The Dilemma of Equality and Diversity

by Michael Jindra

Throughout the world, an increasingly frustrating quandary has arisen over how to address rising levels of inequality amid increasing diversity. From the controversies over the Roma/Gypsy in Europe and aboriginal life in Australia to the homeless populations in the United States, Native American reservations, and those in poverty in general, political bodies and other organizations have tried different strategies and policies, often with little success. This predicament, I argue, is borne out of a largely unrecognized tension between the values of diversity and (economic) equality and the connected, stultifying debate over issues of poverty and culture.

In this article, I will discuss how diversity, as expressed by lifestyle, is connected to economic inequality. After briefly discussing the controversy over connecting cultural diversity and poverty, I will then highlight what diversity is and where we see it—in the proliferating array of subcultures and lifestyle groups. I will then detail the largely unrecognized tension between the values of diversity and equality, including where we see these tensions burst out into conflict and indecision in public policies. Drawing on my own research on antipoverty nonprofits, we will see the same dilemmas operating at the local level. I then discuss several reasons why stratification scholars are unable to recognize this tension, with attention to their assumptions, their discourse on fault, and their preferred narratives about people in poverty. Finally, I discuss the few scholars who have recognized this tension and call for a broader approach to addressing inequality.

There are, of course, understandable reasons for the hesitance to connect cultural diversity with issues of poverty and inequality. For one, highlighting culture as a cause of poverty and inequality can lead people to simplistically blame the poor for their own condition and can give excuses to policy makers to do nothing about poverty. Other academic arguments against connecting culture to poverty are so well worn that there is little reason to rehearse them again (see Small, Harding, and Lamont [2010] for a review). They usually highlight Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty,” which prompted reactions against it that continue today, mostly around the concern that culture “blames the victim” of poverty (Lewis 1959). Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous 1967 report on the black family similarly prompted a virulent reaction (Patterson 2010) that basically halted any scholarly analysis of the connection between culture and poverty until scholars such as William Julius Wilson gingerly brought culture back into the discussion, even if only as adaptation to structural forces.

Below, I will offer a more detailed critique of the current literature on poverty, inequality, and stratification (a term used more commonly among sociologists), but I first want to make the argument that incorporating cultural differences is absolutely essential to understanding and dealing with inequality, and that there are ways of handling this issue that can adequately address the concerns of those hesitant to give an overall view of the lives and cultures of the poor. Ignoring the connection between culture and poverty is tantamount to self-censorship and indicates a basic failure of scholarship. In contrast, scholarly work on culture and poverty, if utilized properly (which means never using it as an excuse to ignore poverty or inequality) would help develop applied approaches and policies that take in all the causes of poverty and would complement, not replace, the existing focus on structural solutions to poverty.
Connecting Diversity to Economic Outcomes

In order to do this, one must begin with a proper understanding of diversity. Diversity, as I use it in this article, is based on actual practices and beliefs or attitudes, in addition to the more common and overlapping understanding of diversity as based on socially constructed categories of race/ethnicity, or on categories such as class, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation (cf. Pincus 2011; Susser and Patterson 2001). This diversity is expressed in significant contrasts in family life, leisure, work, and consumption, from hyper-achieving success-oriented groups to leisure and entertainment-oriented subcultures, and includes the myriad of groupings that marketers define us by. Diversity is thus tied more to Weber’s Lebensführung (life conduct) or Anthony Giddens’s use of “lifestyles”—clusters of habits and orientations that involve modes of acting, routines of dress, diet, and “favoured milieux for encountering others” (1991:81). Murray Milner calls it “lifestyle pluralism,” which he describes as a “mélange of relatively unranked groups that have differing lifestyles and discernable social boundaries,” which are nevertheless often fuzzy (Milner 2004:101). It is important to keep in mind, however, that these groups are not just self-chosen, but power and structure often play a role in forming them.

Economic equality is a more straightforward concept. While it is often measured using the Gini index, as income inequality, a better measure is wealth or asset inequality. While income can change significantly from year to year, asset inequality is cumulative and better measures how well people can withstand adversity. More significantly, it is affected not only by income but also by consumption and savings habits, which have a profound effect on overall wealth when, for instance, savings are used to build wealth for emergencies, college educations, or retirement. Wealth inequality is also more extreme than income inequality, and it better captures the effects of the contrasting histories and habits of different groups (Elmelech 2008).

Within the United States, diversity has always existed, with different groups having different attitudes and practices concerning subsistence, hierarchy, honor, and other notions, some of which have contributed to inequality. There were substantial differences among the various groups (e.g., East Anglians, Scottish borderlands) that emigrated from the British Isles (Fischer 1991), which can still be tied today to different levels of wealth, violence, health, and other measures in different regions such as Appalachia (Nishbett and Cohen 1996; Obermiller, Wagner, and Tucker 2000). Regional variations that go back to the nineteenth century are clear (Krueger, Bhaloo, and Rosenau 2009; Lieske 1993).

Other cultural patterns have had a strong effect on both health (Williams 2013) and economic status, including at higher wealth levels. Sherry Ortner (2003) has pointed out how both cultural and noncultural factors have played a role in the rise of Jews to the top income levels. Earlier, the widespread promotion of literacy through reading the Torah and commentaries played a major role in Jews entering various professions and becoming urbanized and wealthy (Burstein 2007). The literature on immigration, which I can mention only briefly here, reveals a wide array of cultural orientations related to economic outcomes among different groups (Hao 2007; Waldinger and Lichter 2003), a topic often left out of the discussion on inequality, as Jeremy Hein (2006) argues in his extensive analysis of the role of culture among immigrants.

At lower wealth levels, the pull of “alternative” lifestyles often gets short shrift in favor of structuralist explanations for inequality, as I discuss more below. People do not always “adopt mainstream notions of work, productivity, and long-term economic planning” and instead “live in the present” (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999:1). These diverse groups tend to reject authority, value freedom and sociality, and thus avoid practices that include working in large organizations with regular work hours, accumulation, and home ownership (Pardo 1996; Polsky 2006; Stewart 2001). They recognize, either implicitly or explicitly, that there are often significant sacrifices or trade-offs for societies oriented to the accumulation of wealth, where sociality is sacrificed to wealth, freedom sacrificed to work.

Long-standing subcultures on the margins include the Roma and portions of indigenous groups (Muckle 2012) still found in North America and Europe. Focusing on the United States, one could include today’s array of itinerants, street sellers (Duneier 2001), hustlers (Polsky 2006), intermittent workers (Malenfant, LaRue, and Vézina 2007), and homeless (Gowan 2010). In poor urban neighborhoods, “preservation agents” among the varied ethnic communities use various social mechanisms (language, shunning) to maintain a way of life they view as “more important than economic gain,” which can reduce economic mobility, as Sánchez-Jankowski reports (2008:44ff.). One should also note anticapitalist immigrant cultures, including some pockets of the working class that have resisted dominant consumerist orientations and live frugal lives on low incomes (Durrenberger and Doukas 2008), or religious groups such as the Amish.

Expressiveness, romanticism, and other ideals have also motivated a wide range of social movements and phenomena, from early mountain men and migrants to hippies and punks, across the social classes (Miller 1991; Soefnner 1997). Others include various groups of agrarians, bohemians, and more recent groups such as “downshifters” (Benson and O’Reilly 2009), “new age” and environmental groups (Campbell 2007), countercultures based on contemporary leisure or popular cultures such as “grungies” (Moore 2004), or subcultures where both work and leisure are distinctive, such as bicycle couriers (Fincham 2007). Some of these lifestyle groups offer attractions of a very nonmainstream sort, described by some as “edgework” (Kidder 2011; Lyng 2005), “extreme” bodily activities that include criminality (Hayward 2004), or other leisure lives (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Allen-Collin-
son and Hockey 2011). One can list many others here, such as the subcultural cliques (Eckert 1989) that influence life paths.

The more itinerant groups listed above are frequently misunderstood and often appear “feckless or irresponsible” to their more mainstream neighbors (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999:21). Savings and education rates tend to be lower, and gambling rates higher, with economic activity often taking place on the margins but often within their own social networks and logics (Stewart 2001). As a result, some of these groups suffer from ongoing discrimination and stigmatization, which certainly play a role in maintaining the marginalization of these groups. It is important to note that these orientations originate from a complex interplay of forces, including the norms of a subculture, histories, and the fact of material scarcity.

