CONVERSATIONS

"Nobody has the answer, but we need some map, even to go into the unknown":
A Conversation with Arjun Appadurai on Research, Speculation and Future thinking

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Arjun Appadurai is a cultural-anthropologist born in Mumbai (1949) and based between New York, where he is Paulette Goddard Professor in Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, and Berlin, where he is currently Mercator Fellow at the International Research Training Group *Temporalities of Future in Latin America* at the Freie Universität Berlin, funded by the German Research Foundation DFG.

In this conversation, PhD candidates at the IRTG Elis de Aquino and Luis Kliche address some of the different and diverse themes that occupy Appadurai's career, from digital capitalism to education, as well as Appadurai's experience with Latin American researchers and institutions, in an exercise to imagine the possible future horizons at the global and local level.

This interview was carried out online in December 2020.

Elis de Aquino: You are a Mercator Fellow in the Temporalities of Future Programme at the Freie Universität, and now you are speaking with CROLAR for our issue about Latin American futures. Can you tell us a little bit more about how this interest in the future arose?

Arjun Appadurai: I think there are two sources of my interest. One is my upbringing in the early years of national independence in India. India became independent in 1947. I was born in 1949. So, in the fifties and, of course, in the sixties and later, India was very much trying to shape a future, but we were always seen as a country of the past: of traditions, customs, history – always seen as a big drag on our country in our effort to move forward or into the future.

Then the other source has to do with anthropology and with my work on imagination, and later on aspiration, as I realized they are not studied so much in anthropology, because the future has not been paid serious attention. When I was trying to develop this book called *Future as a Cultural Fact* (Appadurai 2013), it seemed like anthropology had become the discipline of the past, or at best of the present. But there was an anthropology issue tied to my long-standing interest in imagination, and imagining always implies something coming which is not yet there. Of course, people can also imagine

different pasts and fantasize about history and all that. But mostly, when you imagine, you imagine the possible, the probable, the emerging, etc.

Entrepreneurial ethic and the global turn to the right

Luis Kliche: Reading your book *Banking on Words* (Appadurai 2016), one can really sense an interest in promoting a dialogue within anthropology to better understand present and future developments, both on an economical and on a more social and ethical level. Following this work, what immediate futures do you think are visible in the distance under the new form of financial capitalism? Do you think that current authoritarian, popular leaders could be seen as a new kind of political operator of the entrepreneurial ethic?

A.A.: Yes, this book was indeed both an effort to engage anthropology with the study of finance, and an angle for getting into the question of the future: Finance is all about the future, the financial markets would not exist if the future were not central to them.

Here is my thought on your question. In this new capitalist order, risk, uncertainty and speculation about the future are the center engines of value. And that value is not distributed equally. In this sense, Marx is still correct, but what he could not have seen is that the mechanism would not be on the factory floor or in industrial production, but somewhere else. My thought, which I have formulated in Banking on Words, is that the self has been radically fragmented, so that what we used

to think of as the individual is no longer really there, because too many machines have broken us up. The machineries of modern capitalism, as well as surveillance capitalism, corporatism in general and the state, are now only interested in a part of us at any given time. Regarding the global turn to the right in very general terms, whether it's Modi, Bolsonaro, Trump, Boris Johnson, Orban, or Erdogan, there are many differences, but one common thing is that they all in a way promise – not to everybody, not to black people or other marginalized groups, but to certain people, usually some kind of superior, racial or ethnic class – that they will bring back those happy days. It's a restoration, not just of a kind of domination, and you know, "White people will again be on top, we were pulled down by black people, Obama was a big mistake." But there is a deeper promise that all this fragmentation will go away, and you will become – the world will become the world as it used to be. This is a mobilization to nostalgia, but not cynical nostalgia for all times; It's to nostalgia about the very nature of personal selfhood, agency, action, and I think it is a big lie. It cannot be done. That is my line of thinking about how the global turn to the right may have some connection to the transformation of the site of value production in capitalism, which is now very substantially not the present or the past of factory production and goods and services, but speculation on unknown future values, which is where derivatives and all come in.

State pandemic responses and academic debates

L.K.: At the beginning of the pandemic, European intellectuals (Borri 2020) were quick to denounce lockdown measurements as a biopolitical, authoritarian maneuver of state power based on fear and aimed at reducing individual freedoms. In Latin America, on the other hand, some other sets of intellectuals (Cadahia and Cano 2020) have countered by calling for states to protect vulnerable social sectors. Could we see in this discrepancy a representation of a deeper and general divide in current developments of state, community, and freedom ideas between welfare and postcolonial states?

