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The Risks of Dialogue

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About the Author

Arjun Appadurai is the Goddard Professor in Media, Culture and Communication at New York University, where he is also Senior Fellow at the Institute for Public Knowledge. He serves as Honorary Professor in the Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Tata Chair Professor at The Tata Institute for Social Sciences, Mumbai and as a Senior Research Partner at the Max-Planck Institute for Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Gottingen. He was previously Senior Advisor for Global Initiatives at The New School in New York City, where he also held a Distinguished Professorship as the John Dewey Distinguished Professor in the Social Sciences. Arjun Appadurai was the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at The New School from 2004-2006. He was formerly the William K. Lanman Jr. Professor of International Studies, Professor of Anthropology, and Director of the Center on Cities and Globalization at Yale University. Appadurai is the founder and now the President of PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research), a non-profit organization based in and oriented to the city of Mumbai (India).

Professor Appadurai was born and educated in Bombay. He graduated from St. Xavier's High School and took his Intermediate Arts degree from Elphinstone College before coming to the United States. He earned his B.A. from Brandeis University in 1967, and his M.A. (1973) and Ph.D. (1976) from The Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

During his academic career, he has also held professorial chairs at Yale University, the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania, and has held visiting appointments at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris), the University of Delhi, the University of Michigan, the University of Amsterdam, the

University of Iowa, Columbia University and New York University. He has authored numerous books and scholarly articles, including *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Duke 2006) and Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, (Minnesota 1996; Oxford India 1997). His books have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese and Italian.

Arjun Appadurai has held numerous fellowships and scholarships and has received several scholarly honors, including residential fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto (California) and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and an Individual Research Fellowship from the Open Society Institute (New York). He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1997. In 2013, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Erasmus University in the Netherlands.

He has also served as a consultant or advisor to a wide range of public and private organizations, including many major foundations (Ford, MacArthur, and Rockefeller); UNESCO; UNDP; the World Bank; the National Endowment for the Humanities; the National Science Foundation; and the Infosys Foundation. He currently serves on the Advisory Board for the Asian Art Initiative at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum and on the Scientific Advisory Board of the Forum D'Avignon in Paris.

Appadurai's latest book, *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* was published by Verso in 2013.

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My talk today draws on work that I have done, some of which the chair of this session was kind enough to mention, so this is not new research, but it is certainly an effort to pull together some of my interests in a slightly different way, given this context. So, first, the field of debate.

When cosmopolitanism is debated in scholarly circles, as it has intensely been in the last fifteen years or so, slums, urban poverty and global deprivation rarely enter the picture, except to remind us that cosmopolitanism is an elite privilege and debating it is likewise an elite luxury. There are reasons for this bias, that are to be found in our common understandings about what cosmopolitanism actually is. Most definitions of cosmopolitanism either directly or indirectly assume that it is a certain cultivated knowledge of the world beyond one's immediate horizons and is the product of deliberate activities associated with literacy, the freedom to travel and the luxury of expanding the boundaries of one's own self by expanding its experiences.

For this reason, cosmopolitanism is usually contrasted with various forms of rootedness and provincialism, the last associated with attachment to one's own friends, one's own group, one's own language, one's own country and even one's own class, and a certain lack of interest in crossing those boundaries. The cosmopolitan is often identified with the exile, the traveller and the seeker of the new, who is not content with his or her historically derived identity, biography and cultural values. In today's world, cosmopolitanism is loosely associated with postnational sensibilities, the global ethos, multicultural politics and values and a generalized openness to cultural experimentation, hybrid identities and international cultural transfers and exchanges.

This set of associations is hardly the same as the universalism of the enlightenment, but it has some affinities with it, in its common interest in an expanded idea of humanity which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnos. Today I wish to suggest that a rather different sort of cosmopolitanism can be discerned in the world of internally generated forms of activism, incubated among the world´s poorest populations – this will be one of my examples – more or less independent of advanced education and the privilege of access to the means of travel, leisure and in form of self-cultivation that is the whole ethos of *Bildung*.

