



The Civilization of Clashes

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review of:

Appadurai Arjun (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (PB: pp. 153, £9.99, ISBN: 0-8223-3863-7)

Thoughtful, insightful, multilayered, *Fear of Small Numbers* delivers its promise – to cast light over the harshest results of globalization. More so, I believe that *Fear of Small Numbers* is a book of lasting relevance, not only because it is acutely attuned to the changed and changing nature of organizing, identity and politics, but also because it is so utterly committed to the globalization of hope.

The point of departure of *Fear of Small Numbers* is an investigation of the shadow sides of globalization – large-scale political violence, ethnic cleansing, social exclusion and ethno-cultural antagonisms. These issues of pressing urgency, of which we have seen an outburst over the past two decades, are occurring all the while the world is engaged in an increasingly intense exchange of images and ideas and is becoming intricately interconnected through new technologies, global flows of capital and people. *Fear of Small Numbers* provides Appadurai's explanation of the linkages between what he refers to as contemporary ethnocidal violence, the global political economy and the changed modus operandi of potentially lethal, but also potentially emancipatory transnational communities.

I would say that *Fear of Small Numbers* contributes to the collected body of work of scholars who, alongside Appadurai, are writing against the culturalization of politics, to use Žižek's (2007) term, and call for a more nuanced analysis of political violence and the nature of cultural and religious identities, associated with it. In that sense, Appadurai shares his viewpoints with Sen (2006), and his argument that we need to de-essentialize and broaden our view of social identity. Sen's (2006) book *Identity and Violence* can be seen as an in-depth appeal to abandon reductionist notions of civilizational divisions and religious identities as the causes of the violence we are witnessing today. Appadurai's contribution here is to reconnect the notion of identity to the political economy, social exclusion and the ideology of national-ethnic purity.

Similarly, *Fear of Small Numbers* echoes Mohanty's (2003) critique of growing social and economic inequalities around the globe, as well as the significance and potential of

progressive grassroots movements. Here, even if Mohanty (2003) approaches grassroots movements from a feminist point of view, while Appadurai discusses these movements as one form of transnational network organizations, I can see how both authors' observations point to the importance to recognizing and understanding these new platforms for social action, which do not necessarily operate on the basis of a priori defined set of ideological premises or easily labelled activist stances. In that sense, even Mohanty (2003) points to that while some of these movements may never choose the label of feminism to describe themselves, the betterment of living and social conditions for women in the Third World are an integral part of their accomplishments.

Finally, I can also see a parallel to Bauman's (2006) analysis of social uncertainty as one key feature of our social life in *Liquid Fear*. Bauman's (2006) book is an inventory of the fears of our age, characterized by uncertainty of what the threat is and what we can do to counter it, among which the fear of terrorism and large-scale violence is one among several. Thus, Bauman's (2006) investigation of modern anxieties can be seen as an exploration of social insecurities in their full spectrum, while Appadurai's book attempts to explain the nature of terrorism and violence. However, Bauman is more narrowly focused on the Western societies in his analysis, while Appadurai's work brings global processes in view in a far broader fashion.

Appadurai's foremost contribution lies in how he weaves these observations into an overall diagnosis of the seemingly paradoxical world condition, where expansion of capital, liberal ideas and human rights is coupled with an outbreak of extreme political violence and ethnic cleansing. Appadurai's analysis goes beyond traditional models and theories, in its discussion of the features of the emergent global networks, violent and otherwise. One profound observation that Appadurai makes concerns the changing nature of organizing in the light of globalization. He coins two interrelated concepts, cellular and vertebrae organizations, as a way to better grasp the processes that are taking place. The terms 'vertebrae' and 'cellular' stem from biology, and as metaphors, bring forth biological associations. Vertebrae organizations, according to Appadurai's classification, represent the nation state and its derivatives, bound to the centralized structures such as national financial and political institutions and national ideologies. Vertebrae systems, of which nations are largest in scale, are defined by their adherence to a set of coordinated, regulative norms such as international treaties and agreements and symmetrical principles of mutual recognition between nations despite asymmetries of power or wealth. Corporations, according to this classification, have, over the past decades, become increasingly free from vertebrae structures via post-Fordist, flexible modes of production and accelerated mobility of capital and technology and combine cellular and vertebrae features. On the other side of the spectrum, we have cellular organizations, which, in turn, are networks, such as terrorist cells, functioning in concordance with global flows.

The most interesting feature of cellular organizations, I would say, is not so much their ability to retain contours and direction despite their being decentralized or their self-replicating capacity, but lies in how these organizations cut across the conventional boundaries and grounds of classification. It seems to me that the notion of cellular organization is founded on the observation that the relationship between identity and politics is itself made disjunctive under the conditions of globalization. Something is

left out of focus if we continue to imagine transnational networks as groupings of people on the basis of profession, class interests, national and regional origin and such. Sure, such networks exist, their influence is growing and they do play a significant role in the global economy, which we can also find out by browsing through Friedman's (2005) *The World is Flat*. What Appadurai seems to be saying is that global conditions of social insecurity and growing social injustices create a certain type of politics, and these politics can only be understood via people's location within the global economic system now, not by tracing their various traditional affiliations. The many types of anti-Americanism, the mobilization of terrorist cells across the national and class boundaries, and, on the other side of the spectrum, progressive grassroots movements which defy the generalized universal language of identity and interest, cannot be understood without taking this emergent type of politics into account.

