

*The Capacity to Aspire:
Culture and the Terms of Recognition*

ARJUN APPADURAI

The Argument

This essay seeks to provide a new approach to the question: why does culture matter? Let us lengthen the question and ask why it matters for development and for the reduction of poverty. This both narrows and deepens the question. The answer is that it is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured. Thus, in strengthening the capacity to aspire, conceived as a cultural capacity, especially among the poor, the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty. This argument runs against the grain of many deep-seated images of the opposition of culture to economy. But it offers a new foundation on which policy makers can base answers to two basic questions: why is culture a capacity (worth building and strengthening), and what are the concrete ways in which it can be strengthened?

Getting Past Definitions

We do not need one more omnibus definition of culture any more than we need one of the market. In both cases, the textbooks have rung the changes over the long century in which anthropology and economics have taken formal shape as academic disciplines. And not only have the definition mongers had ample say, there has been real refinement and academic progress on both sides. Today's definitions are both more modest, and more helpful. Others are better equipped to tell the story of what we

really ought to mean when we speak of markets. Here I address the cultural side of the equation.

General definitions of culture rightly cover a lot of ground, ranging from general ideas about human creativity and values, to matters of collective identity and social organization, matters of cultural integrity and property, and matters of heritage, monuments, and expressions. The intuition behind this capacious net is that what it gains in scope, it loses in edge. In this chapter, I do not deny the broad humanistic implications of cultural form, freedom, and expression. But I focus on just one dimension of culture—its orientation to the future—that is almost never discussed explicitly. Making this dimension explicit could have radical implications for poverty and development.

In taking this approach to culture, we run against some deeply held counterconceptions. For more than a century, culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness—the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future—plans, hopes, goals, targets. This opposition is an artifact of our definitions and has been crippling. On the anthropological side, in spite of many important technical moves in the understanding of culture, the future remains a stranger to most anthropological models of culture. By default, and also for independent reasons, economics has become the science of the future, and when human beings are seen as having a future, the keywords such as wants, needs, expectations, calculations, have become hardwired into the discourse of economics. In a word, the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person of the future. Thus, from the start, culture is opposed to development, as tradition is opposed to newness, and habit to calculation. It is hardly a surprise that nine out of ten treatises on development treat culture as a worry or a drag on the forward momentum of planned economic change.

It is customary for anthropologists to pin the blame for this state of affairs on economists and their unwillingness to broaden their views of economic action and motivation and to take culture into account. And economics is hardly blameless, in its growing preoccupation with models of such abstraction and parsimony that they can hardly take most real-world economics on board, much less the matter of culture, which simply becomes the biggest tenant in the black box of aggregate rationality. But anthropologists need to do better by their own core concept. And this is where the question of the future comes in.

In fact, most approaches to culture do not ignore the future. But they smuggle it in indirectly, when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values as

being central to cultures, conceived as specific and multiple designs for social life. But by not elaborating the implications of norms for futurity as a cultural capacity, these definitions tend to allow the sense of culture as pastness to dominate. Even the most interesting recent attempts, notably associated with the name of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), to bring practice, strategy, calculation, and a strong agonistic dimension to cultural action have been attacked for being too structuralist (that is, too formal and static) on the one hand, and too economic on the other (Bourdieu 1977). And what is sometimes called “practice” theory in anthropology does not directly take up the matter of how collective horizons are shaped and of how they constitute the basis for collective aspirations which may be regarded as cultural.

There have been a few key developments in the anthropological debate over culture that are vital building blocks for the central concern of this essay. The first is the insight, incubated in structural linguistics as early as Saussure, that cultural coherence is not a matter of individual items but of their relationships, and the related insight that these relations are systematic and generative. Even those anthropologists who are deeply unsympathetic to Lévi-Strauss and anything that smacks of linguistic analogy in the study of culture, now assume that the elements of a cultural system make sense only in relation to one another, and that these systematic relations are somehow similar to those which make languages miraculously orderly and productive. The second important development in cultural theory is the idea that dissensus of some sort is part and parcel of culture and that a shared culture is no more a guarantee of complete consensus than a shared platform in the democratic convention. Earlier in the history of the discipline, this incomplete sharing was studied as the central issue in studies of children and of socialization (in anthropology, of “enculturation”), and was based on the obvious fact everywhere that children become culture bearers through specific forms of education and discipline. This insight became deepened and extended through work on gender, politics, and resistance in the last three decades, notably through the work of scholars such as John and Jean Comaroff, James Scott, Sherry Ortner, and a host of others, now so numerous as to be invisible (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Scott 1990; Ortner 1995). The third important development in anthropological understandings of culture is the recognition that the boundaries of cultural systems are leaky, and that traffic and osmosis are the norm, not the exception. This strand of thought now underwrites the work of some of the key theorists of the cultural dimensions of globalization (Beck 2000; Hannerz 1992, 1996; Mbembe 2001; Sassen 1998, 1999), who foreground mixture, heterogeneity, diversity, heterogeneity, and plurality as critical fea-

tures of culture in the era of globalization. Their work reminds us that no culture, past or present, is a conceptual island unto itself, except in the imagination of the observer. Cultures are and always have been interactive to some degree.

Of course, each of these developments in anthropology is accompanied by a host of footnotes, debates, and ongoing litigations (as must be the case in any serious academic discipline). Still, no serious contemporary understanding of culture can ignore these three key dimensions: relationality (between norms, values, beliefs, etc.); dissensus within some framework of consensus (especially in regard to the marginal, the poor, gender relations, and power relations more generally); and weak boundaries (perennially visible in processes of migration, trade, and warfare now writ large in globalizing cultural traffic).

This chapter builds on and returns to these important developments. They are of direct relevance to the recovery of the future as a cultural capacity. In making this recovery, we will also need to recall some of these wider developments within anthropology. But my main concern here is with the implications of these moves for current debates about development and poverty reduction.

Bringing the Future Back In

The effort to recover, highlight, and foreground the place of the future in our understandings of culture is not a matter, fortunately, where anthropology has to invent the entire wheel. Allies for this effort can be found in a variety of fields and disciplines, ranging from political theory and moral philosophy to welfare economics and human rights debates. My own thinking on this project builds on and is in dialogue with three important sets of ideas which come from outside anthropology and some from within it.