A.A.: Leaving aside the rest of the global South, just thinking about Europe, America and Latin America, there is a kind of key position. One is the state, which is indeed very present in Europe. The U.S.: complete chaos and abandonment by Trump, totally beyond their fix, and then Latin America, where there is a problem of state capacity, and then this very reasonable demand that the state should do this work. This is a kind of, let's call it left, or progressive demand in the context of much less resources, as well as a still ongoing, much more naked struggle for primary accumulation, going to the Amazonian forest, exploiting it. But still the state is not able to do everything, if the state is going to send police to every favela to catch the narcoterrorist, they cannot also do COVID. So they have to pick, and they pick the bad things.

The left critique, I think, is very legitimate, but if you look at the broader world, you see many variations of this. If you look at India, Modi has been lucky so far, because the cost of COVID has not been as high as everybody feared in a country with great poverty, tremendous density, huge cities. Modi was lucky, because, for reasons nobody can understand, the impact of COVID was not so bad. And people have some scientific reasons, maybe because other diseases have been more severe, and are still more severe, cholera, dysentery, etc., that in some scientific way, this virus has not had as much space to occupy, whereas in Europe, because public health was so successful, the European body was wide open to it.

I should also add that I am not in support of the [Giorgio] Agamben type of position, which I think was premature, and also extremely, again, Eurocentric. The big picture for me is this: if you look at COVID, and the COVID response, of course daily the picture is changing, the vaccine is now going to come, it's like the millennium, it's coming, Christ is coming, we will soon be safe, we will line up and then we will rise to heaven together, secular heaven where we will be perfectly healthy. I am a little bit skeptical about that, but still, I think worldwide, there have been some people that said the nation-state will suddenly become more powerful and we'll become weak because of COVID; they have to do their job. The problem is planetary, every problem here is planetary, COVID is the latest, migration is another one. All our big problems are planetary problems, so they cannot ever be finally resolved by the

nation-state. Even if at the moment the nation-state appears to have a fresh life, it won't last long, because global things are still going on, including finance, the arms trade, the drugs trade, global things have gone on, nothing has stopped. As far as the global picture goes, I would say that every state has discovered, whatever its policy, that it cannot succeed without citizens being involved. And being willing to keep social distance, etc. I think the global message here, the only positive one, is that the state has learned that it cannot operate without citizen power, citizen trust, a kind of social contract at the ground level.

Education and Voice

E.A.: You have been concerned a lot about education and information. In September 2019, during the launching of UNESCO's initiative *Futures of Education* (United Nations 2019) you said that "a vital task for educators […] will be to build the capacity of the young, the poor, and the marginal to imagine, to anticipate, and to aspire." How can aspiration – at a moment of global depression – be "taught" to young people, especially those from low-income families and from the so-called global South?

A.A.: I am very grateful that you pointed out that small talk that I gave in New York more than a year ago. I continue to serve on this commission for the futures of education that UNESCO has and that is still going on. Some interesting lessons have come out of that, and I have two things to say in response to your question.

One is concerned with the massive digitalization of knowledge worldwide, and how to think about that in terms of indeed disempowered, vulnerable marginal populations, also younger, so children in kindergarten and in school, not only colleges and universities, but all levels, especially in the South. My point is that we need to be very careful to understand the underlying, let's say, political, social, cultural meanings of words like data, big data, pattern seeking, archiving, algorithm, etc. We need to examine very closely these elementary words of the new digital era, because they are somehow interconnected, they all require each other. There is no algorithm for Google unless you have millions of bits of data. You can't say, here I have five pieces of data, I can have an algorithm. It just does not work. It does only with millions of bits – and this is a little bit like the self. When the self is broken up in a million bits or when the world is broken up in a million bits, then we have big data, then we need algorithms. So there is some system there which is kind of an ontological, epistemological system which my message, along with others in UNESCO, is very alert to; it needs to be examined very carefully and critically, as we plan to open and continue to strengthen access to education for the future, because it is very tempting, especially in the time of COVID, to go online, in every sense. Many UNESCO colleagues have also pointed, "What about the children for whom home is not a safe place, for whom the school is the only safe place? What's the good of saying 'go online and work at home'?"