Nevertheless, what I call (and I have written elsewhere about this) "cosmopolitanism from below" has in common with the more privileged form of cosmopolitanism the urge to expand one's current horizons of self and cultural identity and the wish to connect with a wider world in the name of values which in principle could belong to

anyone and apply in any circumstance. This vernacular cosmopolitanism also resists the boundaries of class, neighbourhood and mother tongue, but it does so without an abstract valuation of the idea of humanity or of the world as a generally known or knowable place.

This is a variety of cosmopolitanism that begins close to home and builds on the practices of the local, the everyday and the familiar, but is imbued with the politics of hope that requires the stretching of the boundaries of the everyday in a variety of political directions. It builds towards global affinities and solidarities through an irregular assortment of near and distant experiences and neither assumes nor denies the value of its universality – or the universality of its values.

Its aim is to produce a preferred geography of the global by the strategic extension of local cultural horizons, not in order to dissolve or deny the intimacies of the local, but in order to combat its indignities and exclusions. It is thus closely tied to the politics of hope and the promise of democracy as a space of dignity as well as of equality. It is indeed correct to call this style of life cosmopolitan but it is cosmopolitanism driven by the exigencies of exclusion rather than by the privileges and "ennui" of inclusion. It is what I've also elsewhere called compulsory cosmopolitanism.

So briefly let me talk about the cosmopolitanism of the urban poor as an example of this compulsory cosmopolitanism or cosmopolitanism from below. I have written in various books and essays quite a bit about my work with the very poor, essentially unhoused poor of the city of Mumbai. Some of you may know this work, some of you may not, but I give you a quick sketch here and then tell you what I learned or how I began to think about cosmopolitanism from below or compulsory cosmopolitanism after my work with these slum dwellers which began around the year 2000. It is seventeen years ago now but the most intensive phase was in the early 2000s. I still work with that alliance of people still which is the alliance I spent the most time with in Mumbai but the Mumbai group is part of an Indian network and the Indian network is part of a global network called "Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI)": it works in 40 countries, more than 20 of them in the African continent, many in Asia, a few in Latin America and the Middle East. It is a massive transnational nongovernmental activist network of urban slum dwellers, many of whom are women.

I spent time with this alliance in South Africa, as well as in the Philippines and in India, but my main focus was in the formation in India which was the historical source of this large network. The next was South Africa and then they moved on to other places. That is a long history, I won't go into many details now. In Mumbai, the alliance (the term they actually use for themselves, alliance) is composed of three key groups.

One is called the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF). It is largely male and national, but it has a strong Bombay presence and a certain specific ethnic quality in its leadership and composition that I will say a word about in a minute. The second group is called Mahila Milan. Mahila means women and Milan means meeting, so meeting of women. It's a women's organisation whose roots lie in women who became slum activists who were previously sex workers in a particular neighbourhood of Mumbai. They lived and in 2017 still often live on the pavement in regularized spaces that they have had for a long time, but which are still insecure, which could be demolished, which could be destroyed, which have no title in Hernando de Soto's terms. These are not small capitalists living in a small property. They have no durable property. These women have lived there both when they were sex workers and now when many of them are grandmothers. They have long left their original profession, but they are right in the same area. They form this women's organisation. Finally, there is an organisation called SPARC which is a NGO more in the recognisable western mode, composed of middle class women who had social work or other training and were interested in the urban poor.

These three groups came together to form this alliance in the late 1990s/early 2000s, but then built up ties with South Africa and so on and now are part of a very large network. In Mumbai, which is where most of my fieldwork has been, I was impressed with the fact that these urban slum dwellers were a big part of the mosaic of urban poverty in Mumbai. This larger poor population composes almost 6-8 million out of a total population of roughly 15 million, and roughly 50% of this group have no decent housing, and another 15% percent is living in extremely insecure temporary housing on the pavement. If you fly to Mumbai you will see an ocean of blue tarpaulins everywhere. It is not the favelas. It is not here and then there, it is everywhere. Mumbai is the size of Manhattan and greater Mumbai is the size of New York City including the boroughs. You will see these blue concentrations which are temporary, illegal, unofficial, everywhere in the city from above.