Digging into Diversity and Lifestyle

Specific research on life patterns in Western societies shows a diversity that is not simply reducible to adaptation to circumstances and that also exists within and between social groups. Sociologist Margaret Archer (2007), for instance, has contrasted four different lifestyle groups, based on their “reflexivity” and orientations, which guide their way of life and influence their social mobility. “Communicative reflexives,” for instance, often foster social immobility because they “attach supreme significance to interpersonal relations.” They tend to live for today, are unlikely to plan ahead, and see a lot of contingency while hoping something will eventually “turn up.” In contrast, for “autonomous reflexives,” self-reliance and work are important. They practice a personal power that fosters upward social mobility; embrace challenge, control, and variety from work (Archer 2007); and minimize social considerations.

Similarly, other social scientists analyze diverse lifestyles in terms of broad general orientations (e.g.,fatalists, individualists) based on factors such as differences in values, social relations, household routines, and general ways of life (Engbersen et al. 2006; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990). For instance, there is diversity in “household cultures” (Dake and Thompson 1993), such as practices concerning eating, cleaning, sociality, and consuming habits. Some families have scheduled communal mealtimes, prompt cleanup, and savings patterns, in contrast to those who are less bound by these routines and, for instance, rely more on takeout food at irregular times. People in these groups often have different work ethics and perceptions of time and risk (Engbersen et al. 2006). Specifically, research indicates significant diversity among the poor themselves, such as Salcedo and Rasse’s (2012) classification of five types of urban poor households (organized, dependent, ghettoized, hopeless, and “meyenized”), the multiple “cultures of poverty” reported by Holloway et al. (1997), or Ulf Hannerz’s four lifestyles of Soulside (2004). All of these clearly reveal the flawed nature of analyses that either posit only one “culture of poverty” or, more commonly, deny any connection between culture and poverty at all. The poor are often different from the mainstream, but neither are they homogeneous, with a wide variety of contrasting orientations and practices, a continuum between mainstream and nonmainstream patterns that shifts over time and overlaps between ethnic, class, religious, and other subcultural and lifestyle orientations.

For a popular look at lifestyle diversity in the contemporary United States, there is hardly a better place to turn than the ABC television show Wife Swap (2004–10) and similar shows, where the spouses of two very different families were exchanged and made, in turn, to follow each other’s habits and rules for a week. Though the show illustrated a degree of diversity that is not as radical as in international cross-cultural contexts, one is still struck by the vivid clash of family lifestyles. The families may still share common American orientations such as individualism, but they show a radically different view of “the good life,” with contrasting work, leisure, and consumption patterns, and their common individualism allows life patterns to take a myriad of different routes that feed into a kind of diversity seldom discussed as such.

Indeed, studies have shown clear contrasts between different styles of parenting based mainly on class. “Concerted cultivation” has become the standard upper middle class pattern, while “natural growth” is found more among lower class families (Lareau 2011). The former is better for upward mobility, while the latter can give children more daily freedom and stronger obedience toward parents. At stronger extremes, a “cult of childhood success” (Kottak and Kozarits 2002) has taken over, which includes numerous planned enrichment activities for children and an ongoing use of experts and advice to manage the “business” of raising children and to ensure their future success. Some families put intense pressure on youth to perform well in school, with substantial lifelong effects on educational attainment and income and wealth levels. Ethnicity also plays a role here, as Nisbett (2009) reports with East Asians, and as popularized in the frenzied response to a self-proclaimed “tiger mother” (Chua 2011).

The high achievement pattern, however, often comes at a cost in terms of sociality, time, freedom, and increased stress (Pope 2001), so for many the sacrifices required for upward mobility are simply not felt to be worth it (Kabachnik 2009). Worldwide, many recognize the advantages of freedom and flexibility and forgo the regulated work-oriented lifestyle common only among particular groups worldwide. As cultural studies scholars stress, one must understand the “pleasures” of alternative ways of life that may be less work and income oriented, or even deviant (Katz 1988), such as many of those listed above. “Impulsivity” and the lack of delayed gratification are increasingly important in the growing “hedonistic” clusters of society driven by the phenomenal rise of consumer culture (Hayward 2004). These issues also take us into the more biological and individual levels of analyses, where neuroscientists and social scientists are increasingly working to-
gether to understand how external factors such as cultural and technological changes affect the pleasure centers of the brain, for instance, by encouraging addictive patterns, including gambling (Lende and Downey 2012; Schüll 2012).

Market researchers, who have unsurprisingly developed some of the strongest tools for defining a diversity based primarily on lifestyle and practice, have also confirmed increased diversity in the West (Weiss 2000). To put it simply, people find fulfillment, identity, and enjoyment in very different ways, from "occupational devotees" (Stebbins 2004) to those who pursue "leisure careers" (MacDonald and Shildrick 2007), often "despite significant economic and social costs" (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011:143). While some have reported two main general orientations: one individual and acquisitive, and the other expressive, countercultural, and more inner directed (Binkley 2007), it is certainly more complex than this. For some it may be a lifestyle based on an expressive, "neo-bohemian" (Lloyd 2006), postmaterialist (Inglehart 1997) ethic. For others it may be "playing to win," whether for their children (Davis 2009; Levey 2010) or themselves (Hewlett and Luce 2006).

Recent research points to an increase both in the size of groups with a "hedonist" orientation and also in groups with a "competitive" one (Thome 2008). In addition, the wealthy and the poor are becoming more isolated from each other due to such forces as increased assortative mating (marriage within social groups) and residential/class segregation, which in turn increase the transmission of inequality and decrease social mobility (Elmelech 2008).

All of this points to a society with stronger extremes—intense, hypercompetitive overachievers at one end and widely varying unskilled, less educated intermittent workers, or downshifting, leisure, and social-oriented groups at the other extreme. Some reduce this process simply to the outcome of changes in the political economy—higher competition for higher paying jobs, and a reduced number of good-paying working class jobs, in addition to political policies that favor the rich. But this is simplistic, as it totally ignores changes in family structure, parenting practices, education, and other significant forces that contribute to what may become a "permanently divided society," according to stratification scholar Isabel Sawhill (2012:6) and Charles Murray's controversial Coming Apart (2012)

These patterns, though, are not just a question of individual choice. They are culturally embedded, passed down, and maintained through both structural forces and cultural preferences. These orientations should not be essentialized, as some change over time, and there is also wide diversity of practice within groups, with some leading conventional middle class lives. Structural forces such as stereotypes and prejudices against visible members of groups and their symbols, including more subtle features such as accent, dress, or personality, work to maintain differences and symbolic boundaries between groups (Lamont and Molnár 2002). The various cultural productions and practices of minority ethnic groups are sometimes reactions to the oppression experienced from society, as we see in music, dress, style, comportment, and other factors (Anderson 2000; Patterson 2006; Wilson 2009). Effects can include an oppositional street identity that works against the humble, obedient social interaction demanded in contemporary office or service settings (Bourgois 2002), or accusations of "acting white" against high-performing students of color (Buck 2010).

The product of all this is a "fragmentary, kaleidoscopic differentiation of life styles rather than rigid and bounded social strata" (Scott 1996:15). And one consequence of this increased lifestyle diversity, with different groups oriented to different goals or ideals, is more inequality. In other words, there is a tension or trade-off between these values of diversity and equality, which are manifested in various policy dilemmas worldwide. The next section describes this process in both international and national contexts.

Tensions of Diversity and Inequality

International Contexts

Around the world, tensions between those with contrasting economic practices and outcomes can be particularly acute and occasionally erupt in violence and expulsions (Chua 2004). In Australia, the situation of aborigines may be where the dilemma of equality and diversity has been felt and written about most strongly, since the inequalities are among the most extreme, and attempts to remedy them have been stymied at every turn. Government policies, and the positions of prominent experts on aboriginal affairs (including aboriginals) have shifted back and forth between autonomy on the one hand and integration/assimilation on the other (Tonkinson 2007), somewhat like Native American policy in North America. After attempts at assimilation earlier in the twentieth century, self-management policies in the 1970s gave some autonomy to aboriginals, hoping this would help them thrive. More recently, however, those policies have been retracted after shocking reports of high levels of child and spouse abuse, alcoholism, and squalid conditions in aboriginal communities. Heavily influencing these differential outcomes are cultural differences on a number of levels, where attitudes and practices of white Australians and aboriginals toward work and sociality dramatically differ (Tonkinson 2007).