Outside anthropology, the effort to strengthen the idea of aspiration as a cultural capacity, can build on Charles Taylor's path-breaking concept of "recognition," his key contribution to the debate on the ethical foundations of multiculturalism (Taylor 1992). In this work, Taylor showed that there is such a thing as a "politics of recognition," in virtue of which there was an ethical obligation to extend a sort of moral cognizance to persons who shared worldviews deeply different from our own. This was an important move, which gives the idea of tolerance some political teeth, makes intercultural understanding an obligation, not an option, and recognizes the independent value of dignity in cross-cultural transactions apart from issues of redistribution. The challenge today, as many scholars

have noted, is how to bring the politics of dignity and the politics of poverty into a single framework. Put another way, the issue is whether cultural recognition can be extended so as to enhance redistribution (see especially Fraser and Honneth 2003; Fraser 2001).

I also take inspiration from Albert Hirschman's now classic work (Hirschman 1970) on the relations between different forms of collective identification and satisfaction, which enabled us to see the general applicability of the ideas of "loyalty," "exit," and "voice," terms that Hirschman used to cover a wide range of possible relations that human beings have to decline in firms, organizations, and states. In Hirschman's terms, I would suggest that we have tended to see cultural affiliations almost entirely in terms of loyalty (total attachment) but have paid little attention to exit and voice. Voice is a critical matter for my purposes since it engages the question of dissensus. Even more than the idea of exit it is vital to any engagement with the poor (and thus with poverty), since one of their gravest lacks is the lack of resources with which to give "voice," that is, to express their views and get results skewed to their own welfare in the political debates that surround wealth and welfare in all societies. So, a way to put my central question in Hirschman's terms would be: how can we strengthen the capability of the poor to have and to cultivate "voice," since exit is not a desirable solution for the world's poor and loyalty is clearly no longer generally clearcut?

My approach also responds to Amartya Sen, who has placed us all in his debt through a series of efforts to argue for the place of values in economic analysis and in the politics of welfare and well-being. Through his earlier work on social values and development (Sen 1984) to his more recent work on social welfare (loosely characterized as the "capabilities" approach) (Sen 1985a) and on freedom (Sen 1999), Sen has made major and overlapping arguments for placing matters of freedom, dignity, and moral well-being at the heart of welfare and its economics. This approach has many implications and applications, but for my purposes, it highlights the need for a parallel internal opening up in how to understand culture, so that Sen's radical expansion of the idea of welfare can find its strongest cultural counterpoint. In this chapter, I am partly concerned to bring aspiration in as a strong feature of cultural capacity, as a step in creating a more robust dialogue between "capacity" and "capability," the latter in Sen's terms. In more general terms, Sen's work is a major invitation to anthropology to widen its conceptions of how human beings engage their own futures.

Within anthropology, in addition to the basic developments I addressed already, I regard this chapter as being in a dialogue with two key scholars.

The first, Mary Douglas, in her work on cosmology (Douglas 1973/1982), later on commodities and budgets, and later still on risk and nature (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982), has repeatedly argued for seeing ordinary people as operating through cultural designs for anticipation and risk reduction. This is a line of thought that helps us to investigate the broader problem of aspiration in a systematic way, with due attention to the internal relations of cosmology and calculation among poorer people, such as those members of the English working classes studied by Douglas in some of her best work on consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 1979/1996).

Finally, James Fernandez has had a long-term interest in the problem of how cultural consensus is produced. In this exercise, he has reminded us that even in the most “traditional”-looking cultures, such as the Fang of West Africa whom he has written about extensively, we cannot take consensus for granted. His second major contribution is in showing that through the specific operations of various forms of verbal and material ritual, through “performances” and metaphors arranged and enacted in specific ways, real groups actually produce the kinds of consensus on first principles that they may appear to take simply for granted (Fernandez 1965, 1986). This work opens the ground for me, in my own examinations of activism among the poor in India and elsewhere to note that certain uses of words and arrangements of action that we may call cultural, may be especially strategic sites for the production of consensus. This is a critical matter for anyone concerned with helping the poor to help themselves, or in our current jargon, to “empower” the poor. With Fernandez, we can ask how the poor may be helped to produce those forms of cultural consensus that may be best advance their own collective long-term interests in matters of wealth, equality, and dignity.

I turn now to asking why such a revitalized tool kit is called for to make real progress on the relationship between culture, poverty, and development. What exactly is the problem?

The Capacity to Aspire

Poverty is many things, all of them bad. It is material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risk and high costs for thin comforts. It is inequality materialized. It diminishes its victims. It is also the situation of far too many people in the world, even if the relative number of those who are escaping the worst forms of poverty is also increasing. The number of the world’s poor, their destitution, and their desperation now seem overwhelming by most measures.

The poor are not just the human bearers of the condition of poverty.

They are a social group, partly defined by official measures but also conscious of themselves as a group, in the real languages of many societies. Just as ordinary human beings have learned to think of themselves as “people” and even as “the people” in most human societies in the wake of the democratic revolution of the last three centuries, poor people increasingly see themselves as a group, in their own societies and also across these societies. There may not be anything which can usefully be called a “culture of poverty” (anthropologists have rightly ceased to use this conceptualization), but the poor certainly have understandings of themselves and the world that have cultural dimensions and expressions. These may not be easy to identify, since they are not neatly nested with shared national or regional cultures, and often cross local and national lines. Also, they may be differently articulated by men and women, the poorest and the merely poor, the employed and the unemployed, the disabled and the able-bodied, the more politically conscious and the less mobilized. But it is never hard to identify threads and themes in the worldviews of the poor. These are strikingly concrete and local in expression but also impressively general in their reach. The multivolume World Bank–sponsored study of “The Voices of the Poor” is a major archive of these threads and themes (Narayan et al. 2001a,b).

