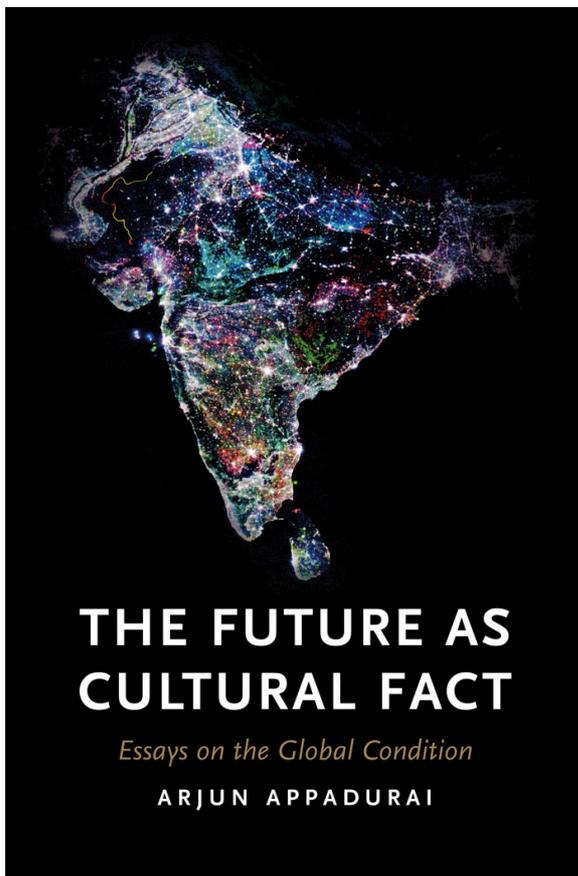


BOOK REVIEW

*The Future as a
Cultural Fact:
Essays on the Global
Condition*
Arjun Appadurai

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Arjun Appadurai tackles an important issue with this collection of essays: the future. More precisely, he engages with *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, expanding on what this means for social sciences in general and for anthropology in particular. This premise initially seems simple, but encompasses great complexity. He calls to “lay the foundations of an anthropology of the future [...] that can assist in the victory of a politics of possibility over a politics of probability” (3). The book addresses a great deal; covering every aspect of it would inadvertently do injustice to the richness and diversity of the essays. As a result, I have opted to discuss the book in a more narrow reading, focusing on the explicitly conceptual side of the engagement with the future.

The future is the major challenge of the book, for we do not know it and there is little consensus on what it should be. The future thus remains subject to consideration, negotiation, and contestation – in theory at least. Moreover, thinking about and planning for the future is not just a technical issue (286-7), as would often seem from economic approaches. Yet it is precisely economics that remains firmly established as the “science of the future” (180):

[I]n the dialogue between anthropology and economics, especially in the field of development studies, the future had been more or less completely handed over to economics, with anthropology providing a sort of Greek chorus about diversity, history, cultural values, and the dignity of local ways of living (289).

The aim of the book, at this level at least, is to engage anthropology more actively and strategically in exploring possible pathways for the future. Appadurai is not alone in his call for an “ethnography of the future” as it has been termed elsewhere (Clammer, 2012: 129). The point that culture needs to inform thinking about social justice in general or development in particular is not new, but the point is well made, as there is indeed a need to transgress the existing tendency in anthropology “to oscillate between studies of utopian and millennial movements on the one hand and, more recently, of culture trauma on the other” (292).

On another level, let us say in more practical terms, the issue is far more complex than just taking the diversity of future visions into account. This is firmly acknowledged by Appadurai. Chapter nine, previously published in the edited volume *Culture and Social Action* (Walton & Rao, 2004), provides renewed engagement with the longstanding question, “why culture matters for development and the reduction of poverty” (179). Appadurai refers to Hirschman’s notion of “loyalty,” “exit,” and “voice” in order to locate his argument. Historically, culture has most often been associated with loyalty, with little attention to voice (183). Yet, it is precisely at the level of “voice” that the greater potential value of culture comes into play “since exit is not a desirable solution for the world’s poor and loyalty is clearly no longer generally

clear-cut” (183). In this context, Appadurai proposes the *capacity to aspire* as a notion that links culture, voice, and future. Culture is intrinsic to the grand narrative of what a good life is, be it through religion, values, or material assets. Yet this narrative often seems to be dissolved into the more practical implications such as marriage, status, friendship, and health. Yet the most visible articulation of this grand narrative is reflected in particular wants and needs. This, Appadurai goes on to argue, has often caused “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” (188). We should thus bring the bigger narrative back into the picture – by increasing the capacities to aspire by a greater group of people.