In addition, this dilemma over equality and diversity is well illustrated by the experiences of Australian white antiracists, sympathetic to aboriginal populations, who lead to aboriginal areas to improve aboriginal life. Many of them, often from more educated and wealthier backgrounds, become frustrated by the lack of progress and perceived lack of cooperation from aboriginals (Kowal 2008). These activists are pulled by a desire both to see aboriginal life improve (in the common terms of Westerners) and to give aboriginals self-determination, a policy which has allowed increased social dysfunction and abuse within aboriginal communities. One anthro-
Different individuals and groups resolve this tension by either choosing one at the expense of the other or awkwardly attempting to balance them. One anthropologist advocates very remote locations or aboriginal outposts where there would be no outside influence, to allow “the opportunity for Indigenous people to choose to live fundamentally differently from the mainstream” (Altman 2006:11), but whether many aboriginals would desire this themselves is unclear. Others, such as Sutton, argue for more assimilationist intervention in order to close gaps in health, income, and other social indicators.

In general, Australian policy has shifted back and forth between diversity and equality, never finding a satisfactory outcome. On the one hand, diversity and one of its possible applications, autonomy, has meant increased inequality on a number of indicators, setting off alarms with sensational reports in the media. Yet, the “new paternalism” announced in 2007 by the government after the dramatic revelations of abuse also strikes much of the Australian public as wrong-headed since it resurfaces memories of colonialist oppression. In Europe, the diverse Roma/Gypsy groups (some settled, some itinerant) likewise frequently confound authorities, whose strategies have shifted over time. At times, governments have provided services and pressure to assimilate, which some Roma have resisted. At other times, it is expulsion and discrimination. Attempts at integration are often not successful or done only halfheartedly. The dilemma is expressed in the battle over whether to accept nomadism either as a way of life or as a “problem requiring solutions” (Roman 2012:69).

Attitudes have recently become more negative, as expulsions of Roma populations have increased in a number of countries, such as France.

European states have taken contrasting positions on diversity, such as France with its “universalist” orientation and Britain with a more multiculturalist bent (Sala Pala 2010). Increased immigration in recent decades, however, has roiled these countries to the extent that the British, German, and Dutch governments have controversially declared “the failure of multiculturalism” (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010) as opinions have turned increasingly against the large, mainly Muslim minorities in their respective countries, with gains by Far Right political parties. Some of this is certainly xenophobia, but some of the tension is from a (perceived) lack of integration and over ostensibly different attitudes and practices toward work, state benefits, and other lifestyle practices such as the treatment of women. The welfare states of Scandinavia, for instance, are admired around the world, but few notice the dependence of this model on specific cultural legacies that include conformism and a secularized Lutheranism that created high levels of trust and a focus on work (Sørensen and Stråth 1997). Welfare states across Europe have come under strain recently because of increased diversity, and support for the welfare state has consequently declined, though this varies across different parts of the continent (Clasen 2011; Eger 2010).

The current trouble in the Eurozone over debt is further evidence of the tensions over diversity and equality, the “stickiness” of cultural differences, and the willingness of elites to ignore them in favor of a universal mode of wealth and accumulation (Eichengreen 2011). As we now see, quite different practices over accounting, budgeting, borrowing, taxation, licensing, and work/leisure habits (and of course political/economic factors) contributed to the debt crisis that currently envelops the European Union (EU) and has roiled markets worldwide. Mediterranean countries are struggling after entering a northern EU milieu with a contrasting ethos and practices. Some argue they will need to adopt the way Americans deal with the tension between diversity and equality, by net government transfer payments to poorer regions. But the looser EU, without unified taxation and spending policies, cannot currently accommodate this model.

The North American Context

Like the Roma/Gypsy groups of Europe, there are many lower income populations in North America that confound authorities by following egalitarian and freedom-oriented lifestyles. This general orientation is defined by part-time or nonwork, temporary living arrangements, and frequent mobility. Some of these are homeless, others more settled, but most of them living on very low incomes, such as the scrap collectors common in urban areas (Ferrell 2006). Larger numbers are found in California because the weather allows “vehicle-dwellers” and homeless populations some respite. Here, an itinerant population stays near beaches trying to sell goods to tourists, though they are seen as a nuisance by nearby residents, so officials attempt crackdowns (Lovett 2010). In San Francisco, the progressive government has long fretted about what to do about the large numbers of homeless, some of whom gravitate toward itinerant work such as recycling over more standard jobs, for various reasons. Here the impulse toward accepting diversity bumped up against the perceived problems they create, and the city ended up with a policy of “authoritarian medicalization” (Gowan 2010).

Often, the situation is traced to simple availability of jobs and housing or mental illness, but it is clearly more complex than this, especially if one has an understanding of and sensitivity to diverse groups and orientations. Nonmainstream or alternative lifestyles exist for a variety of reasons, from stigmatization and prejudice to the attractions of the lifestyles themselves, and often a mix between these poles. People are pushed and pulled in different directions, and understanding how this process works among people means getting a grasp on everything from family dynamics, networks, identity issues, personality orientations, normative beliefs, and larger social, cultural, and economic contexts. Sometimes biograph-
Stand and Deliver urban-school films such as in popular culture. According to Robert Bulman (2005), in such as health life satisfaction or social trust. or in the case of too much inequality, create problems in areas large, create tensions and stresses that may invite backlash, All of these issues pivot on whether to enforce a specific classes typically lobbying to get rid of this kind of diversity. 

Building codes are another example of policies that authorities use to legislate equality. In mainstream discourse, these codes are portrayed as a matter of safety, cleanliness, and aesthetic beauty, but these are all culturally relative concepts, and people in different localities may have widely varying standards. Official building codes and zoning policies have created conflicts with ethnic and immigrant groups that have contrasting practices, such as among Latinos, Laotians, and Hasidim (Rapoport 2000). Mariana Valverde recently detailed the contradictions between the official celebration of diversity in Toronto (and other North American cities) and the reality of regulations and laws over aesthetics (sounds, smells, yard appearance), housing, and other practices such as street selling, all of which severely limit diversity (Valverde 2012). Mobile homes and trailers are another common flashpoint between different economic classes, with middle and upper classes typically lobbying to get rid of this kind of diversity. All of these issues pivot on whether to enforce a specific equality or allow diversity. Differences, if they become too large, create tensions and stresses that may invite backlash, or in the case of too much inequality, create problems in areas such as health life satisfaction or social trust.

One can also see the tension and contradiction expressed in popular culture. According to Robert Bulman (2005), in urban-school films such as Stand and Deliver featuring underprivileged youth, the dominant theme is utilitarian individualism, where the youth overcome odds and work their way to success. “Solving” poverty means addressing inequality, and therefore we (media consumers) encourage utilitarian individualism. In suburban school films like Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, which features a hero rebelling against school authorities, it is expressive individualism. In one context, inequality violates our sense of justice, and in the other conformism violates our sense of freedom and diversity. In the suburban school film Pump Up the Volume, the “heroes are independent and free thinking” while the antagonists are narrow-minded achievement-oriented adults and some students (Bulman 2005:85). At the same time the suburban films seemingly promote a rebellious creativity, we lament declines in academic standards. And it is the expressivity and aesthetics of some youth cultures that affect work and study habits and clearly hurt academic and work careers (Gunter 2008). Youth “seek to generate worth and value through their investments in style,” though “these practices may also play into oppressive social relations and contribute to fixing the young people within marginalized and disadvantaged social positions” (Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007:219). Popular culture and peer influence play a role in influencing attitudes toward schooling, which have a significant relationship with inequality and later life income (Gibson, Gandara, and Koyama 2004; Vaisey 2010).