This archive and other close observations of poor populations in different parts of the world reveal a number of important things about culture and poverty. The first is that poor people have a deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live. Even when they are not obviously hostile to these norms, they often show forms of irony, distance, and cynicism about these norms. This sense of irony, which allows the poor to maintain some dignity in the worst conditions of oppression and inequality, is one side of their involvement in the dominant cultural norms. The other side is compliance, not mere surface compliance but fairly deep moral attachment to norms and beliefs that directly support their own degradation. Thus, many untouchables in India comply with the degrading exclusionary rules and practices of caste because they subscribe in some way to the larger order of norms and metaphysical propositions which dictate their compliance: these include ideas about fate, rebirth, caste duty, and sacred social hierarchies. Thus the poor are neither simple dupes nor secret revolutionaries. They are survivors. And what they often seek strategically (even without a theory to dress it up) is to optimize the terms of trade between recognition and redistribution in their immediate, local lives. Their ideas about such optimization may not be perfect, but do we have better optima to offer to them?

I refer to this ambivalence among the poor (and by extension the excluded, the disadvantaged, and the marginal groups in society more generally) about the cultural worlds in which they exist in terms of the idea of the terms of recognition (building on Taylor's ideas). In speaking about the terms of recognition (by analogy with the terms of trade, or the terms of engagement), I mean to highlight the conditions and constraints under which the poor negotiate with the very norms that frame their social lives. I propose that poverty is partly a matter of operating with extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned. More concretely, the poor are frequently in a position where they are encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services. In the Indian case, these norms take a variety of forms: some have to do with fate, luck, and rebirth; others have to do with the glorification of asceticism and material deprivation; yet others connect social deference to deference to divinity; yet others reduce major metaphysical assumptions to simple and rigid rules of etiquette which promise freedom from reprisal. When I refer to operating under adverse terms of recognition, I mean that in recognizing those who are wealthy, the poor permit the existing and corrupt standing of local and national elites to be further bolstered and reproduced. But when they are recognized (in the cultural sense), it is usually as an abstract political category, divorced of real persons (Indira Gandhi's famous slogan *garibi hatao*—remove poverty—and many other populist slogans, have this quality). Or their poverty is perversely recognized as a sign of some sort of worldly disorder which promises, by inversion, its own long-term rectification. The poor are recognized, but in ways that ensure minimum change in the terms of redistribution. So, to the extent that poverty is indexed by poor terms of recognition for the poor, intervention to positively affect these terms is a crucial priority.

In other terms, returning to Hirschman, we need to strengthen the capacity of the poor to exercise “voice,” to debate, contest, and oppose vital directions for collective social life as they wish, not only because this is virtually a definition of inclusion and participation in any democracy. But there is a stronger reason for strengthening the capacity for voice among the poor. It is the only way in which the poor might find locally plausible ways to alter what I am calling the terms of recognition in any particular cultural regime. Here I treat voice as a cultural capacity, not just as a generalized and universal democratic virtue because for voice to take effect, it must engage social, political, and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines, and norms which are widely shared and credible, even

by the rich and powerful. Furthermore, voice must be expressed in terms of actions and performances which have local cultural force. Here, Gandhi's life, his fasting, his abstinence, his bodily comportment, his ascetical style, his crypto-Hindu use of nonviolence and of peaceful resistance, were all tremendously successful because they mobilized a local palette of performances and precursors. Likewise, as the poor seek to strengthen their voices as a cultural capacity, they will need to find those levers of metaphor, rhetoric, organization, and public performance that will work best in their cultural worlds. And when they do work, as we have seen with various movements in the past, they change the terms of recognition, indeed the cultural framework itself. So, there is no shortcut to empowerment. It has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilize adherents, and capture the public space of debate. And this is true in the efforts that the poor make to mobilize themselves (internally) and in their efforts to change the dynamics of consensus in their larger social worlds.

The complex relationship of the poor and the marginalized to the cultural regimes within which they function is clearer still when we consider a specific cultural capacity, the capacity to aspire. I have already indicated that this is a weak feature of most approaches to cultural processes and frequently remains obscure. This obscurity has been especially costly for the poor, and in regard to development more generally.

Aspirations certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor (all approximate characterizations), they have been large invisible in the study of culture.

To repatriate them into the domain of the culture, we need to begin by noting that aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life. As far back as Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead, we have learned that there is no self outside a social frame, setting, and mirror. Could it be otherwise for aspirations? And aspirations about the good life, about health and happiness, exist in all societies. Yet a Buddhist picture of the good life lies at some distance from an Islamic one. Equally, a poor Tamil peasant woman's view of the good life may be as distant from that of a cosmopolitan woman from Delhi, as from that of an equally poor woman from Tanzania. But in every case, aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas (remember relationality as an aspect of cultural worlds)

which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about: life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or warfare. At the same time, aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue. More narrow still, these intermediate norms often stay beneath the surface and emerge only as specific wants and choices: for this piece of land or that, for that marriage connection or another one, for this job in the bureaucracy as opposed to that job overseas, for this pair of shoes over that pair of trousers. This last, most immediate, visible inventory of wants has often led students of consumption and of poverty to lose sight of the intermediate and higher order normative contexts within which these wants are gestated and brought into view. And thus decontextualized, they are usually downloaded to the individual and offloaded to the science of calculation and the market—economics.

The poor, no less than any other group in a society, do express horizons in choices made and choices voiced, often in terms of specific goods and outcomes, often material and proximate, like doctors for their children, markets for their grain, husbands for their daughters, and tin roofs for their homes. But these lists, apparently just bundles of individual and idiosyncratic wants, are inevitably tied up with more general norms, presumptions, and axioms about the good life, and life more generally.

But here is the twist with the capacity to aspire. It is not evenly distributed in any society. It is a sort of metacapacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. What does this mean? It means that the better off you are (in terms of power, dignity, and material resources), the more likely you are to be conscious of the links between the more and less immediate objects of aspiration. Because the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes, because they are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options. They too may express their aspirations in concrete, individual wishes and wants. But they are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs. This resource, unequally tilted in favor of the wealthier people in

any society, is also subject to the truism that “the rich get richer,” since the archive of concrete experiments with the good life gives nuance and texture to more general norms and axioms; conversely, experience with articulating these norms and axioms makes the more privileged members of any society more supple in navigating the complex steps between these norms and specific wants and wishes.

The capacity to aspire is thus a navigational capacity. The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures), have a more brittle horizon of aspirations.

