

## RETHINKING GLOBAL CULTURE: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ARJUN APPADURAI'S GLOBALISM

**Van-Ha Luong Thi**

Institute for Preservation and Development  
of Traditional Culture,  
Hanoi, VIETNAM

vanha2908@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This paper examines the theoretical contributions of Arjun Appadurai to the study of cultural globalism through four of his major works: *The Social Life of Things* (1986), *Modernity at Large* (1996), *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013). Appadurai's innovative concepts, such as "scapes", "imagination as a social practice" and "ethics of possibility", have reframed how we understand cultural flows, identity, and globalisation in the 21st century. By reviewing existing scholarship and applying thematic analysis, this study synthesises key insights from his works and explores their relevance in contemporary debates on global culture, nationalism, and future-oriented thinking. This paper contributes to cultural sociology by emphasising the continued importance of Appadurai's ideas for understanding the disjunctures and potentials of global modernity.

**Keywords:** cultural globalism, Arjun Appadurai, globalisation theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is often discussed in economic or political terms, but culture remains a vital domain through which it is lived, negotiated, and contested. Arjun Appadurai has emerged as one of the most influential voices in rethinking global culture beyond homogenization narratives. His work focuses on the unpredictable, disjunctive nature of global cultural flows and the role of imagination in shaping social futures. This paper explores Appadurai's ideas across four major books to understand how he conceptualises culture in an era of global transformation. The central question this paper addresses is: How does Appadurai

theorise cultural globalism, and why is his framework significant for understanding contemporary global dynamics?

To answer this question, the paper undertakes a thematic analysis of Appadurai's four key works—*The Social Life of Things* (1986), *Modernity at Large* (1996), *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013). By examining the development of his core concepts—global flows, imagination, fear, and futurity—this study offers a comprehensive synthesis that reveals the evolution and coherence of his thought. It also integrates and critically engages with existing scholarship that supports or challenges his framework, highlighting both its theoretical innovations and its limitations. In doing so, the paper contributes a more integrated and diachronic interpretation of Appadurai's approach to cultural globalism and demonstrates its enduring relevance in addressing the complexities of contemporary global transformations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Arjun Appadurai: A Brief Biography

Arjun Appadurai is an Indian-American anthropologist born in 1949. He earned his PhD from the University of Chicago and has held academic positions at Yale University, the New School, and New York University. Appadurai's research is distinguished by its interdisciplinary nature, bridging anthropology, sociology, media studies, and political theory. His work consistently centres on how globalisation reshapes cultural practices, identities, and the experience of locality.

Appadurai has been instrumental in shifting the study of globalisation toward more culturally nuanced and multidimensional analyses. His theories have been widely adopted in fields such as media studies, migration studies, urban studies, and international development. His concept of *disjunctive globalisation* has become foundational in cultural studies and critical communication theory (Rai 2018). His influence also extends to public discourse, where his

ideas have shaped conversations around cosmopolitanism, diasporic politics, and the ethics of future-making (NYU, n.d.; Rai 2018).

While Appadurai has authored a wide range of essays and edited volumes, these four books mentioned above represent pivotal moments in the development of his intellectual framework, particularly in relation to globalisation, culture, and imagination. Two key themes that emerge from these works are the dynamic and disjunctive nature of global cultural flows and the transformative impact of globalisation on imagination and identity, including its contradictions and potential for conflict.

## **2.2. The Dynamic and Disjunctive Nature of Global Cultural Flows**

Appadurai's work emphasises the fluid and interconnected nature of the global landscape, moving away from static, localised understandings of culture. This idea is initially hinted at in *The Social Life of Things* (1986), which, reintroduced in the introduction to *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), explored how things “move across regimes of value, enable new commodity paths through diversions, and bridge worlds far apart in space and time through their own capacity to morph, without losing their cultural significance” (Appadurai 2013, 128). This early work laid the groundwork for understanding the dynamic trajectories of objects and their embedded cultural meanings in a broader context.