Educational practices, of course, are common fodder for the courts, as in the famous 1972 Supreme Court case of Yoder vs. Wisconsin, which pitted Amish practices on education versus the state’s desire for a universal standard of education intended to limit inequality. The Amish rejected the state requirements because their own particularistic practices meant education only through the eighth grade. The court ruled in favor of the Amish, after having considered the validity of contrasting cultural patterns in their decision. Most other Western countries, however, are more restrictive of children’s education outside of official state institutions, and homeschooling in the United States continues to be contentious in some jurisdictions. Likewise, the ongoing debate over national education standards places the equality of No Child Left Behind and the Common Core in tension with those who say these policies do not take diversity into consideration.

The Native American situation in some ways mirrors the Australian aboriginal dilemma. Policies toward Native Americans have shifted radically over the years, in an attempt to address their income and wealth levels, lowest of all racial/ethnic groups in the United States and Canada. As in Australia, the legacy of usurpation and exploitation by European immigrants has meant that policy makers have felt responsible for this inequality and attempted to “solve” it by various means. In the United States, many reservations were eliminated in attempts at assimilation and then reestablished later in the twentieth century to allow for autonomy. Yet the inequality has remained, mitigated only more recently by business enterprises and gaming compacts that allow many Indian tribes regular sources of income. This, however, has created new tensions over diversity and equality within and between Indian groups across the United States, such as among the Seminole (Cattelino 2008), Lakota (Fenelon 2006), Southern Plains region (LaVere 2000), Iroquois, and others, with some tribes being torn by these tensions. Traditionalists lament the distancing from Indian ways of life centered on clan, community, and traditional subsistence and thus lean toward cultural particularity (diversity), while progressives or “modernizers” more attached to the mainstream welcome business development, including casinos or natural resource exploitation (though this division is more complicated than this, as Cattelino describes). Urban Indians also manifest a different kind of diversity, utilizing alternative “nomadic” patterns of exploiting resources in urban areas (Darnell 2011). Pushing equality here could essentially mean hurting or eliminating diversity, but interesting arguments are made, for instance, in favor of development while trying to maintain at least some of the “communal nature” of Indian ways (Warry 2007).

Antipoverty Nonprofits and the Tension

The tension between diversity and equality can also be seen in local contexts, such as among local antipoverty nonprofits.
In most urban communities around the United States, nonprofits attempt to assist the poor through various means. These include homeless shelters, those that provide emergency help with utility bills, church-related organizations like the Salvation Army or Catholic Charities, women’s shelters like the YWCA, drug treatment centers, drop-in day centers, those that serve single mothers and provide job training (e.g., Goodwill), and a host of others that involve mentoring, classes, or self-help groups, from STRIVE to Bridge of Hope.

The philosophies and practices of these groups vary, and each deals with the dilemmas of diversity and equality in different ways. Some are more intent on moving the individual to the path of self-sufficiency by involving participants in the classes, counseling, training, or other more intensive activities that often move people out of poverty and off social assistance programs, while others focus on more modest goals such as providing community, support, or immediate stability. These latter organizations may also serve a different clientele, such as those with more severe needs or disabilities that prevent them from holding regular jobs. These organizations sometimes change their philosophies over time and become more or less intensive in their efforts, or they have internal debates and differences on whether, for instance, the residents of a homeless shelter should be required to take classes to improve their job prospects. In essence, these organizations range from those that lean toward equality through specific practices, to those that are less intensive and thus accept more diversity (Jindra and Jindra 2013).

Another dimension of the tension or trade-off between diversity and equality is found in how one antipoverty organization works with individual participants. In one Midwestern city, a local antipoverty nonprofit utilizes ongoing classes, “networking meetings,” and other activities, encouraging participants to consider their “mental map” and associated behaviors that go with it, set goals, and work toward a more stable life. The nonprofit utilizes the published Bridges out of Poverty curriculum (DeVol 2013), which focuses on understanding the “hidden rules of economic class,” the eleven different kinds of “resources” (e.g., financial, mental, relational), how to build these resources, and how to create a plan to get from poverty to prosperity.

Classes are led by a facilitator and a cofacilitator, one or both of whom have come out of poverty and were earlier graduates of the class. Bridges out of Poverty uses a collaborative, participative model where the participant “coinvestigators” (of diverse ethnicities) consider differences in how people in poverty, the middle class, and wealth structure and orient their lives, dwelling especially on the “hidden rules” of class. The class in essence encourages participants to offer a self-critique of their lives, their background, and where they are going in the future. They also analyze their communities and wider socioeconomic structures and obstacles. Those that graduate from the class are further mentored by volunteer “allies” from middle class backgrounds.

The tension between diversity and equality is found, for instance, when participants consider “language registers” (such as formal/casual) and discourse patterns, time orientations, and attitudes and practices about education, money, food, clothing, and other categories. In general, they compare the “achievement” orientations of the middle class to what are regarded as the relationship/survival/entertainment orientations of generational poverty. In effect, participants learn that they must consider taking on at least some middle class behaviors in their path out of poverty. This, however, is where some (e.g., Froyum 2010) have criticized Bridges out of Poverty for overvaluing middle class standards, illustrating the dilemma between diversity and equality.

One interviewee, Randy, a white male, took the course in 2006 after a series of felonies involving DUls and domestic abuse. He had been in a halfway house and was a recovering alcoholic who had a skilled trade and had done well in the past, but his drinking and spending kept him from saving any money and achieving any stability. “Poverty was all about chaos, constant drama” he told me. His father had grown up in poverty in Appalachia, a family background which he reports contributed to his day-to-day pattern of living. The Getting Ahead course helped him see the pattern he was in: blowing his paycheck quickly and using payday loans. Stopping drinking meant he also had to drop his drinking buddies, since they now had less in common. Relationships changed. He adopted more middle class habits like saving, and he works at carpentry on the side of his regular job as a foreman at a plastics plant. But he has not turned into the stereotype of an ascetic miser. He does not charge much for his carpentry work, which keeps him in high demand, and he provides help for his children, though with strict guidelines about repaying him, lest they maintain what he calls the “chaos” of poverty.

Other interviewees demonstrate a wider variety of life goals, aspirations, and definitions of success. For some, success is modestly defined as being stable and not on public aid. Some, especially seniors, are unlikely to acquire the various capitals to enter the middle class and have trouble handling the complexity of modern life, including financial predators and the complexities of bank accounts. In other words, they do not all strive to enter the middle class. They are diverse—often strong-willed, independent, and unwilling to submit themselves to the strict requirements of educational institutions and workplaces guided more by neoliberal principles, as those in the middle and upper classes do. One should not, however, use these differences as an excuse to “other” them and ignore poverty or inequality. Many do want something better and want to know how to get ahead. This is where programs like Bridges out of Poverty (and many others that focus on patterns of behaviors and attitudes, such as STRIVE or the Circles Campaign) encourage people like Randy to adapt at least certain middle class modes of life, thereby decreasing lifestyle diversity, but with the potential to lessen inequality.
Ignoring the Tension

The tension between diversity and equality is important to understand, but it is rarely discussed by stratification (or other) scholars, for several reasons. For one, many are either uncomfortable with or theoretically opposed to a focus on culture. Indeed, scholars who work on poverty have been accused of a “gross neglect of the existence and workings of a culture among the poor” (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008:48). This situation is a legacy of the debate that started back in the early 1960s over the “culture of poverty,” after which it became taboo to discuss different behaviors, habits, and practices among the poor (Patterson 2010). Related to this, academics often prefer to avoid an issue if they fear misinterpretation by the public, as one also finds in the debate over the existence of “acting white” accusations in schools, as Stuart Buck discusses (2010).

Indeed, much ethnographic writing on poverty has been “driven by the desire to address stigmatizing characterizations of the so-called underclass” (Munger 2002:11).1 Scholars, in essence, follow narratives that are driven by dominant academic discourses. In anthropology, for instance, scholarship on marginalized groups has veered from a victim narrative in the 1970s to one of heroic “resistance” in the 1980s and ’90s as scholars realized that victimology leaves agency entirely out of the picture. More recently, the resistance narratives are now also seen as unsatisfactory, one-dimensional, and overused, and scholars have moved onto other topics such as identity.