Thus, 50% of a city of 15 million is living with no secure housing. Hence, housing rights are the key political interest of this particular alliance. Again, I have written elsewhere at length about this, but I wanted today to only talk about the question of cosmopolitanism that I learned from these men and women. They or their families come to Mumbai from many different parts of India; many from Hyderabad in the South, many from Chennai or the Madras region in the South, others from regions with a significant Muslim population in the North.

Hindus, Muslims, Tamil speakers, Telugu speakers and Urdu speakers present an extraordinary linguistic diversity across this set of very poor people, which means that to work together they right away have to engage each other's languages. So

just forgetting the rest of the power hierarchy, among themselves they have to bridge the language connections. So many of these people, who are often illiterate, in fact multilingual, speak three languages and sometimes have a smattering of English. This is remarkable, but not chosen as part of a *Bildung* exercise. It is pursued as part of a reproductive, political and cultural survival ethos.

In the traffic among one another, for example Hindi or Urdu speaking ex-sex workers in the women's organisation and Tamil slam dwelling males from another part of Mumbai, who do not speak Hindi but speak Tamil, that is the key to the bond that makes this alliance very strong, but it also cuts across gender, language and regional boundaries inside India. You do not have to go very far to see extraordinary diversity negotiated internally in this alliance. In addition, of course, they have to deal with the police, they have to deal with slum landlords, they have to deal with developers, municipal officials, people who allow or do not allow them to build toilets. By the way in these communities very often there is sometimes a ratio of 800 people for 1 toilet.

And if you are very lucky you have a building with ten toilets, ten seats to defecate with four times this population [points to public] all having to go to work at 7:30 in the morning. This is a common situation. So the building of toilets and the building of housing are closely connected, but all of them require that you have to negotiate with people who speak other languages; who speak Hindi, who speak Marathi, which is the language of the state in which Mumbai is the capital. Hindi is the national language, and your own community speak many other languages, other officials speak yet other languages.

Indeed what this means is that the urban poor have to negotiate with all kinds of other cultural practices in order to get from today to tomorrow, in order to have any chance of fulfilling their ambitions to get organised, to do collective savings, to put pressure on the state. That is their general politics, but all of it requires negotiation and, in the spirit of the Merian Centre, it is all negotiation done under the conditions of asymmetry, not of equality. It is a little bit like the story of Radcliffe-Brown, the great anthropologist, who studied kinship in the Andaman Islands, and his way of doing kinship research was to bring a native to his balcony with two large Indian soldiers standing over them with a stick, and then you hear them talk about their kinship terms. It is not a relaxed or equal translational atmosphere.

These are the conditions which I call compulsory, in terms of the expansion of the life world of the urban poor in Mumbai. This expansion in Mumbai leads them to have contact with poor women in other cities in India and, starting in 2000, with poor women from Cape Town, poor women from Kathmandu, all coming to Mumbai organised by this network and exchanging music, urban experiences, housing plans, etc., with their

counterparts. Thus the network becomes global but it begins very close to home. I could say a great deal more about the Mumbai environment, languages and so on, but I will not. I will only say that these people are certainly cosmopolitan but this is cosmopolitanism that is compulsory: it is required for survival and is very hard. It is pursued and kept alive both as a matter of relatively equal collaboration within the movement and totally asymmetric dialogue with the powers that might be: corporations, developers, municipality, police, all of whom are breathing down the necks of these communities.

I want to move to a very different example now and focus on the risk question and then I will try to connect the two examples. In this second part of my talk I try equally briefly to give you some general ideas of why I talk of the risk of dialogue and I am going to take these examples from the last ten or fifteen years in Europe, where the question of Islam has become central to the question of negotiation with the other.