The concept is more developed in *Modernity at Large* (1996) through the framework of “global cultural flows”, which Appadurai categorizes into five dimensions or “scapes”: ethnoscapas (the flow of people), technoscapas (technological interactions), financescapas (capital flow), mediascapas (flow of media), and ideoscapas (the flow of ideologies). These “scapes” are not necessarily aligned; Appadurai stresses their “disjunctive” and “unpredictable” nature. He argues that the “new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (Appadurai 1996, 32-33). This disjuncture, or the gaps and contradictions between different global flows, becomes a crucial point of analysis. For example, Japan's

openness to foreign products contrasts with its reluctance to accept immigrants, illustrating such a disjuncture. (Appadurai 1996, 34).

*The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013) builds upon this by acknowledging the increased speed and spread of these flows due to the internet, travel, cross-cultural media, and global advertising. Appadurai notes that “global cultural flows have lost the selective and cumbersome qualities that they have had for much of human history” (Appadurai 2013, 132). This intensification further underscores the dynamic and potentially chaotic nature of cultural globalism. Critics like Heyman and Campbell (2009) acknowledge Appadurai's contribution to popularising the idea of “global flows” but suggest that his emphasis on disjuncture might underestimate the power of capital and the interactions between different kinds of flows.

### **2.3. The Transformative Impact on Imagination and Identity**

Appadurai also extensively explores how globalisation, driven by these cultural flows, profoundly impacts the *social imagination* and the *formation of identities*. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), he argues that migration and electronic media are key forces in shaping how people collectively imagine their lives and worlds. These flows expose individuals to possibilities beyond their immediate locales, leading to “a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (Appadurai 1996, 53). This deterritorialization of people and ideas means that identity is no longer solely tied to a specific place of origin but is instead constructed through interactions and comparisons across diverse communities. This leads to the emergence of “postnational” identities and “diasporic publics”, where shared identities and imaginations transcend national borders.

*The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013) reiterates the significance of imagination, stating that lives today are as much “acts of projection and imagination as they are enactments of known scripts or predictable outcomes” (Appadurai 2013, 111). The book suggests that the future itself becomes a “cultural fact,” something to be

actively envisioned and worked towards. This connects directly to the transformative power of the social imagination.

However, Appadurai also addresses the darker side of this transformation. While *Modernity at Large* (1996) was sometimes seen as presenting an optimistic view of globalisation, *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006) directly confronts the relationship between this phenomenon and ethnic violence. Appadurai argues that the anxieties and insecurities produced by the intensified flows and the erosion of traditional identities can fuel exclusionary and violent forms of “culturalism”, particularly in the context of minority populations feeling threatened (Appadurai 2006, 50). He suggests that these very processes that foster new imaginations and connections can also generate fear and hostility towards difference.

Many scholars, including Amy Young Evrard (2017), Josiah Heyman and Howard Campbell (2009), and S. Rai (2018), have critically engaged with Arjun Appadurai’s contributions to the study of cultural globalisation. However, much of the existing scholarship tends to focus narrowly on specific phases of Appadurai’s intellectual output, particularly *Modernity at Large* (1996), without situating it in the broader arc of his theoretical development. This fragmented approach has insufficiently explored the evolution and coherence of his ideas across these four key texts: *The Social Life of Things* (1986), *Modernity at Large* (1996), *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013). Our study therefore asks: How does Appadurai’s theorisation of cultural globalism develop across these major works, and to what extent does this trajectory address the critical tension between cultural fluidity and structural constraint identified in contemporary scholarship?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in thematic textual analysis. The research centres on a close reading of four of Arjun Appadurai’s foundational works: *The*

*Social Life of Things* (1986), *Modernity at Large* (1996), *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013). These texts were selected for their significance in mapping the evolution of Appadurai's view of cultural globalism—from early insights on commodification and value, to complex global cultural flows, to the tensions of identity politics, and finally to the imagination and futurity as ethical domains.

To contextualise and critically engage with Appadurai's contributions, this study also analyses secondary literature that either builds on or critiques his theories. Key sources include Evrard's (2017) interpretive synthesis of Appadurai's argument, Rai's (2018) overview of Appadurai's influence in critical cultural studies, Heyman and Campbell's (2009) Marxist-geographical critique of global flows, and Rantanen's (2006) interview-based reflection on Appadurai's scholarly trajectory and self-positioning within media and globalization discourse.