The neglect of the tension is also because the social sciences have long been prone to reductionisms of personhood to more materialistic motives such as interest and power (Sahlins 1976; Smith 2010). This means that the complexities of human action are missed when studying certain issues like poverty, which involve the interaction of structural, cultural, and individual/agency forces or causes. Indeed, when it comes to poverty, anthropologists and other scholars who are normally sensitive to cultural difference suddenly assume that everyone aspires to one universal, upwardly oriented mode of life or lifestyle (Kerbo 2006:263ff.; Robbins 2009:273).2 The question then becomes—whose aspirations? Typically it is that of the standard “American success model” (Strauss 1992) held by the middle and upper classes. Most mainstream individuals, academics included, consistently underestimate the attractions of alternative lifestyles, revealing the “bourgeois ethnocentrism” that Marshall Sahlins (1972) fingers. As sociologist Joseph Davis (2008:276) argues, “even in our multiculturalism, we imagine a sameness of outlook and aspiration, an unwitting projection of ourselves in the end.” Thus, anything else that deviates from the mainstream pattern must be explained or rooted in some other structural or adaptive force, and one only needs to remove structural barriers to be lifted out of poverty.

One basic mistake that many of these scholars make is to argue from interviewees’ simple statements or assertions, whereas in reality our behavior often deviates from our stated aims (Strauss 1992). In other words, most of us tend to verbally buy into the ideology of upward mobility and success, yet actual behavior varies widely. For instance, while immigrant families verbally stress the importance of education, immigrant family processes may orient in other directions (Vermeulen and Perlmann 2000). Strong orientations toward family mean lower college enrollment for Latino children (Desmond and Turley 2009). Older children are expected to share in family-related responsibilities, while education takes a backseat. Parents end up providing little support for their children in school, partly because they are unfamiliar with it themselves. The “cultural model” of success is strong, but the behavioral paths are influenced by a wide variety of forces, from family dynamics to subcultures and individual interest.

Another way of putting this is that we are influenced by several different cultural models or traditions, all of which can be in tension (Waldron 1996).

Meanwhile, most textbooks on stratification and inequality typically highlight that any cultural differences are superficial and only situational, and do not discuss any tensions between the various orientations (e.g., Kerbo 2006). Ronald Takaki (1993), a well-known scholar on inequality, argues explicitly for both diversity and equality, while avoiding discussion of any tension between the two. Even in the recent reconsideration of the relation of culture to poverty, the same weaknesses appear. The introduction (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010) to a special journal issue on culture and poverty—highlighted in a front-page article in the New York Times (Cohen 2010)—differentiates seven cultural influences related to poverty (e.g., frames), but actual practices and habits are given short shrift in their summary, even though these have been central to definitions of culture for the last century (Worsley 1997). Consumption practices, often a major contributor to poverty because they prevent savings (Moav and Neeman 2008), are not even mentioned. They even seem uncomfortable with values, another central element of culture. Anthropologists (e.g., Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Robbins 2009) still beat on the old simplistic “culture of poverty” model and ignore better arguments connecting culture and poverty. If agency is highlighted, it is how the poor have “adapted” to the structures and contexts and navigate their way through their situation. Concepts of agency that involve self-reflexivity and routine ethical choices are simply left out of consideration, as Laidlaw (2014) discusses. However, research points to the direct and important influence of “cultural inputs,” “values,” and their connected practices on socioeconomic...
outcomes (Abramson 2012; Hitlin and Piliavin 2004). Culture may be used to explain the advantage of the rich, as in Bourdieu’s work, because the taboo only exists in relation to the poor, as Khan (2012:368) notes.

In poverty studies, there is also an almost total neglect of the influence of popular culture—even though television viewing and popular culture consumption in general are substantially higher among lower income groups. Not only does pop culture consumption substitute for other activities such as education and work, but the messages of popular culture often work against obtaining success, as discussed above with the influence of movies. Some musical genres, such as hip hop and southern rock, work against bourgeois orientation and practice (Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2008). In media such as advertising, rebellion, individualism, and anti-institutionalism predominate. While the upper and middle classes consume these products also, they (especially youth) can strategically combine a rebellious image on the outside with a success-oriented habitus through family and community socialization.

In sum, those who reject culture as an important influence—Richard Shweder (2003) calls them “anticulturalists”—will simply not see the connection between culture and inequality. The discourse that typically rejects cultural difference intersects with another significant scholarly discourse on social problems that has pervaded the social sciences (and broader contexts) in the last few decades, that of fault. Shweder, for instance, has highlighted the “mixed and perhaps changing discourse on suffering and fault” in the United States, which “removes the idea of the agency of the sufferer as a relevant contributory factor” (Shweder 2003:128), which Joel Robbins recently discusses as “the anthropology of suffering” (Robbins 2013). This rather one-sided discourse is partly in reaction to the other, individualist extreme, where all responsibility is put on those in poverty. Attributions of fault are commonly disparaged as “blaming the victim.” This is understandable, since social forces and circumstances beyond one’s control often do contribute to misfortune. But, according to Shweder, there is a problem when victimization becomes the dominant account of suffering and when it becomes politically incorrect to ever hold people responsible for their misery” (Shwed 2003:128–129). This depersonalizes the sufferer, who is encouraged to think and act as a passive victim with few personal capabilities, which certainly does not contribute to their well-being.

Recognition of the Tension

Public discussion of cultural and lifestyle differences immediately brings up issues of moralizing and judgment, not to mention generalizing and stereotyping. We often prefer to avoid discussing these kinds of differences, while talking of diversity superficially, usually based on an outmoded belief that racial/ethnic groups define diversity, when intragroup differences are often larger than intergroup differences.

Given the ever-widening gaps between different lifestyle patterns, more tension between the values of diversity and equality is likely. A few scholars have recognized this tension, though they are rare. Emma Kowal’s writings (above) on white antiracists in Australia are probably the best illustrated and most extensive discussion of the quandaries of trying to be committed to both diversity and equality. Social psychologist Hazel Markus and colleagues note how we commonly hold the “paradoxical idea that society should celebrate difference with the idea that this difference doesn’t really matter. . . . This perspective on difference is an all-American effort to reconcile diversity with equality” (Markus, Steele, and Steele 2002:461). Minow, Shweder, and Markus (2008) similarly recognize an “equality-difference paradox” in the schools context, where pressures to integrate meet pressures to value diversity. In Britain, David Goodhart’s (2004) essay in the left-of-center Prospect sparked considerable discussion when he laid out the “progressive dilemma” between solidarity/equality and diversity.

Some fall clearly on one side or the other of this issue, as we see above with the debate in Australia. Organizations such as Survival International advocate in defense of multicultural identities and groups, though normally leave out any sense of the tension with equality, which Kowal explicitly includes. James Scott (2009) backs the strategies of diverse antistate highland peoples against wealthier lowland mainstream groups and states. In a strong defense of culture theory, James Bogg argues for Native American interests against regnant “liberal theory” (Bogg 2002). From the opposite direction, the influential Harrison and Huntington (2000) volume largely pleads for poorer communities and nations to adopt mainstream values of economic progress. The rather large

3. Bourdieu is also limited by a bent toward social structural determinism at the expense of the agent, and a neglect of human capital in favor of cultural capital.

4. For a discussion of how this blameless discourse does not apply to certain marginalized groups, such as poor southern whites, see Grindal (2011).

5. For an interesting discussion of the tensions between values and practices of freedom, equality, and civil peace, see Salzman (2005).
corpus of writings on the homeless is another touchstone for this debate, with some (Wasserman and Clair 2010) leaning more toward recognizing the diversity of the dispossession of the homeless, and thus against large-scale top-down measures aimed at entirely eliminating homelessness, which they argue denies them a role and contributes to their oppression. On the more egalitarian side, one can find anthropologist Michael Blim (2005) and those such as Brian Barry (2001) or Walter Benn Michaels (2006) who argue that diversity, or at least a multicultural politics of identity, should give way to policies aimed at eliminating inequality, though they display little awareness of how actual diverse practices are related to inequality.

The political issues involved also relate to theoretical differences. While those solidly on the political left often recognize only structural sources of inequality and thus structural solutions (Goode and Maskovsky 2001), some on the political right, such as followers of Ayn Rand, take the opposite tack and individualize inequality by making it mostly the result of choices or preferences. Many of the latter also posit a simplistic belief in the free market as the cure to a variety of economic issues and thus also display no awareness of cultural difference. If allowing for cultural differences, they understand them as choices and not as historically generated and structurally influenced practices.