This difference should not be misunderstood. I am not saying that the poor cannot wish, want, need, plan, or aspire. But part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur. If the map of aspirations (continuing the navigational metaphor) is seen to consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again. Where these pathways do exist for the poor, they are likely to be more rigid, less supple, and less strategically valuable, not because of any cognitive deficit on the part of the poor but because the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and refutation in regard to the future are limited (and this may well be one way to define poverty), it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively less developed.

This capacity to aspire—conceived as a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations—compounds the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes that surround them. This is because the experiential limitations in subaltern populations, on the capacity to aspire, tend to create a binary relationship to core cultural values, negative and skeptical at one pole, overattached at the other. Returning to Hirschman’s typology, this may be part of the reason that the less privileged, and especially the very poor, in any society, tend to oscillate between “loyalty” and “exit” (whether the latter takes the form of violent protest or total apathy). Of course, the objective is to increase the capacity for the third pos-

ture, the posture of “voice,” the capacity to debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically.

The faculty of “voice” in Hirschman’s terms, and what I am calling the capacity to aspire, a cultural capacity, are reciprocally linked. Each accelerates the nurture of the other. And the poor in every society are caught in a situation where triggers to this positive acceleration are few and hard to access. Here empowerment has an obvious translation: increase the capacity to aspire, especially for the poor. This is by definition an approach to culture, since capacities form parts of sets, and are always part of a local design of means and ends, values and strategies, experiences and tested insights. Such a map is always a highly specific way of connecting what Clifford Geertz long ago called the “experience-near” and the “experience-distant” aspects of life and may thus rightly be called cultural or, less felicitously, a “culture” (Geertz 1973b). This is the map that needs to be made more real, available, and powerful for the poor.

Having suggested that the capacity to aspire requires strengthening among poor communities, it is vital to note that examples of such efforts are already available in a variety of new social movements, many driven from and by the poor themselves. In these movements, we can see what can be accomplished when the capacity to aspire is strengthened and tested in the real world, the world in which development can either fail or succeed. In looking closely at one such movement, we are also able to see the how mobilization can expand and enrich the capacity to aspire within a specific social and cultural milieu.

Changing the Terms of Recognition: On the Ground in Mumbai

I have elsewhere described some results of a study in progress of grass-roots globalization, which consists of a detailed ethnographic account of a propoor alliance of housing activists based in Mumbai who are building a global coalition to serve their vision (Appadurai 2001). This movement represents forcefully what happens when a group of poor people begins to mobilize its capacity to aspire in a specific political and cultural regime. It allows me to say something about the lived experience of poverty but also about a specific set of ways in which a specific propoor activist movement is changing the terms of recognition for the urban poor and enriching the cultural capacity to aspire among its members through a strategy that creates a double helix between local activism and global networking. The Mumbai-based coalition, which I focus on in this essay, has been at the heart of a global network of community-based housing activists, called the Slum/Shackdwellers International (SDI), which now has members in more

than a dozen countries in Africa and Asia (notably in India, South Africa, and Thailand), with additional alliances in Latin America, Japan, and the United Kingdom. SDI is a major example of the sort of global, nongovernmental network which produces new forms of local politics by innovating strategic forms of activism across borders. While the examples I use come from India, I could cite many similar examples from the activities of the network in South Africa and the Philippines, and other national settings.

The city of Mumbai is in the state of Maharashtra, in western India. The movement here consists of three partners, and as an Alliance, its history goes back to 1987. The three partners have different histories. SPARC is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) formed by social work professionals in 1984 to work with problems of urban poverty in Mumbai. The National Slum Dweller's Foundation is a powerful grassroots organization established in 1974 and is a community-based organization which also has its historical base in Mumbai. Finally, Mahila Milan is an organization of poor women, set up in 1986, with its base in Mumbai and a network throughout India, which is focused on women's issues in relation to urban poverty, and is especially concerned with local and self-organized savings schemes among the very poor. All three organizations, which refer to themselves collectively as the Alliance, are united in their concerns with gaining secure tenure in land, adequate and durable housing, and access to urban infrastructure, notably to electricity, transport, sanitation, and allied services.

Mumbai is the largest city in a country (India) whose population has just crossed the 1 billion level (one-sixth of the population of the world). The city's population is at least 12 million (more if we include the growing edges of the city and the population of the twin city which has been built across the Thane Creek). This means a population of 1.2% of one-sixth of the world's population. Not a minor case, even in itself.

By general consensus, here are some facts about housing in Mumbai. About 40% of its population (about 6 million persons) live in slums or other degraded forms of housing. Another 5% to 10% are pavement dwellers. Yet, according to one recent estimate, slum dwellers occupy only 8% of the city's land, which totals about 43,000 hectares. The rest of the city's land is either industrial land, middle- and high-income housing, or vacant land in the control of the city, the state (regional and federal) or private owners. The bottom line: 5 to 6 million poor people living in substandard conditions in 8% of the land area of a city no bigger than Manhattan and its near boroughs. In addition, this huge population of the insecurely or poorly housed people has negligible access to essential services, such as running water, electricity, and ration cards for essential foods.

Equally important, this population, which we may call citizens without a city, is a vital part of the workforce of the city. Some of them occupy the lowest end of white-collar organizations and others the lowest end of industrial and manufacturing industries. But many are engaged in temporary, menial, physically dangerous and socially degrading forms of work. This latter group, which may well constitute 1 to 2 million people in Mumbai, are best described, in the striking phrase of Sandeep Pendse (1995), as Mumbai's "toilers" rather than as its proletariat, working class, or laboring classes, all designations which suggest more stable forms of employment and organization.

Housing is at the very heart of the lives of this army of toilers. Their everyday life is dominated by ever-present forms of risk. Their temporary shacks may be demolished. Their slumlords may push them out through force or extortion. The torrential monsoons may destroy their fragile shelters and their few personal possessions. Their lack of sanitary facilities increases their needs for doctors to whom they have poor access. And their inability to document their claims to housing may snowball into a general invisibility in urban life, making it impossible for them to claim any rights to such things as rationed foods, municipal health and education facilities, police protection, and voting rights. In a city where ration cards, electricity bills, and rent receipts guarantee other rights to the benefits of citizenship, the inability to secure claims to proper housing and other political handicaps reinforce one another. Housing—and its lack—is the most public drama of disenfranchisement in Mumbai. Thus, the politics of housing can be argued to be the single most critical site of a politics of citizenship in this city. This is the context in which the activists I am working with are making their interventions, mobilizing the poor and generating new forms of politics.