The analysis was conducted through iterative reading and coding of these primary and secondary texts to identify four core thematic strands: disjunctive global cultural flows, imagination as a social force, the relationship between globalisation and fear, and the future as a cultural project. These themes were used to evaluate the consistency, development, and applicability of Appadurai's framework across his major works and to assess their significance in contemporary scholarly debates on globalisation. This approach enables a comprehensive and diachronic interpretation of Appadurai's cultural globalism, addressing existing scholarly gaps by synthesising his intellectual trajectory in light of both supportive and critical engagements.

#### 4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from a thematic analysis of Appadurai's four major works concerning the research question: How does Appadurai theorise cultural globalism, and why is his

framework significant for understanding contemporary global dynamics? The findings directly address the conceptual gaps in the existing literature identified in the preceding review and offer an integrative synthesis of Appadurai's evolving theoretical framework.

#### **4.1 Global Cultural Flows as Disjunctive and Interconnected**

Appadurai speaks about globalisation not as a uniform or homogenising process, but as a disjunctive and layered configuration of flows that intersect in unpredictable ways. Across his works, he consistently develops the idea that global cultural processes cannot be adequately understood through traditional centre-periphery or nation-state models. In *The Social Life of Things* (1986), he first introduces the concept of movement and value transformation in relation to material culture. Commodities, he argues, have “social lives,” moving across different contexts and accruing meaning in ways that reflect broader cultural logics (Appadurai 1986, 31).

This foundational idea anticipates his later formulation of cultural flows in *Modernity at Large* (1996). In this seminal work, he expands this framework through his five “scapes”: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, financescaples, mediascaples, and ideoscaples. Each of these scapes reflects different dimensions of global flow, and importantly, they operate disjunctively—at different speeds, with distinct logics, and often in conflict with one another (Appadurai, 1996, 24-28). This theory moves beyond static models of cultural diffusion, offering a complex, multi-scalar understanding of global interconnectedness.

Scholars have engaged critically with this framework. Evrard (2017) affirms that Appadurai's disjunctive model marked a decisive break from earlier approaches that treated culture as static and tied to specific localities. By foregrounding the interplay between global media and transnational migration, Appadurai reframed culture as dynamic, mobile, and shaped by global networks. However, Heyman and Campbell (2009) express concern that Appadurai's

insistence on the disjunctive and chaotic nature of these flows—treating them as analytically equal and causally unranked—risks obscuring the real hierarchies that structure global dynamics. They argue that “finance capital and centralised political authority often exert disproportionate influence on shaping and constraining cultural flows” (Heyman & Campbell 2009, 133).

The intensification and acceleration of these flows in the digital era is addressed in *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), where the author argues that the once-slow and cumbersome global exchanges of people, goods, and ideas have become more rapid and pervasive (Appadurai 2013, 59-60). This insight updates his earlier scapes model and shows how new forms of media and communication technologies have transformed the temporality and spatiality of cultural interaction.

By tracing this theoretical development, the analysis reveals that Appadurai’s theory of cultural globalism is best understood not through a single text, but as a trajectory that evolves with the transformations of global systems. This synthesis addresses a critical gap in the literature, as most scholars focus exclusively on *Modernity at Large*, missing the broader arc of his thought.

#### **4.2 Imagination as a Cultural and Political Force**

A central contribution of Appadurai’s theory of globalisation is the treatment of imagination as a collective, socially organised practice. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), he introduces the idea that imagination is no longer the preserve of artists or elites, but is increasingly a mass phenomenon fueled by media and migration. He writes, “the imagination has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996, 31).

Rai (2018) highlights the significance of Appadurai’s concept of imagination as rooted in media, migration, and ideology, functioning as a key site of globalisation processes. She particularly emphasises

the role of mediascapes in shaping shared imaginaries, often resulting in what she calls a “globally variable synesthesia”, where similar imagined worlds appear in multiple contexts with localised variations (Rai, 2018: 4-5).