I argue that understanding cultural influences means taking a mediating position between these extremes, by incorporating the importance of the macro factors that help form culture while allowing that alternative lifestyles may have some pull, even if those in the mainstream (including academics) find some of these lifestyles perplexing. In social theory terms, this means allowing for both structural forces and agency, along with culture. More specifically, poverty scholars fail to adequately incorporate all of the elements of social theory, especially those involving culture and agency (Abramson 2012; Alexander 2007; Vaisey 2010).

The focus has typically been on the structure of job opportunities, the way income is distributed across those jobs, government policies, or the beliefs and practices, such as discrimination, of privileged groups that disadvantage marginalized groups. These analyses certainly point to reasons why patterns of inequality are so stubborn and why inequality is getting worse, but they are also notably incomplete. As Kowal argues, scholars are prone to “overstructuration,” the tendency “to downplay agential explanations and highlight structural explanations for any given situation” (Kowal, forthcoming). Other social forces, such as the “pleasures” of identifying with marginalized groups (Kulick 2006), also act upon scholars, which at the same time can create a certain self-righteousness and groupthink (Sutton 2009:137–139).

It is important to note that recognizing the tension between diversity and equality does not imply naturalizing inequality or making it functional. It should never be used as an excuse to ignore poverty or inequality. A proper understanding of inequality means keeping all of the causes in mind, which include everything from family background, networks, identity issues, personality orientations, normative beliefs, religious background, and other social, cultural, and economic contexts (Keister 2011:12). Patterns of habitual behavior are key (Farkas 2003). Education and job training, for instance, have often had disappointing results, unless the more culturally generated “soft skills” are also considered, from interpersonal skills to time management, emotion control, and conscientiousness. One can gain a rich array of insights from other disciplines like developmental and social psychology, behavioral economics, along with advances in biological anthropology, where there has been a burst of recent work, including the interactions between biology, the human person, and the environment (Chiao et al. 2013; Lende and Downey 2012; Narvaez et al. 2014). Biographical approaches (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000) and interdisciplinary approaches are also needed here, with a view to the developmental pathways that people navigate through structural, cultural, and individual contexts.

Conclusion

In order to understand the tensions between diversity and equality, we will need an adequate understanding of lifestyle diversity, which also means reconsidering some of the taboos on incorporating culture. Anthropologists ought to offer their unique insight into the tremendous diversity that is ignored by most who study inequality. This will be a tricky enterprise, but well worth it if it gives us better insights into what contributes to poverty and inequality, while remaining sensitive to diversity. Despite some of the ethnographic work on the poor, there still seems to be a huge disconnect between the anthropology of poverty and inequality, and the reality of the lives of the poor and the organizations that work on poverty alleviation. The standard scholarly narratives simply do not adequately address both the structural and cultural aspects of the lives of the poor or the related tensions between the central values of diversity and equality. By their one-sided structural approaches, stratification scholars leave themselves open to easy takedowns from public intellectuals who write for broader audiences (e.g., Wolfe 1999) and thus have simply taken themselves out of the public debate on poverty, leaving the field open for writers like Charles Murray (2012).

The typical policies promoted by well-meaning academics often assume a homogenous and compliant public simply needing opportunity, ready to take up jobs when available. They do not get at the dynamics and diversities of social groups. Some of the lower income groups (e.g., downshifters, Amish) are relatively stable and contribute to few social problems, and one could argue they provide positive alternatives to the mainstream neoliberal juggernaut. But others struggle to survive in our speeded-up technocratic world of high competition (on the production side) and the temptations of ever-increasing opportunities for leisure and immediate gratification (on the consumption side), preventing the slower
processes of education and savings that promote stability over the long run. Daniel Bell’s *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) is here prescient, leading us to understand that our predicaments go deeper in society than we often realize, with our public policies often hamstrung by the ongoing tension between diversity and equality.

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Comments

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The general thrust of Michael Jindra’s article is admirable. It is marred, however, by inconsistent use of key terms, “equality” and “diversity,” used sometimes to denote observable social phenomena and sometimes to denote values or principles.

On the one hand, we may compare the observable extent of equality between two specific populations in space and time, using economic or “human development” indicators. And when Jindra concludes that there has been an increase in diversity in the West, even in the world at large, there is no problem in understanding what he means, though we may go on to ask what are the criteria for forming this hypothesis. Jindra adduces such a wide range of criteria—practices, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as numerous socially constructed markers—that the claim is unverifiable. One could point to many social phenomena—soccer, the English language, the Internet, management taught at business schools, New Age spirituality—which seem to attest to convergences as much as to increased diversity.

On the other hand, “equality” and “diversity” can represent values or principles—as in Jindra’s first paragraph. For both theologians and humanists, the equality of all human beings is an article of faith. Egalitarian values also underpin many political ideologies, from that of the United States, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, to state communism. As for diversity, it is promoted as a political value in some countries today, though as Jindra notes, the concept of multiculturalism is contentious. The result is a commingling in this article of the analytical or etic use of the terms “equality” and “diversity” with their “folk” or emic use, and a less-than-smooth train of thought.

Moreover, the principles of equality and diversity are not precisely comparable. Equality is an ideal of the same order as liberty, each with a long history of political advocacy, and it makes sense to think of these two principles as in continuous tension. As for diversity, it is admittedly given a high value by a school of humanist thought, much influenced by social-cultural anthropology. Emmanuel Terray’s essay on Lévi-Straussian lines, “The role of the Other in the constitution of the human being,” is an eloquent example, a warning against xenophobia and political hysteria (Terray 2011:15–23). However, there is as yet no “diversitarian” movement to set alongside egalitarianism and libertarianism.

More positively, I would like to single out one of the many stimulating points made by Jindra when he writes that “In anthropology . . . scholarship on marginalized groups has veered from a victim narrative in the 1970s to one of heroic ‘resistance’ in the 1980s and ’90s as scholars realized that victimology leaves agency entirely out of the picture. More recently, the resistance narratives are now also seen as unsatisfactory, one-dimensional, and overused, and scholars have moved onto other topics such as identity.” In my own research on welfare provision in the Palestinian Territories, it is impossible to avoid either the aspect of Palestinian victimhood (resulting from expulsions, confiscations, military occupation, “ethnic cleansing,” aid dependence, and political manipulation by Arab states as well as by Israel and Western powers) or that of resistance, which is indeed closely linked with the affirmation of Palestinian identity.

The Palestinian capacity for active resistance (*muqawama*) is well known to everyone, extending to the lurid cult of the “martyrdom operation” (*istiḥsād*). But although another term in the Palestinian cultural repertoire, *šumād*, best translated as “steadfastness,” has received less international media coverage, it is more pertinent to the everyday lives of Palestinians under pressure. *Šumād* can be expressed, for instance, through the determination not to give up land or emigrate, through building up local welfare institutions, through asserting national cultural values, and through non-violent protest (though this has been given little practical support by Palestinian politicians, and shades into *muqawama*). The term has Islamic resonance, for Al-Šamād is one of the names of God (Qur’ān 112.2). Leonardo Schiochett (2011) argues that *šumād* also has a secular history but has recently become “re-Islamized.”

At the beginning of the present century, numerous international aid donors saw local Islamic charitable organizations in the Palestinian Territories as worthy objects for subventions that sidestepped the corruption then associated with the Palestinian Authority. These charities saw themselves as practical manifestations of *šumād* (Schaublin 2012). The long-running political crisis in Israel-Palestine was exacerbated by the Fatah-Hamas split in 2007. International counterterrorist measures, led by the United States, have subjected all external
aid flows to suspicious scrutiny. For this and other reasons, donors have shunned what was formerly a decentralized, relatively unpolitical, and locally trusted sector. The weakening of nonviolent sumid in the face of overpowering forces that increasingly threaten Palestinian futures is likely to be followed by a revival of more violent opposition from dissenting factions. Cultural adaptations are trumped here by geopolitics.

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By making explicit the tension between economic equality and cultural diversity, Jindra has offered an effective critique of the popular scholarly discourse on stratification that assumes a homogenous public needing opportunity. Drawing on such high-profile cases as the Roma/Gypsy in Europe, Native Americans in the United States, and Australian aboriginals, he points out lifestyle diversity as an important (but often ignored) contributing factor of persistent inequality so as to highlight the role of human agency and cultural embeddedness in understanding poverty and inequality. While I fully agree with his analysis, it seems that he has focused exclusively on advanced Western countries that have completed the nation-building process and generally have high tolerance to diversity. Here I would like to put this tension in the contemporary context of China’s modernization and national rejuvenation with reference to religious diversity and its connections to development.