That's one line of thought, to please urge everybody in the interest of the oppressed and poor of the world not to buy these keywords of the new digital order at face value. That doesn't mean rejecting the digital world. That's as unrealistic as rejecting capitalism or rejecting the industrial revolution: it doesn't make sense. But how can we manage it, redirect it, critique it, and so on?

My second point is a personal one: how we should encourage the capacity to aspire. This is a personal passion of very long standing – 20 years or more – which is addressed in a single chapter of my book *Future as a Cultural Fact* (Appadurai 2013), and the chapter is called "The Right to Research". That is a big article of faith for me, and I've been trying to push the argument in many ways for a long time without much luck, but I'm still persisting, and the argument is very simple, that education cannot only be about literacy, information, knowledge, basic skills, stem, whatever. That there is one other thing that education is, which is developing the capacity to create new knowledge. That is what we mean by research, but usually we monopolize that; "we" meaning people in higher education, people with PhDs, you know, we say "that is what we do." You can learn to read, you can learn to write, you can learn to think critically, you can learn to participate in development projects, you can feel of service. But who defines the problem, the method, who sets the research design, who makes the argument, and who advocates for the argument, that is really us, it's not them, so to speak.

There are many ways in which we can encourage the capacity to aspire but for me this is the big one: building the capacity for people to create new knowledge. In other words, finding ways which are beyond the normal, credentialing protocols of the academy for ordinary citizens, especially weaker ones, to actually define a problem, make the design, get the answer, look forward. Whether it's about disease, unemployment, gender, violence. I mean, how absurd, expensive and ineffective is it to get experts from 1,000 miles away to come and do the research so that we can solve the problem of drug violence in, for example, Rio, or the problem of Malaria, or AIDS transmission in South Africa. Would it not be better to get people who are trained researchers – and I don't mean trained to get PhDs from us, trained in some other way, so that they can actually move forward, advocate, and create change by producing new knowledge in their world, in their terms, for themselves?

E.A.: In many countries in Latin America, it is believed that education is the best way to solve social problems. Many families and individuals invest in scholarization in the hope of achieving better living conditions. However, research conducted since the 1960s has pointed to the limits of education; at the same time, recent work shows the inequalities within and among educational systems. In this sense, how or to what extent can education contribute to developing the capacity to aspire, when both education and the capacity to aspire are unequally accessed or available? What kind of education are we talking about?

A.A.: That's again a very important and big question and I agree with you completely in the assumption, and the question that comes is, what do we do? Well, I think we really have to do two things. One thing is to really do some hard rethinking of the official education channels: big universities, third degrees, who gets PhDs, BAs, MAs, and for what. This has to be thought about carefully, so that one result can be achieved or at least one bad result can be prevented, namely that we produce people only for short-term global needs, not for long term. So, we need to think about official education which has more durability, more sustainability in terms of the skills and so on.

The other side is to rethink what education means, so that people who are in vulnerable, remote or difficult situations, also not from the cosmopolitan or the anglophone world, or the lusophone world, who are in indigenous language worlds, and social worlds, and cultural worlds, are now misdirected to go after degrees which will get them nowhere. Maybe they can be directed to different kinds of skill development, training, etc., which doesn't necessarily have to be narrowly vocational, like studying to be a plumber, but it can be about other skills about the material world, or other forms of education which are real in that environment. For example, building skills up to and including architecture, which do require architectural degrees. This can be done.

In a way, I would say some of the inspiration for what I'm saying in this regard is not new, it goes back to people like Freire, who always understood that the pedagogy of the oppressed has to be radically different. Of course, his ideas were formulated a long time ago, the world has changed a lot so just as with Marx, we can't just download the idea and say, let's just do it. We have to rethink it, but I would say the rethinking has to be along the lines of allowing a broader democratic discussion about what people want to know. What do they feel is lacking? Not will you become an engineer, will you become an architect, which is the road into the narrow path, again, on which we have nothing anyway. But rather say, what do you think you, your community, your city, your neighborhood, even your country really needs? And what can we provide?

The "we", this is the tricky part, has to be some combination of people with wealth, which means you have to somehow get money from rich people. It doesn't mean from anybody, but there are people who are relatively progressive. So you need some money, you need civil society, and you need non-governmental organizations who can put it into practice.