Heyman and Campbell (2009) critique Appadurai’s concept of imagination, arguing that while it is a useful theoretical tool, it does not adequately address the uneven distribution of imaginative capacity. They contend that access to the tools of imagination—such as media production, digital platforms, and educational institutions—is itself deeply stratified along lines of class, geography, and political power (Heyman & Campbell 2009, 133-135).

This idea is extended in *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), where imagination becomes not just a way of interpreting the world, but a method of shaping it. Appadurai frames imagination as an ethical and political project, arguing for an “ethics of possibility” in contrast to the “ethics of probability” that dominates risk-based thinking (Appadurai 2013, 295-297). Here, imagination emerges as a site of resistance and innovation in the face of uncertainty and precarity.

The empirical relevance of Appadurai’s theory of imagination is demonstrated in several recent studies. Suzuki (2020) explores how young Japanese women enact imagination through temporary migration, aspiring to personal transformation and fulfilment beyond the rigid norms of their home society. Their life projects are shaped by transnational media and narratives of possibility, supporting Appadurai’s view of imagination as a field of social practice. Likewise, the case studies in *Aspirations of Young Adults in Urban Asia* (Remmert *et al.* 2020) reveal how youth in diverse urban contexts employ the imagination to forge alternative identities and futures amid structural constraints. Westendorp (2020) explicitly links these aspirations to Appadurai’s notion of the “ethics of possibility,” offering a grounded perspective on how young people navigate and imagine alternative futures. These examples reinforce Appadurai’s idea that imagination is not merely fantasy, but a mode of cultural agency—contingent, situated, and deeply political.

Boccagni’s (2017) comparative study of immigrant workers also shows how aspirations function as temporal orientations grounded in structural and emotional experiences of migration, resonating with Appadurai’s later emphasis on futurity.

### 4.3 Globalisation, Fear, and Cultural Violence

Appadurai’s engagement with the darker dimensions of globalisation is most fully developed in *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), which departs from the more optimistic tone of his earlier work. He addresses the rise of violence against minorities as a consequence of their disjunctures. Drawing on Freud’s “anxiety of incompleteness”, he argues that the volatility introduced by global flows destabilises majority identities, leading to xenophobia, scapegoating, and ethnic violence (Appadurai 2006, 155).

This represents an important corrective to critiques like those of Evrard (2017), who suggests that Appadurai’s early work overemphasised the emancipatory potential of globalisation. By acknowledging the intersection of global cultural flows with fear, uncertainty, and violence, Appadurai develops a more nuanced theory that accounts for both the constructive and destructive outcomes of cultural globalism.

Rai (2018) notes how Appadurai addresses critiques of his earlier work in these later publications. In *Fear of Small Numbers*, he explores the “dark side”, where global flows intensify anxieties about identity, triggering violence against minorities. Appealing to Freud, he theorises the fear experienced by the majority population as they confront the perceived volatility of identity in a globalised world (Rai, 2018:11-12).

Moreover, *Fear of Small Numbers* ties together imagination and disjuncture in a novel way: just as the imagination can be a site of hope and future-building, it can also be a site of anxiety, myth-making, and exclusion. This dual potential reinforces the need to consider globalisation not as inherently liberatory or oppressive, but as a set of contradictory forces with unpredictable consequences.

#### 4.4 From Diagnosis to Ethics: Toward a Future-Oriented Framework

Across the four texts, Appadurai moves from diagnosis to prescription. While his early work is primarily descriptive—mapping how objects and ideas circulate globally—his later ones advocate for ethical engagement. *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013) introduces the idea that future itself has become a cultural object: something that is imagined, contested, and acted upon. He calls on scholars to think beyond fatalistic or probabilistic models and explore how cultural actors envision and create alternative futures.