Mainstream cultural values in China are scrutinized and regulated by a powerful party-state preoccupied with making exclusionary loyalty claims of the country’s diverse ethnic and religious groups and constructing commonalities of lived experience across the nation (Kipnis 2012). Unlike what Jindra has observed in the Western context, there is no taboo against connecting cultural difference with poverty in the political space of the Chinese state. In both official and popular Chinese discourses, rural inland provinces are perceived not only economically poor but culturally backward, as evidenced by the national project of “sending culture down” to poor rural areas. Both state and nonstate actors (such as evangelical Christian groups and domestic nongovernmental organizations) share the view that there is a need to transform rural people’s backwardness while lifting them out of poverty (Cao 2009, 2011, 2013). However, development-related state interventions and bureaucratization have fostered resentment and resistance in impoverished minority regions where there is rich local religious life such as in Tibet and Xinjiang, where Tibetan Buddhism and Islam, respectively, have substantial influence among the local populace.

In the dual context of state and market modernities, officials have taken a utilitarian approach to religion by setting up the “religious stage for promoting the economic development show” (zongjiao datai jingji changxi; see Oakes and Sutton 2010). While China’s five officially recognized religions are under pressure to adapt to socialism, those categorized as “feudal superstitions” (such as folk religions and local cults) may be preserved in the form of intangible cultural heritage if compatible with the political and economic interests of the state. Technically illegal religious structures and wasteful ritual activities are for the most part tolerated if not encouraged by local state agencies as long as they help stimulate the local economy and enrich local elites (Chau 2006; Fisher 2008; Yang 2000). Not unlike the political left in the West as described by Jindra, the post-Mao reformist state tends to view the connection of cultural/religious diversity and inequality essentially not as a matter of individual choice or preference, but as a manifestation of developmental tensions to be overcome, a view in line with the atheist-state understanding of the doomed fate of religion in modernity.

Empowered by China’s reform-era economic miracle, President Xi Jinping has recently described the ongoing nation-building project as a gradual and linear process to realize the “Chinese Dream” (apparently a paraphrase of the famous American Dream). As a top buzzword in the Chinese media now, the Chinese Dream emphasizes the revival of the Chinese nation and aspirations for development, prosperity, and China’s modern identity, all of which signify a national call for breaking away from local traditional forms of community and the rise of a new form of politically motivated national homogeneity. In this nation-building process, pluralism has become a political formality serving to justify the use of collective efforts and resources to maintain the status quo in politics. While the party-state recognizes the freedom of religion as a constitutional right, religious believers continue to be disallowed to join the ruling Communist Party even though the latter has incorporated private entrepreneurs into its power structure, defying the supposedly proletarian nature of the party. What appears to be a dangerous consensus in today’s Chinese society is the understanding of the tension of diversity and equality as a transient phenomenon of economic nature, inevitably resulted from dramatic modernization and uneven development and thus bound to be resolved by the completion of an all-around well-off society led by efficient state agencies as well as elite entrepreneurs and scientists imbued with a modern secularist tendency. The strong relevance of the state and its emphasis on gross domestic product accumulation in the Chinese model of development will likely continue to perpetuate the misconception of the fundamental human need for economic opportunities and development in the making of public and foreign policies. At this juncture of China’s increased global economic outreach and political impact, Jindra’s article serves as a timely reminder by questioning this seemingly universal truth.
The very title of Michael Jindra’s article sets the stage for a fascinating discussion on one of the most persistent conundrums of our modern societies: How do we reconcile equality and diversity? My remarks here will focus less on the substance of the article, much of which is well informed and impeccably presented, and more on the assumptions behind the very enterprise. It seems to me there are three issues that merit present, and more on the assumptions behind the very enterprise. The first concerns the definition of the concepts used in the article. The second has to do with the discussion of the causalities implied in the theories that deal with questions of equality and diversity. The last turns on the need to revisit the premises of the social sciences we use to analyze these processes.

(1) The article uses but does not question a number of important concepts, which to a large extent color the way the argument is presented. The notions of equality, diversity, poverty, and, above all, culture, are all loaded both historically and conceptually, and because of this they tend to overdetermine the ways in which the main topics are approached. Clearly, the major issue is that explosive question about the alleged link between culture and poverty—a problem that afflicts all Western societies. The problem is twofold: one the one hand, it is simply politically unacceptable to suggest a cultural root to poverty; on the other, there is a politically understandable but theoretically dubious attempt to portray poverty as diversity. So, politics and analysis clash, leading to a seesaw approach to this thorny dilemma. While the article is lucid in the exposition of these contradictions, it does not propose any conceptual way out.

(2) Clearly, the key issue here is that of causality. Whereas sociology searches for structural explanations to the relation between poverty and diversity, anthropology looks more closely at the question of diversity and culture. Both offer explanations as to why it is so difficult to achieve diversity and equality: the one stressing the socioeconomic constraints making progress virtually impossible; the other explaining that there may be distinct cultural understandings of diversity, which do not fit the template of our Western societies as they are currently organized. The result is that there seems to be no satisfactory, or even workable, concept of agency. Either there is no scope for agency that would allow greater equality or agency becomes the veil that is (not so) discreetly thrown upon practices that are seen to be detrimental to socioeconomic advancement.

(3) The difficulty in identifying relevant causalities stems from two distinct but interrelated questions. The first has to do with the limits of the concepts we use. But the second, and more important, is linked to the nature of mainstream social science. The concepts we use are intimately tied to the development of Western societies—that is, in effect, Westernization. One way out here is to conceive of culture not as a concatenation of (supposedly universal) values but as a language that makes it possible for people to understand and share the ways in which they perceive and operate within the world they inhabit. Seen thus, the notion of poverty can only be relative, and it is therefore impossible to conceptualize it satisfactorily outside of the cultural context within which it is found. Are the nomadic Maasai poor because their wealth is invested in cattle?

One way out of this analytical dilemma is to search for concepts that enable us to analyze these issues outside the iron box of social science theory. This involves a double exercise. One is to set the theories within their historical context, in order to show how they were meant to conceptualize the “progress” of our Western societies since the Enlightenment. The other is to search for concepts that can stand tall outside of this specific Western framework. This is not easy, since we are all conditioned by the setting in which we have lived and worked. However, it is not impossible, and, in any event, the attempt to do so is a liberating exercise that may make it easier to tackle those apparently intractable issues in a more productive way."
programs one the other. The US government has had to take minority members and women through affirmative action these minority groups on the one hand and by hiring many the past 50 years has helped to moderate racial and gender other similar findings.

I believe Jindra’s article will serve as an important source for research on the tensions between cultural diversity and equality in the future. I admire him for clearly telling the readers of Current Anthropology that lifestyles of disadvan-
taged groups do influence their economic problems. His mes-
Sage is likely to encourage many social scientists to consider the influence of cultural differences in economic adaptations in the future. I have read his article with great interest, and I agree with his central argument.

Since Jindra provides more examples of the tensions be-
tween cultural diversity and class inequality in his article, I would like to introduce here a salient example of the tensions between cultural differences and racial inequality. In her award-winning book Black identities: West Indian dreams and American realities, Mary Waters (1999) pointed out that Ca-
ribbean black immigrants are ready to take low-status, low-
paying jobs that most African American workers would not accept, partly because as new immigrants they have a higher motivation for economic mobility and partly because they consider their jobs temporary. Many other immigration stud-
ies have also shown that business owners and managers prefer Latino immigrant workers to African American workers be-
cause they consider the former to be harder working than the latter. There are many other reasons, in addition to cul-
tural reasons, why we should believe new immigrants from underdeveloped countries work harder and have a higher mo-
tivation than native-born Americans: their self-selection in terms of class and achievement orientation, their urgent im-
migrant situation, and their psychological motivation deriving from a big gap in the standard of living between the United States and their home country. For these reasons, most im-
migration scholars accept the proposition about immigrant workers’ harder work and higher motivation, but because of its negative implication for African Americans, many race scholars, including Stephen Steinberg, are critical of this and other similar findings.