Instead of finding safety in affiliation with any single ruling party or coalition in the state government of Maharashtra or in the municipal corporation of Mumbai, the Alliance has developed a complex political affiliation with the various levels and forms of the state bureaucracy. This group includes its national civil servants who execute state policy at the highest levels in the state of Maharashtra and run the major bodies responsible for housing loans, slum rehabilitation, real estate regulation, and the like. The members of the Alliance have also developed complex links with the quasi-autonomous arms of the federal government (such as the railways, the port authority, the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport Corporation) and to municipal authorities who control critical aspects of infrastructure, such as regulations concerning illegal structures, water supply, sanitation, and licensing of residential structures. Finally, the Alliance

works to maintain a cordial relationship with the Mumbai police and at least a hands-off relationship with the underworld, which is deeply involved in the housing market, slum landlordism, and extortion, as well as in the demolition and rebuilding of temporary structures. From this perspective, the politics of the Alliance is a politics of accommodation, negotiation, and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation or threats of political reprisal. This pragmatic approach is grounded in a complex political vision about means, ends, and styles which is not entirely utilitarian or functional. It is based on a series of ideas about the transformation of the conditions of poverty by the poor in the long run. In this sense, the idea of a political horizon implies an idea of patience and of cumulative victories and long-term asset building which is wired into every aspect of the activities of the Alliance. The Alliance believes that the mobilization of the knowledge of the poor into methods driven by the poor and for the poor is a slow and risk-laden process that informs the strong bias of the Alliance against “projects” and “projectization” that underlies almost all official ideas about urban change.

This resistance to externally defined time frames (driven by donor schedules, budgets, and economies) is a critical part of the way in which the Alliance cultivates the capacity to aspire among its members. It is played out in tough negotiations (both internal to the Alliance and with external agencies) about how plans are made, risks taken, commitments solidified, and accountability defined. For example, the Alliance recently succeeded in getting a major contract to build a large number of community toilets in Mumbai, on a scale previously reserved for private contracts and developers, or for government organizations and experts. By acquiring this major contract, the Alliance set itself the challenge of relating its long-term visions of dignity, health, and sanitary self-sufficiency to its short-term capacities for handling contractors, builders, suppliers, engineers, and banks in Mumbai. In this ongoing exercise, which is a textbook case of what “empowerment” could really mean, important segments of Mumbai’s slum dwellers are exercising collectively the sinews of the capacity to aspire, while testing their capacities to convince skeptics from the funding world, the banking world, the construction industry, and the municipality of Mumbai that they can deliver what they promise, while building their capacities to plan, coordinate, manage, and mobilize their energies in a difficult and large-scale technical endeavor.

Another arena in which the Alliance (and its global partners in SDI) builds the capacity to aspire is in regard to savings, which they see as a discipline of community building. But it is also a central mode for building the capacity to aspire. Savings is thus a term which means more than what

it says in the life of the Alliance. Creating informal savings groups among the poor (now canonized by the donor world as “microcredit”) is a major worldwide technique for improving financial citizenship for the urban and rural poor throughout the world, often building on older ideas of revolving credit and loan facilities managed informally and locally, outside the purview of the state and the banking sector. Savings and microcredit have many advocates and visionaries in India and elsewhere. But in the life of the Alliance, savings has a profound ideological, even salvational, status. The visionary of the specific philosophy of daily savings for the Alliance is the president of the National Slum-Dweller’s Foundation, A. Jockin, who has used daily savings as a principal tool for mobilization in India and his central strategy for entry and relationship building in South Africa, Cambodia, and Thailand. He is the missionary of a specific idea of daily savings among small-scale groups, which he sees as the bedrock of every other activity of the federation. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that in Jockin’s organizational exhortations wherever he goes, Federation = Savings. When Jockin and other members of the Alliance speak about daily savings, it becomes evident that they are describing something far deeper than a simple mechanism for meeting daily monetary needs and sharing resources among the poor. They are also speaking about a way of life organized around the importance of daily savings, which is viewed as a moral discipline (in Jockin’s words, it is like “breathing”) which builds a certain kind of political fortitude and commitment to the collective good and creates persons who can manage their affairs in many other ways as well. It is something like a spiritual discipline whose spread Jockin and other leaders see as the building block of the local and global success of the federation model.

Mahila Milan, the women’s group that is the third partner in the Alliance, is almost entirely preoccupied with organizing small savings circles. Thus, in putting savings at the heart of the moral politics of the Alliance, its leaders place the work of poor women at the very foundation of what they do in every other area. In a simple formula: without poor women joining together, there can be no savings. Without savings, there can be no community building. Without real communities (defined by them as parts of “federations”), there is no way for the poor to drive changes themselves in the arrangements that disempower them. Thus, the act of savings is an ethical principle which forms the practical and moral core of the politics of patience, since it does not generate large resources quickly. It is also a moral discipline which produces persons who can raise the political force and material commitments most valued by the federation.

Sharing and circulating ideas and experiences about savings, in direct

exchanges among the poor women of SDI, has been one of the major modes by which the poorest communities in SDI have built a global dialogue based on face-to-face conversation and honest criticism of each other's hopes and failures. These exchanges also facilitate conversations about the differences in the challenges that different communities, in different countries, face in their own environments. They are also the processes through which cultural differences are explored, negotiated, and transcended through laughter, debate, song, and speeches in collective events organized over the years in Mumbai, Manila, Cape Town, Durban, and many other places. These discussions about savings are highly specific occasions for poor men and women to find out what the future truly means for different individuals and groups who are trying to think ahead and struggle for secure tenure, for government loans, for permits for water or electricity, or for the right to police their own communities. Here, local horizons of hope and desire enter a dialogue with other designs for the future and poor persons (often women) crossing massive cultural boundaries are able to discuss their aspirations in the most concrete of forms, in conversations about why some members are unable to save regularly, about why some misuse their access to community funds, about what sorts of consumption are more or less legitimate with borrowed money, and about how money relates to trust, power, and community.