Latin America and Decolonial thought

E.A.: We would like to turn now to Latin America. Although you made it clear that you are not an expert in the region the translation of your books, your interviews for academic journals and your affiliation in different institutes as a fellow or advisor shows mutual exchanges between you and Latin America researchers and institutions. What is your reading of the region from the outside?

A.A.: I have been very lucky and it's been almost 25 years, since the mid-90's I think, when I first went to Rio and then later to São Paulo a few times and then to Argentina, to Buenos Aires, and Uruguay.

I am extremely alert to the fact that Latin America as a whole is a very large region, physically huge, and also politically diverse, but nevertheless a few things stand out. To me, I see a struggle going on about the meaning and the institutions of democracy, citizenship and state which is more active than in other parts of the world, it's an open struggle about the basics. In Bolivia, Chile and even in Peru, what I see are dramatic changes, and debates, and struggles, which interestingly are not as present in Brazil or Argentina. Of course, there are no perfect answers, but they are remarkable. The thing that I see in them, is the rise to power of the indigenous groups, the Quechua speakers and so on. This is a standard thing, so even if you're a complete non-expert, you look at Evo Morales and you know that you are looking at someone very different than [Fernando Henrique] Cardoso. And in Chile and Peru, Bolivia, I see lots of people like that, who come out of that world, and for me this is the most interesting thing to pursue because in a place like India, our actual indigenous population is still remarkably voiceless: the political voice of people who have been long-term occupants of the countries, of the regions, of the nations, and of the whole continent and who have still an extremely articulate worldview which is diametrically opposed to the worldview of contemporary capitalism.

Here I see the most important lesson for someone like me: in the work of people like [Anibal] Quijano. He left the Marxist point of view and said, "No, really, the issue is the (re)production of epistemologies," etc., from which people like Walter Mignolo get their inspiration. Now, I should add that I have some serious differences and debate about this view of the colonial matrix of power, of the knowledge debate and of decoloniality. Nevertheless, it's a very important point of view, and I think it only can come out of a place in which indigenous people have already moved the needle. So that scholars can begin to see the world of these indigenous groups and movements, and, of course, the Zapatistas are a great case of that, they have affected the way critical scholarship operates too.

This is a great thing, even though the results in the end for me are a little troubling, in the sense that I see a tendency in this whole decolonial way of arguing about equality, justice and so on, which in general terms I totally endorse, but I worry that it requires a rejection of modernity which is so total that it's impractical. So maybe it's the right thing, but it's an impossible thing. I am more in the school of people working both in Africa and India, who say, "Look, we are now in a mixed world. That other world is gone, the world of indigenous knowledges, cosmologies, non-binary views has been irreversibly altered by capitalism and colonialism. We are children of that mixture, we have to also make our critique in that mixture so that we can move forward and make our own mixture." Not decolonize everything,

because you will not decolonize everything, and in that process, you will end up losing.

I am here just flagging my point of difference, but it's against the background of something that I would never ever otherwise have thought or learned about, except for this remarkable constellation of thinkers, who are now probably 20 or 25 people over the last 50 years from Latin America.

Social sciences and future thinking

L.K.: In *Future as a Cultural Fact*, you have said that research is "the systematic pursuit of the not-yet-known". In that regard: What is the possible and specific contribution that research in social sciences with a focus on the future, or on possible futures, can bring to our current issues?

A.A.: Research for me is the best part of speculation. The financial world is the worst part of speculation. So, I'm still a friend of speculation in that realm of thought. And secondly, speculation which is not without shape or form. Therefore, I say it has to be a kind of structured inquiry into the "not-yet-known", but there's a paradox there: if it's not known, how can it be structured? That is the mystery. It's like the trinity, you know, nobody has the answer, but we need some map, even to go into the unknown, but I would like to resolve this for a need to go back to education. Not to the corporate world, which is now monopolizing what speculation is about. And we are losing out, and we are going as educators into training, credentializing, digitalizing, all this stuff which has nothing to do with speculation in its best sense. So that's my

answer: Let us reclaim speculation so that we widen the options available to all fellow citizens as they try to navigate the world. Not to instruct them and give them the message from God, this is the way to go, not to give them the menu of three items and say please choose, but to allow them to set the menu. That's where research comes in, that kind of speculation.

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