This is, however, by no means self-evident. Even though we all articulate what kind of future we want, our capacity to aspire is not equally distributed. Much rather, “its skewed distribution is a fundamental feature, and not just a secondary attribute, of extreme poverty” (289):

[The capacity to aspire] is a sort of meta-capacity, and the relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. 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 (188).

This is, in large part, a variation on the truism that the rich will become richer. But the focus is on expanding on underlying reasons, and not merely on the outcome. Yet, the limited capacity to aspire among less affluent groups is not inevitable. Building on the foundations of hope and imagination, Appadurai stresses the need and possibility to overcome despair.

More practically, the role of research in overcoming limitations in the acquisition and use of strategic knowledge is illustrated in chapter fourteen. Vernacular research can be used to take more seriously the realm of possibilities among and between people. Yet, in order to transform the idea of research beyond modern Western academia to a more universally applicable ideal through radical reconsideration of what research is and what purpose it should serve, it has to become subject to greater reflexivity within academia (275). PUKAR (which stands for Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research, yet also means “to call” in Hindi) serves as an example to clarify how research is linked to the capacity to aspire to the future. The aim of PUKAR is to help people who are not part of Mumbai’s upper class to explore their urban biotope under the principle that “documentation is intervention” (280). Through essays in vernacular languages and images, their own positions in the city are negotiated largely on their own terms, which allows them to

develop skills and “to document, to inquire, to analyse, and to communicate results” in order to “speak up as active citizens that are shaping their city and their world” (281). Since research is argued to be a human need, it sensibly also becomes a human right – as is suggested in this chapter.

The book is a crucial and necessarily normative articulation of what the future of anthropological engagement and inquiry should look like in order to engage with the aspirations and futures of people more meaningfully. As such, this work is a timely, if not overdue, collection of essays that provides a rationale and the ground to further emphasize the future, thus in a sense (re-)claiming some authority on this from (orthodox) economics. The book does however have some minor caveats.

It is, indeed, merely a collection of essays. As many (earlier versions) of the essays (chapters 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, and 12 to be precise) in this book have been previously published in a variety of books and journals over the past 25 years, the collection reads more like an anthology than a carefully constructed engagement with the main topic. The variety of engagement and thorough revisiting of earlier works gives great depth and conceptual diversity to the book. But those more familiar with the work of Appadurai may already have read much of the central argument between the lines of many an essay before.

Moreover, Arjun Appadurai eloquently and passionately engages with India in general and on Mumbai in particular. The obvious advantage of the long and thorough interaction with this locale is the precision of the observation and analysis. For someone like myself who has no link with the country, however, some examples from a wider geographical realm could have helped illustrating the wider implications of the book, particularly since it is branded as a collection of “essays on the *global* condition” (emphasis added). This is perhaps an unfair point, because even the most distracted reader is pointed to the explicit focus on India of this at first glance: the cover shows an artily illuminated map of the country.

Lastly, there has been some compelling critical engagement with the socio-economic imaginary in social sciences in recent years. Yet Appadurai almost invariably equates the economic realm with orthodox economics. There has however been an increasing engagement with economics from a postcolonial (Zein-Elabdin & Charusheela, 2004; Pollard et al., 2011) and pluralist (Fullbrook, 2008) angle, just to name a few. As these engagements form an epistemological link between what Appadurai criticises and what he proposes, these thoughts could have served as an enrichment of his argument. Moreover, there has been increased engagement with “southern theory” (Connell, 2007) and “theory from the South” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2011) in a more general way. Such works arguably provide a basis to

further contextualize the ways through which the future can be imagined and negotiated.

Appadurai has, once more, greatly contributed to the understanding of culture and society. He convinces of the need to locate culture and work with it when envisaging the future and shows how this could work theoretically, while illustrating ideas with apt examples. We may be unable to control what the future will be like; we do have many ways to think about the ways we would want it to be. This book is a must for anyone who thinks about the future and cares about the complexity of social justice under the global condition.

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