The last key term that recurs in the writing and speech of the leaders of the Alliance is the idea of "precedent setting." I am still exploring the full ramifications of this linguistic strategy. What I have learned so far is that, beneath its bland, quasi-legal tone, there is a more radical idea. The idea is that the poor need to claim, capture, refine, and define certain ways of doing things in spaces they already control and then use these to show donors, city officials, and other activists that these "precedents" are good ones, and encourage other actors to invest further in them. This is a politics of "show and tell," but it is also a philosophy of "do first, talk later." The subversive feature of this principle is that it provides a linguistic device for negotiating between the legalities of urban government and the full force of the "illegal" arrangements that the poor almost always have to make, whether they concern illegal structures, illegal strategies, informal arrangements for water and electricity, or anything else that they have succeeded in capturing out of the material resources of the city. This linguistic device shifts the burden for municipal officials and other experts away from the strain of whitewashing illegal activities to the safety of building on legitimate precedents. The image and linguistic strategy of "precedent" turns the survival strategies and experiments of the poor into legitimate foundations for policy innovations by the state, by the city, by donors, and

by other activist organizations. It is a linguistic strategy that moves the poor into the horizon of legality on their own terms. Most importantly, it involves risk-taking activities by bureaucrats within a discourse of legality, and allows the boundaries of the status quo to be pushed and stretched without creating fears of rule-breaking among those bureaucrats who are sympathetic to the Alliance. It creates a border zone of trial and error, a sort of research and development space, within which poor communities, activists, and bureaucrats can explore new designs for partnership. The strategies of precedent setting also constitute spaces for exploring the capacity to aspire and for testing the possibilities for changes in the terms of recognition. For in every discussion about precedent setting, what is involved is a map of a journey into the future, whether in the matter of relocating homes (after demolition of temporary homes by the police) or of arrangements with contractors to provide services for building toilets, or of dealings with funders about deadlines, reports, and accountability. In each of these instances, activists and the poor communities they answer to (or come from) have to practice the arts of aspiration, lending vision and horizon to immediate strategies and choices, lending immediacy and materiality to abstract wishes and desires, and struggling to reconcile the demands of the moment against the disciplines of patience.

But the world does not change through language alone. These key-words (and many other linguistic strategies not discussed here) also provide the nervous system of a whole body of broader technical, institutional, and representational practices which have become signatures of the politics of the Alliance. Here I briefly discuss two vital organizational strategies that capture the ways in which technical practices are harnessed to the Alliance's political horizon. They are housing exhibitions and toilet festivals.

Housing exhibitions are a major organized technique through which the structural bias of existing knowledge processes is challenged, even reversed, in the politics of the Alliance. Since the materialities of housing—its cost, its durability, its legality, and its design—lie at the very heart of slum life, it is no surprise that this is an area where grassroots creativity has had radical effects. As in other matters, the general philosophy of state agencies, donors, and even NGOs concerned with slums has been to assume that the design, construction, and financing of houses has to be produced by various forms of expert and professional knowledge ranging from that of engineers and architects, to that of contractors and surveyors. The Alliance has challenged this assumption by a steady effort to appropriate, in a cumulative manner, all the knowledge required to construct new housing for its members. In effect, in Mumbai, the Alliance has

moved into housing development, and the fruits of this remarkable move are to be seen in three or four major sites, in Mankhurd, Dharavi, Ghatkopar.

Housing exhibitions are a crucial part of this reversal of the standard flows of expertise when it comes to housing for the rehabilitation of slum dwellers. The idea of housing exhibitions by and for the poor goes back to 1986 in Mumbai and has since been replicated in many cities in India and elsewhere in the world. These exhibitions, organized by the Alliance and other like-minded groups, are an example of the creative hijacking of an upper-class form (historically evolved for consumer products and high-end industrial products oriented to the middle and upper classes in India) for the purposes of the poor. Not only do these exhibitions allow the poor (and especially the women among them) to discuss and debate designs for housing that suited their own needs, it also allowed them to enter into conversations with various professionals about housing materials, construction costs, and urban services. Through this process, their own ideas of the good life, of adequate space, and of realistic costs, were foregrounded, and they began to see that house building in a professional manner was only a logical extension of their greatest expertise, which was to build adequate housing out of the flimsiest of materials and in the most insecure of circumstances. These poor families were enabled to see that they had always been architects and engineers and could continue to play that role in the building of more secure housing. In this process, many technical and design innovations were made, and continue to be made.

More significant, these events were political events where poor families and activists from one city traveled to housing exhibitions in another city, socializing with each other, sharing ideas, and simply having fun. They were also events to which state officials were invited, to cut the ceremonial ribbon and to give speeches associating themselves with these grass-roots exercises, thus simultaneously gaining points for hobnobbing with “the people” and giving poor families in the locality some legitimacy in the eyes of their neighbors, their civic authorities, and themselves. More important, in these public and ceremonial moments, we can see another remarkable way in which the capacity to aspire is built by changing the terms of recognition. Time after time, in the speeches by the leaders of the Alliance at these events, I have seen the importance of the languages of hope, aspiration, trust, and desire come together in a variety of languages (English, Hindi, and Marathi especially), in speeches built around a core of terms such as *asha* (hope), *bharosa* (trust), *yojana* (plan), and *chahat* (desire), all deployed in speeches about the importance of building more housing for the poor, for increasing their freedom from harassment, and for

expanding their spheres of self-governance. As politicians and bureaucrats join these events, in which much speech making is substantially spontaneous, they also find themselves drawn into the lexicon of plans, commitments, hopes, and trust. While it is possible to view these events as mere political charades, I would suggest that they are productive forms of political negotiation, in which poor communities are able to draw politicians into public commitments to expand the resources and recognitions available to the poor. Not all of these promises may be kept (or even meant), but they change the climate of negotiation, place certain commitments on public record, and produce a common terrain of aspiration in which the politics of the poor and the politics of politicians are brought into a common performative space. These are critical steps in strengthening the exercise of the capacity to aspire, among poor communities, not just as a cultural capacity but as a public and political capacity. Words, in such contexts, may not exactly be performatives, which guarantee material outcomes. But they are potent signals and occasions for building the capacity to aspire.