So Appadurai's answer is yes, we are witnessing clashes across the globe, but these clashes are misunderstood if treated as clashes among civilizations, particularly if civilizations are seen as racialized and geographical fortresses of culture. Rather, we have entered an age where wars are waged in the name of ideology alone, within traditions, within nations and within the global world system. If the social fuel of these violent clashes is insecurity, uncertainty and surplus rage, it is by far easier to grasp the struggles and the violence, unleashed in the name of national ethnos and eradication of the minorities as the reminder and a threat to the intrinsic incompleteness of national purity. Cellular organizations remain difficult to pin down in terms of conventional political allegiances and divisions, mainly because they are born of and conditioned by the global system of flows, and so the temptation to succumb to categorization of struggles into clashes of monolithic civilizational identities seems to be an easy solution for many.

I daresay that the political potential of cellular organizations remains somewhat insufficiently explored in *Fear of Small Numbers*, yet we must keep in mind that this question is not only of paramount importance for critical social sciences, it is also a question which is admittedly difficult to answer. Recent debate within political sciences indicates this, how the very notion of left politics cannot be understood without the new global landscapes in consideration, and yet the politics of these new landscapes are not always clear (e.g. Therborn, 2007). We don't have to look far to find examples of how the global political economy juxtaposes elements of political orientation. New types of migration create unprecedented tensions between identities of origin, residence and aspiration. Global flows enable, and many times compel large groups of people from various peripheries of the world to seek their destiny in the metropolises of the globe despite social exclusion and imperialist cultural imagery, processes which produce new alliances and new struggles.

Appadurai traces the links between the indignation over social exclusion, subordination to American standards in a vast variety of areas, anything from academic standards to international policies, and the incidents when disillusioned youth identifies with the social imaginary of cellular terrorist organizations in order to create a sense of belonging to a greater global majority. Appadurai provides many examples of paradoxical life projects and politics, and is probably at his best when he discusses cellular grassroots movements which accomplish change in a qualitatively different

manner than the customary charity or protest-oriented humanitarian work. In so far as *Fear of Small Numbers* is concerned, I would say that Appadurai analyzes the question of politics and cultural identity specifically, consistently with the questions he raises. Yet the cellular world of political action as such probably requires a book of its own, which would include other contemporary movements, such as networks based on sexual and gender identity, or online file sharing communities.

There is one other remark to make regarding Appadurai's observations concerning the disjunctive landscapes of contemporary political movements and ideology. The question of gendered imagery and the relationship between ultra-masculinist rhetoric, nationalist 'predatory identities' and the mobilization of cellular counter-movements seems to be touched upon only in a fleeting manner. Appadurai does write of how the notion of saving Muslim women from Muslim patriarchy is effectively exploited by the Indian Hindu nationalists, an example which is characteristic of how nationalist imagery incorporates and uses the notion of oppressed Muslim women. At the same time, it is important to remember that the exploitation of the imagery of oppressed Muslim women is by no means limited to Hindu nationalism, as that very trope keeps returning as a part of the war rhetoric and as an argument for boundary creation or social exclusion.

I am also inclined to argue that the issue of gender identity and gendered imagery need to be investigated further, and that the clashes we are witnessing, albeit intracivilizational, would be better understood if masculinity was included in the analysis. One obvious example of the problematic of not including gender in the analysis lies in the possibilities for young women, in contrast to young men, to negotiate their position vis-à-vis nation states which exclude them and certain type of violent cellular organizations, which seem to appeal to a primarily masculinist sentiment. The complication also lies in the far greater concessions women are required to make in their travels within the global circuits of labour. I also wonder whether sexual and gender identity has a considerable impact on the manoeuvring routes and new-found communities of those seeking opportunities within the metropolises of the world. In other words, Appadurai's analysis could be enriched by a dialogue with scholars, such as Mohanty (2003), who include the gendered dimension of globalization into their analysis.

Fear of Small Numbers, as Appadurai suggests already from the very start, is an essay and indeed should be read as one or several essays on interlinked topics such as the double-edged status of cultural minorities, as the victims of cultural violence, and as perpetrators of terror, the emergence of new organizational structures within which means of mass destruction and ideological mobilization reside vis-à-vis nation states, or the roots and the diversity of anti-American sentiments. The broad terrain the book covers is its strength and its weakness. Appadurai provides many empirical examples, many of which are based on the case of India and Hindu nationalism, which are illustrative of his argument, yet do not amount to a convincing empirical case per se. Similarly, Appadurai coins a large number of concepts such as ideocide and civicide, or cellular and vertebrae organizations, some of which do not amount to a fully crafted theory in its own right, with which we can proceed to assert what is afoot in our globalized world. The abundance of terminology bears with it other, more problematic

risks as well, namely those of simplified appropriation of the terminology without any in-depth consideration of the theoretical foundation and politics, underpinning Appadurai's book.

On the other hand, the breadth of the book also tells us something about the nature of the investigated phenomena. *Fear of Small Numbers* is a decentralized piece of writing which follows ideas across nations, historical events, levels of analysis and disciplinary boundaries. In that sense, Appadurai's book is a mapping of the changing terrain of the globalized world, providing us with the necessary landmarks to dive in and explore certain aspects of it in greater depth and detail. I am inclined to argue that the scope of analysis of the book is characterized by a certain cellularity *per se*, a reminder that interconnectedness, and not isolation, is the key feature of contemporary phenomena.

Appadurai introduces his essay as produced during an intellectual transition, an itinerary which begins with the investigation of the harshest effects of globalization and lands in the discovery of grassroots movements and their radically emancipatory potential. *Fear of Small Numbers* presents only the preliminary results of the observations Appadurai has made concerning the emancipatory, humanitarian movements, within which the hopes for a better future for large parts of the world's population may very well reside. Between the violence and the hope, *Fear of Small Numbers* is an intellectual exploration of some of the novel and major features of globalization, an inspiring and informative book for any scholar who wishes to engage with questions of identity, politics and organizing in a non-parochial manner.

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