This trajectory fills an important gap in globalisation studies, which often remain trapped in structural or deterministic paradigms. Appadurai instead centres culture, imagination, and ethics as key tools for navigating global complexity. Rai (2018) highlights this shift in Appadurai’s work, noting his emphasis on “grassroots globalisation” and inclusive, question-driven approaches that challenge the dominance of Western-centric models in global research. She observes that Appadurai offers a hopeful corrective through his advocacy for “grassroots globalisation”—a bottom-up movement driven by NGOs and transnational advocacy networks that seek justice and inclusion outside of elite-driven globalisation processes (Rai 2018, 11-12).

This analysis demonstrates that Appadurai’s theory of cultural globalism is a rich, evolving framework that captures the complexity of contemporary global dynamics. Through the themes of disjunctive flows, imagination, fear, and futurity, Appadurai offers a comprehensive and flexible lens for analysing how culture shapes, and is shaped by, this process. His work remains vital for understanding not only how global cultural systems function, but also how individuals and communities respond to, resist, and reimagine these systems in diverse and context-specific ways.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

The synthesis of Appadurai’s four major works reveals a robust and

evolving framework for understanding cultural globalism that moves beyond economic determinism and cultural homogenization. His theorisation captures the complexity, fluidity, and contradictions of global cultural processes. Appadurai's contribution lies in his ability to conceptualise this process as a series of intersecting and disjunctive flows that shape, and are shaped by, both material and imaginative practices.

A key insight of this analysis is the dynamic interplay between global cultural flows and imagination. As established in *Modernity at Large* (1996) and further developed in *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), imagination functions not only as a site of identity formation but as a terrain for ethical engagement with possible futures. This redefinition of imagination—as a form of agency and futurity—distinguishes Appadurai's theory from earlier globalisation models that treated culture as passive or reactive. Instead, he positions cultural actors as actively negotiating and producing meanings within shifting global conditions.

This study also clarifies how Appadurai incorporates a growing awareness of the structural inequalities and violence generated by global cultural disjunctures. *Fear of Small Numbers* presents a corrective to the more optimistic interpretations of cultural globalisation found in his earlier work, highlighting the affective and political volatility that emerges when majority identities feel threatened by perceived minority encroachments. Here, Appadurai integrates psychoanalytic theory with globalisation studies, offering a novel explanation for the rise of cultural violence and exclusion in an increasingly interconnected world.

Despite criticisms—such as those by Heyman and Campbell (2009), who argue that he underplays the influence of global capital—this analysis demonstrates that Appadurai's later works begin to address precisely these concerns. The shift toward ethics and grassroots globalisation, as identified by Rai (2018), illustrates his attempt to move from descriptive theory toward normative and political engagement. Thus, his corpus reflects not a static

worldview, but a responsive and adaptive body of work that seeks to meet the evolving challenges of the global age.

In bridging the gaps identified by Evrard (2017), Heyman and Campbell (2009), and Rai (2018), this study demonstrates the value of reading Appadurai's works in chronological and thematic relation to one another. It reveals a continuity of thought in his interrogation of globalisation as a fundamentally cultural and imaginative process, one that demands not only critical analysis but also ethical responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Arjun Appadurai's theorisation of cultural globalism offers a compelling and multidimensional lens through which to understand contemporary global dynamics. Through the concepts of disjunctive flows, imagination as social practice, the anxiety of identity, and the ethics of futurity, Appadurai articulates a vision that is both critically incisive and ethically engaged.

This study demonstrates that the four selected texts—*The Social Life of Things*, *Modernity at Large*, *Fear of Small Numbers*, and *The Future as Cultural Fact*—are not isolated contributions but constitute an integrated theoretical trajectory. They collectively trace the evolution of his thinking from the circulation of material objects to the imaginative constitution of global futures. His work not only challenges conventional models of globalisation but also expands the methodological and ethical scope of cultural research in a global context.

By synthesising Appadurai's major works and situating them in conversation with both supportive and critical scholarship, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural globalism. It affirms the enduring relevance of Appadurai's framework for analysing global flows, cultural imaginaries, and the ongoing struggle over identity and inclusion in the 21st century. Ultimately, Appadurai's call for an ethics of possibility invites scholars and

practitioners alike to reimagine globalisation not as a singular force, but as a field of contestation, imagination, and potential transformation.

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