As with other key practices of the Alliance, housing exhibitions are also deep exercises in subverting the existing class cultures of India. By performing their competences in public, by drawing an audience of their peers and of the state, other NGOs, and sometimes foreign funders, these poor families involved enter a space of public sociality, official recognition, and technical legitimation. And they do so with their own creativity as the main exhibit. Thus technical and cultural capital are cocreated in these events, creating new levers for further guerrilla exercises in capturing civic space and pieces of the public sphere hitherto denied to the urban poor. This is a particular politics of visibility which inverts the harm of the default condition of civic invisibility which characterizes the urban poor.

Running through all these activities is a spirit of transgression and bawdiness, expressed in body language, speech styles, and public address. The men and women of the Alliance are involved in constant banter with each other and even with the official world (though with some care for context). Nowhere does this carnivalesque spirit come out more clearly than in the Toilet Festivals (*sandas melas*) organized by the Alliance, which enact what we may call the politics of shit. Human waste management, as it is euphemistically described in policy circles, is perhaps the key arena where every problem of the urban poor arrives at a single point of extrusion, so to speak. Given the abysmal housing, often with almost no privacy, that most urban slum dwellers enjoy, shitting in public is a serious humiliation for adults. Children are indifferent up to a certain age, but no adult, male or female, enjoys shitting in broad day-

light in public view. In rural India, women go the fields to defecate while it is still dark, and men may go later but with some measure of protection from the public eye (with the exception of the gaze of railway passengers inured to the sight of squatting bodies in the fields, and vice versa). Likewise, in rural India, the politics of shitting is spatially managed through a completely different economy of space, water, visibility, and custom.

In cities, the problem is much more serious. Shitting in the absence of good sewage systems, ventilation, and running water (all of which slums, by definition, lack) is a humiliating practice that is intimately connected to the conditions under which waterborne diseases take hold, creating life-threatening disease conditions. One macabre joke among Mumbai's urban poor is that they are the only ones in the city who cannot afford to get diarrhea, partly because the lines at the few existing public toilets are so long (often involving waiting times of an hour or more), and of course medical facilities for stemming the condition are also hard to find. So shitting and its management are a central issue of slum life. Living in an ecology of fecal odors, piles, and channels, where cooking water, washing water, and shit-bearing water are not carefully insulated from one another, adds high risks of disease and mortality to the social humiliation of shitting in public view.

The Toilet Festivals organized by the Alliance in many cities of India are a brilliant effort to turn this humiliating and privatized suffering into scenes of technical innovation, collective celebration, and carnivalesque play with officials from the state, from the World Bank, and from middle-class officialdom in general. These toilet festivals involve the exhibition and inauguration not of models but of real public toilets, by and for the poor, involving complex systems of collective payment and maintenance, optimal conditions of safety and cleanliness, and a collective obligation to sustain these facilities. These facilities are currently small scale and have not yet been built in anything like the large numbers required for the urban slum populations of India's cities. But they are another performance of competence and innovation, in which the politics of shit is (to mix metaphors) turned on its head, and humiliation and victimization are turned into exercises in technical initiative and self-dignification. This is a politics of recognition (Taylor 1992) from below. When a World Bank official has to examine the virtues of a public toilet and to discuss the merits of this form of shit management with the shitters themselves, the materiality of poverty turns from abjectivity to subjectivity. The politics of shit (as Gandhi showed in his own efforts to liberate Indian untouchables from the task of carrying away the shit of

their upper-caste superiors) is a meeting point of the human body, dignity, and technology, which the poor are now redefining with the help of movements like the Alliance. In India, where distance from your own shit is the virtual marker of class distinction, the poor, too long living in their shit, are finding ways to place some distance between their shit and themselves. The toilet exhibitions are a transgressive display of this fecal politics, itself a critical material feature of deep democracy. They also connect, in the most powerful way, the politics of recognition to the politics of material life and of the link between dignity and the capacity to aspire.

In June 2001, at a major meeting at the United Nations, marking the five years that had passed after the important Istanbul housing meeting of 1996, the Alliance and its partners elsewhere in the world built a model house as well as a model children's toilet in the lobby of the main United Nations building, after considerable internal debate within the SDI and official resistance at the UN. These models were visited by Kofi Annan in a festive atmosphere which left an indelible impression of material empowerment on the world of UN bureaucrats and NGO officials present. Annan was surrounded by poor women from India and South Africa, singing and dancing, as he walked through the model house and the model toilet, in the heart of his own bureaucratic empire. It was a magical moment, full of possibilities for the Alliance, and for the secretary-general, as they engage jointly and together with the global politics of poverty. So housing exhibitions, and toilets too, can be moved, built, reconstructed, and deployed anywhere, thus sending the message that no space is too grand—or too humble—for the spatial imagination of the poor and for the global portability of the capacity to aspire.

In all these instances, a creative repertoire of rituals and performances, both linguistic and technical, creates the sort of feedback loop between general principles and specific goals which is at the heart of all active social change. It applies both to the partnerships which the Alliance seeks and to its internal dynamics. These performances increase the density, variety, and frequency of the loops between nodes and pathways that I discussed when I described the capacity to aspire as a navigational capacity. The more it is exercised, the more its potential for changing the terms of recognition under which the poor must operate. The Alliance has palpably changed these terms of recognition, both internally (for example, in how the men in the movement treat and regard the women) and externally (for example, in how funders and multilaterals now treat members of the Alliance and other similar activists today—less as objects than as partners).

Consensus, Capacities, Capabilities

We are now in a position to pull together some of the themes of this chapter. I have tried to show that specific forms of self-governance, self-mobilization, and self-articulation are vital to changing the conditions under which activists among the poor are changing the terms of recognition, globally and locally, for the poor. I have also tried to show in the case of the SDI that consensus works at two levels and that both require conscious intervention. The first is the transformation of core norms that surround the poor in any particular sociocultural regime. The second is that internal consensus is produced through what many of the SDI activists themselves refer to as their own “rituals” of practice and procedure. In both cases, existing forms of consensus are changed and new forms of consensus are built, as James Fernandez would have predicted, by the deliberate orchestration of forms of language and special social performances which we could loosely refer to as “ritualized.”