The cultural strategies of the urban poor in Mumbai can be understood as a kind of dialogue with each other and with those who wield power over them. Especially in these asymmetric situations no one can enter into dialogue without taking serious risks. This view is opposed to the commonsense view of dialogue as casual, quotidian, even secondary to the real workings of power and wealth. If we can agree that dialogue is always a risky affair, we can ask ourselves what risks are involved and what risk is worthwhile. It is compulsory, for the poor, the subordinate and the modern lives to take this risk today. That is true in the Mumbai case, but in other cases as well, many of which you will know better about than I because they come from the Latin American world.

I use the term dialogue here to refer to any sort of effort to negotiate between parties that are not culturally similar, that are typically in unequal power relations and that have to learn together in some sort of what I call "contested conviviality". I will return to this term "contested conviviality" in my conclusion. But let me say something about the risks now. I have hinted at some of them in my example of the urban poor, but with Islam in Europe you can see it even more clearly, because it is kind of a macro case, and it is in the media and it is highly articulated in public discourse.

The first risk of dialogue is that the other party, whether the party is a person, a community, an organisation, a state, whatever it may be, may not understand what you mean. The risk of misunderstanding is inherent to all human communication and we have evolved many ways to reduce these risks. We try to choose our words and actions carefully, we pay attention to language and translation, we try to imagine the mental assumptions of the other party. In short, we try to be as intersubjective as possible and to find the best ways to cross the boundaries between the speaker and the listener. We

do this all the time in everyday life and also organisations do the same thing. Needless to say, when we conduct dialogue in earnest we also try to listen with the same mental approach, so as to minimize the risks of misunderstanding and miscommunication. So speaker and listener are both engaged in this effort.

The second risk of dialogue is exactly the opposite, and that is the risk that we may in fact be understood clearly. This paradox is partly based on the worry that the other party may see through our surface expressions and understand motives or intentions we prefer to conceal. That is always a hazard in the era of the epistemology of suspicion, coming out of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. But the deeper risk of being fully understood is the risk that the other party will actually see our deepest convictions, our foundational opinions and even our doubts. The reason why this is a risk is that **dialogue is not about everything. To be effective, dialogue must be, to some extent, about shared ground, selective agreement and provisional consensus.**

When foundational convictions come on to the table the improvisational element of dialogue is endangered and the stakes become impossibly high, since basic convictions have to be made commensurable. One major example is, indeed, the dialogue between the Islamic world and Christian European world, going on now in a very dramatic manner in the last fifteen years, but actually going on for some centuries, in which dialogue quickly moves to doctrinal and ethical foundations, without paying attention to more specific and limited arenas. A struggle over head scarfs in schools needs not to become a struggle over competing views of human universality. It can remain a problem of public conduct or etiquette. Thus, when we undertake dialogue we must take care not to demand too much understanding or to offer too much of our deepest convictions. I am aware that this sounds like a suggestion that we must be hypocritical or cynical. In fact, I am suggesting prudence and limited agreement.

When we undertake dialogue an even greater risk than the risk of misunderstanding, as I say, is the risk of excess understanding. Let us look a little more closely at this. Complete, full and precise mutual understanding is an impossible standard: in any case, given the challenges of cultural, language and history that divide individuals and communities. But complete understanding at the level of primary ethical, religious or political convictions carries yet another danger with it. That danger is the urge to eliminate basic differences altogether. For if we wish to establish common grounds at the level of basic convictions, somebody's basic convictions must change.

And this usually means that one party's deepest convictions become the measure of common ground. This is the way in which false universalisms can erase true differences. Hence dialogue must always involve a decision about how far to demand negotiation about fundamentals. In this sense, all dialogue is a form of negotiation. And negotiation

cannot be based on complete mutual understanding or on a total consensus across any sort of boundary or difference.

There is yet another risk associated with dialogue and that is the relationship of dialogue to internal differences on each side of the dialogue. All individuals have in our doubts, differences and divisions within themselves, such as for example, between short and long term goals, higher and lesser motives, conscious and unconscious interests, and so on. When we move up the scale to groups, communities, civilizations and other large social formations, we have in addition the internal differences between the old and the young, the elite and the common people, between the court and the street, men and women, to name only the simplest categories of internal division.

