience directly speak to this overlap as well: the malleability of space and time in the human experience directly suggest the influence of an historical dimension in which any representation takes it form. As such, history--especially modern history--becomes key to understanding the condition of "globalization."

However, one aspect which strikes me as interesting is the sometimes not too subtle negativity concerning this new cultural condition, especially on the part of Harvey. Although it would of course be naive to think "globalization" is all wonderful, as your average business seminar would make you believe, these insights do seem to be lacking in focusing on the positive aspects of this development. What about the possibility to start a global dialogue on environmental conservation? What about the increasing diversity of ideas and goods flowing around in hyperspace to be used to educate the world on tolerance and cultural plurality? What about the possibility to spread educational systems all over the globe, as simulacrums, to address poverty, crisis, conflict, ecology? The possibility of using the new global infrastructure to the benefit of the entire global community lies in the ways policy makers deal with the problems at hand and leave room for the public to be educated on both challenges and contributions to today's world. As such, globalization can make or break us, and all we can do is accept our responsibility to deal with it. The role of Anthropology in such a situation might be paramount in contributing to the analysis of new, old, hybrid, manufactured, imagined, fantasized and museumized cultural forms. It is only through such understanding that dialogue can take place between different cultures. A dialogue which eventually must lead the locality of the neighborhoods to support any fundamental adjustment in change of lifestyle.

Appadurai, Arjun 1996. *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press

Harvey, David 1990 *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Blackwell Publishers