Ritual here should not be taken in its colloquial sense, as the meaningless repetition of set patterns of action, but rather as a flexible formula of performances through which social effects are produced and new states of feeling and connection are created, not just reflected or commemorated. This creative, productive, generative quality of ritual is crucial to consensus building in popular movements and it is a quintessential window into why culture matters for development.

For many propoor movements, such as the Alliance of housing activists I described in detail, the capacity to aspire (what I referred to earlier as a metacapacity) is especially precious in the face of the peculiar forms of temporality within which they are forced to operate. In this, they are not different from many other poor groups, especially in cities, but also in the countryside in many societies. The paradox of patience in the face of emergency has become a big feature of the world of globalization, as many poor people experience it. The world has a whole operates increasingly in the mode of urgency, of emergency, of dangers that require immediate reaction and attention. The poor, as refugees, as migrants, as minorities, as slum dwellers, and as subsistence farmers, are often at the center of these emergencies. Yet their biggest weapon is often their patience as they wait for relief to come, rulers to die, bureaucrats to deliver promises, government servants to be transferred, or drought to pass. This ability to hurry up and wait (an American joke about life in the army) has much more serious meaning in the life of the poor.

In helping the poor to negotiate emergency with patience, the capacity to aspire guarantees an ethical and psychological anchor, a horizon of

credible hopes, with which to withstand the deadly oscillation between waiting and rushing. Here, too, the capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity whose strengthening addresses some of the most peculiar cruelties of economic exclusion.

This metacapacity, the capacity to aspire, is also a collective asset which is clearly linked to what Amartya Sen (1985a) has referred to as capabilities. They are two sides of the same coin, much as recognition and redistribution recall and require one another. The capacity to aspire provides an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability. Conversely, the exercise and nurture of these capabilities verifies and authorizes the capacity to aspire and moves it away from wishful thinking to thoughtful wishing. Freedom, the anchoring good in Sen's approach to capabilities and development, has no lasting meaning apart from a collective, dense, and supple horizon of hopes and wants. Absent such a horizon, freedom descends to choice, rational or otherwise, informed or not.

What does this mean for those engaged in the active work of development, as planners, lenders, philanthropists? What does it mean to nurture the capacity to aspire?

Nuts and Bolts

I began by noting that culture is many things, and I have by no means addressed them all. The capacity to aspire is one important thing about culture (and cultures), and it has been paid too little attention so far. Since the work of development and poverty reduction has everything to do with the future, it is self-evident that a deeper capacity to aspire can only strengthen the poor as partners in the battle against poverty. This is the only way that words like *participation*, *empowerment*, and *grass roots* can be rescued from the tyranny of cliché. But even if this seems intuitively right and true, what exactly can lenders, planners, and managers in an institution like the World Bank actually do to put it into practice?

Here I make a few suggestions, not to provide a detailed blueprint, but to provide a guide to further deliberation about making the argument of this chapter into an actual method of intervention and a principle of partnership between the poor and those who subscribe to the view that the poor must have an active role in changing their situations for the better.

The premise is that the capacity to aspire, as a cultural capacity, may well be a capacity (that is, a metacapacity) whose fortification may accelerate the building of other capacities by the poor themselves. If so, it ought to be a priority concern of any developmental effort and a priority com-

ponent of any project with other substantive goals (such as health, food security, or job provision) directed to the reduction of poverty. How can this recommendation be concretely explored?

Here, some general principles appear relevant:

First, whenever an outside agent enters a situation where the poor (and poverty) are a major concern, he or she should look closely at those rituals through which consensus is produced both among poor communities and between them and the more powerful. This process of consensus production is a crucial place to identify efforts to change the terms of recognition. And any consistent pattern in internal efforts to positively tilt the terms of recognition of and for the poor should be supported, as either a side benefit or as a major target of the exercise. Such support can take the form of encouragement to report, record, and repeat such efforts, wherever possible.

Second, every effort should be made to encourage exercises in local teaching and learning which increase the ability of poor people to navigate the cultural map in which aspirations are located and to cultivate an explicit understanding of the links between specific wants or goals and more inclusive scenarios, contexts, and norms among the poor.

Third, all internal efforts to cultivate voice among the poor (rather than loyalty or exit) in the context of any debated policy or project should be encouraged rather than suppressed or ignored. It is through the exercise of voice that the sinews of aspiration as a cultural capacity are built and strengthened, and conversely, it is through exercising the capacity to aspire that the exercise of voice by the poor will be extended.

Fourth, any developmental project or initiative, however grand or modest in its scope, should develop a set of tools for identifying the cultural map of aspirations that surround the specific intervention that is contemplated. This requires a method of placing specific technologies or material inputs in their aspirational contexts for the people most affected by them. This will require careful and thoughtful surveys, which can move from specific goods and technologies to the narratives within which they are understood and thence to the norms which guide these narratives. This last proposal also recognizes that aspirations connect to much of the rest of what we may regard as beneficial about culture, including the lifestyle, values, morals, habits, and material life of any community. And this brings us back to culture more generally.

Coda on Culture

I began by noting that we need a sea change in the way we look at culture in order to create a more productive relationship between anthropol-

ogy and economics, between culture and development, in the battle against poverty. This change requires us to place futurity, rather than pastness, at the heart of our thinking about culture. I have tried to draw out the implications of such a revision and have argued that it is of more than academic interest. It has direct implications for increasing the ability of the poor to truly participate in the aims (and debates) of development.

This does not mean that we need to forget about culture in its broader sense, as the sense of tradition, the fabric of everyday understandings, the archive of memory and the producer of monuments, arts, and crafts. Nor do we need to slight the idea that culture is the fount of human expression in its fullest range, including the arts, music, theater, and language. Culture is all of these things as well. But culture is a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions. And in our commendable zeal for the latter at the cost of the former, we have allowed an unnecessary, harmful, and artificial opposition to emerge between culture and development. By bringing the future back in, by looking at aspirations as cultural capacities, we are surely in a better position to understand how people actually navigate their social spaces. And in terms of the relationship between democracy and development, this approach gives us a principled reason to build the capacity to aspire in those who have the most to lose from its underdevelopment—the poor themselves.

Note

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