In the age of globalisation these internal differences are further exacerbated by the movement of migrants to new locations, the different identities and anxieties of old and young among migrant populations, and of course the nature of mass media and electronic communication, which allows intensely local and highly remote attachments to be co-present and mutually informative.

So, in contemporary Europe it is evident that these risks are all real. Islam is too often represented as monolithic, as not having room for dissent, debate or difference. On the other hand, opponents of Islamic fundamentalism often deny the deep divisions underneath the liberal consensus. Between those who are for or against the European Union, between those who come out of Catholic, Protestant or Jewish traditions, between those who have become fully secularized and those who have not, between those who have come to embrace the religion of the market and those who have not, between votaries of fast and slow food, between supports and opponents of the welfare state.

The real challenge is to choose among all these debates and decide which ones are appropriate to bring into a true dialogue. Many of you who know India know that one of the big issues in the relationship of Muslim communities to the largely Hindu dominated State is the question of internal inequality within Muslim communities, particularly regarding the status of women. So we have the famous Shah Bano case, which is all about a Muslim woman's right to divorce, but that right was being suppressed by the Muslim community, which is of course dominated by males, in India as elsewhere.

So, the question is: when that Muslim community has to negotiate with the Indian State and the Indian legal structure, how much space do they give to their own internal dissent and what is the point at which that becomes very risky? This is a risk for both sides in any such debate, because everybody has internal differences. Thus, if we wish to move away from the misleading and dangerous idea of a clash of civilizations,

especially where Islam is concerned, it is important to recognise that all dialogue is risky and that no great tradition or ideology is lacking in internal debate.

We need to remember that the risk of being misunderstood and the risk of being too understood combine with the risk of how to balance your internal differences when you come to the table with your difference with the external other who has the same internal debate problem. So, which pieces do you bring to the table and negotiate over?

To productively manage the risks of dialogue requires us to identify those internal debates which have the greatest consequence for external debates. In the era of globalization, it is likely that the subjects which connect internal and external debates have a lot to do with democracy, free markets, migration, poverty, environment and social welfare. Each of these subjects carries very high stakes, not only because they are big subjects, but because there is complex tectonics between internal debate and external debate – wherever the line may be between internal and external.

So now I come back, having made a slightly more abstract journey using Islam and Europe, back to Mumbai slum dwellers and towards my conclusions. It may seem like an excessive reach to juxtapose the struggles of Mumbai's urban poor and their practices of compulsory cosmopolitanism with the situation of Muslim communities and Islamic leaders as they conduct dialogue with their liberal or Christian counterparts in Europe. However, both cases involve what I earlier referred to as "contested conviviality". By using the term **contested conviviality** I wish to highlight the precarious, asymmetric and risky space that is involved with any sort of conviviality across boundaries of class, gender, race or ethnicity.

This sort of conviviality is the global predicament of complex societies, diasporic meeting places, urban social formations and transregional formations, like the European Union. Such contested conviviality is very different from the world of rational debate and dialogue in the imaginary Habermasian public sphere, whether national or transnational, since it rarely involves equality between the two parties involved.

It is also quite different from what Sérgio Costa critically, in my view rightly, labelled "the nostalgia program" in postcolonial studies, issuing mainly from the "decolonial turn" in Latin American studies, since situations of precolonial purity are impossible to find on the ground, impossible certainly in the case of Mumbai slum dwellers or in the case of Europe and Islam. In any real situation in today's world, I challenge the reader to show me a place where you can turn to something which is relatively untouched. To this extent I am in deep agreement with Sérgio Costa's concern and question about this nostalgia turn which seeks untouched pasts, and comes particularly out of Latin American studies.

What I mean by contested conviviality is not only that conviviality has often got to be achieved in contexts of serious conflict, but also situations in which the very meaning and scope of conviviality may be under debate between the parties involved in such negotiation. Thus, contested conviviality is a meta term, which refers to the conditions of negotiations about conviviality itself. Imagining such a negotiation is a challenge both to real communities in the world who are obliged to live with one another but also to the human sciences, which need to question their own ideas about conviviality in order to capture the nature of this meta debate which underlines many struggles in the world today.

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