Diversity (multicultural) policy in the United States over the past 50 years has helped to moderate racial and gender inequality by reducing prejudice and discrimination against these minority groups on the one hand and by hiring many minority members and women through affirmative action programs one the other. The US government has had to take various measures to moderate racial and gender inequality because historical and contemporary prejudice and discrim-
ination against and stereotypes of these minority groups based on physical differences have contributed to their lower socio-economic status.

However, multicultural policy cannot do anything to mod-
erate the economic disadvantages of those groups based on lifestyle differences reviewed in Jindra’s article that challenge meritocracy. The contemporary postindustrial society de-
mands highly skilled workers. Accordingly, it is inevitable that people get economic rewards based on their educational cre-
dentials and other human capital investments. Also, the con-
temporary postindustrial society economically rewards people with technical skills, frugal attitudes, and legalistic and busi-
ness minds. Thus, why medical doctors make $300 per hour compared to janitors who make only $7 per hour is not a diversity issue, but an issue related to social equality. The United States is a far more multicultural, but far more unequal, country than most European countries. European countries have achieved class equality to a greater extent than the United States using mainly socialist programs, such as a much higher minimum wage, levying much higher taxes for people with high-incomes brackets, and providing greater so-
cial safety nets than the United States. This means that we can achieve not only class but also racial and gender equality effectively in the United States mainly through socialist pro-
grams rather than through diversity programs.

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Opening One’s Eyes to the Equality-Difference Paradox

Promote equality in wealth or embrace genuine cultural di-
versity? The two aims are not harmonious. From a descriptive point of view, there appears to be a trade-off between the amount of equality in wealth and the amount of cultural (or lifestyle) diversity achievable within human societies. If you survey the world, you will discover that the most egalitarian countries with respect to domestic wealth distributions (e.g., Denmark, Croatia, Slovenia, Rwanda) are (relatively speaking) culturally homogeneous. These egalitarian countries often have a history of partition, succession, ethnic cleansing, or intense top-down pressuring of minority groups to assimilate to mainstream norms. One speculates that it becomes easier to enforce policies of wealth redistribution in a more culturally uniform country, perhaps as a result of the fellow feeling and the primordial sense of kinship, trust, and visceral attachment that develops in homogeneous in-groups.

The trade-off goes both ways. Countries that are multi-
that the existence of wealth inequalities might be interpreted 
ians, the provocation in Jindra’s argument is the implication 
at least might be a measure of something good. For egalitar-
inequalities within a society are not necessarily immoral or 
tarians will be inclined to resist the suggestion that wealth 
be roughly the same today as they were in the decades 
prior to World War I (1870–1914), when the cultural, reli-
gious, and linguistic diversity of the country was on the in-
crease and the United States was proudly viewed as a world 
Federation of nations.

From an evaluative point of view, this trade-off between 
providing equality and embracing diversity is sometimes 
called the equality-difference paradox (see Shweder 2008). 
The paradox is a central theme in Michael Jindra’s highly 
original, elegant, and courageous essay. His essay is corrosive 
of received paradigms and is likely to provoke critical re-
responses from both egalitarians and multiculturalists. Egal-
tarians will be inclined to resist the suggestion that wealth 
inequalities within a society are not necessarily immoral or 
at least might be a measure of something good. For egalitar-
ians, the provocation in Jindra’s argument is the implication 
that the existence of wealth inequalities might be interpreted 
as a positive index of (a) the scope of lifestyle diversity in a 
society, (b) the existence of individuals and groups within a 
society who remain poor by choice or unwilling to sacrifice 
their inherited lifestyles at the altar of Mammon, or (c) reject 
nliger achievement ideals and upper middle class bour-
gois notions of success in a global capitalist economy. While 
the essay acknowledges so-called structural factors and ques-
tions of power, the originality in the essay is its balance and 
its willingness to acknowledge (for example) that: “The high 
achievement pattern. . . . often comes at a cost in terms of 
sociality, time, freedom, and increased stress. . . . so for many 
the sacrifices required for upward mobility are simply not felt 
to be worth it.” Indeed, in the light of Michael Jindra’s eye-
opening account of lifestyle diversity in the United States, 
wealth inequalities might even be viewed as a partial measure 
of the extent to which (perhaps even for structural reasons) 
the country truly tolerates (or at least puts up with) the free 
exercise of culture within its borders.

The opening of one’s eyes to the equality-difference par-
adox is likely to provoke multiculturalists as well, at least those 
multiculturalists who actually value cultural differences and 
do not automatically attribute such differences to false con-
sciousness or a history of domination, exploitation, or vicious 
discrimination. The moral ideal for such multiculturalists is 
a pluralistic society. In the ideal pluralistic society, groups or 
formations are free to be culturally different (to adopt alternative 
lifestyles with respect to the raising and education of children, 
subsistence activities, gender relations, time management, ex-
pressive behavior, wealth acquisition) but are also made equal 
with respect to the distribution of material benefits. In effect, 
the reality of the equality-difference paradox unmasks that 
ideal as naive or utopian. Multiculturalists are not likely to 
appreciate the irony that income equality is most readily 
achieved by flattening out the cultural variety within a society. 
And they will be inclined to resist the suggestion that the 
greater the legal and ethical scope for lifestyle diversity, the 
more likely the resources of that society will be unequally 
distributed.

For all these reasons, this is a welcome, eye-opening con-
tribution and a pleasure to read. The essay addresses a deep 
and significant issue by means of a skillfully conducted, hu-
mane, and balanced review of many literatures. While there 
may be limits on how much wealth equality is possible in a 
genuinely culturally diverse society, Jindra’s essay raises in my 
mind the following question: What is the ideal balance be-
tween equality and diversity in a complex society such as the 
United States where at least some of us value both?

Reply

I am pleased that the commenters recognize the crucial issues 
that I address in the article, but I suspect that these mostly 
friendly comments do not reveal the hesitance many feel 
about the connections between diversity and inequality. Since 
I first submitted this article, economic inequality has become 
the hottest issue in public debate, highlighted by President 
Obama and addressed even by Republicans. Preschool pro-
grams have become one of the favorite programs to deal with 
inequality. In this sense, they are an effort to address the 
diversity of parenting practices, but because socialization and 
subcultural processes continue well past preschool as the in-
fuence of peers and popular culture kicks in, evidence as to 
their long-term success is mixed. On all sides, there seems to 
be little awareness of the complexity of the issue.

As Benthall points out, there are problems with measuring 
diversity (more so than economic equality), and while there 
is certainly lifestyle convergence, I believe the evidence for 
increased lifestyle diversity is strong. This is matched by the 
rise of the ideal, not as “diversitarianism” but certainly as 
multiculturalism, and calls to celebrate diversity. This, how-
ever, focuses mostly on racial/ethnic diversity (and often su-
perficially at that) while leaving out the lifestyle diversity that 
is the most relevant factor. As for inconsistency, I indeed use 
those terms both as observable phenomena and as things we 
value. The point is to show how they are changing but also 
how we value both without realizing they conflict. While they 
are not precisely comparable, there is certainly a relationship
between them, as Shweder details in his comments. Also, I specifically define equality as economic equality, not as political equality, a more nebulous ideal.

Nanlai Cao offers excellent insights into the situation in China, where the dilemma is simply resolved by the state in favor of development for all, diversity damned (while keeping it superficially for tourists). Of course, they get resistance. While diversity discourse is more upheld in Western contexts rather than non-Western ones, the dilemma is still felt. In a democracy like India, however, the dilemma pops up again, most notably with the minority and rural “scheduled tribes.” Government efforts to promote literacy, education, and intensive agriculture among them are both egalitarian and an “attempt to eradicate cultural difference by superimposing a majority style of life on the daily habits of minority members” (Schermanhorn 1978:339). Some tribal elites have benefited from affirmative action programs, but the vast majority remain poor, and debates flare over who exactly should be included in these programs. As in other countries, government policies have vacillated between autonomy and assimilation, with the latter usually favored under the pressure of dominant Hindu groups.

Pyong Gap Min adds a nice example in Waters’s important book on the success of West Indian immigrants. Later, he discusses the shifts in labor market structures and rewards, refers to more equal European societies, and advises for more socialist programs. These programs, however, do not tend to work well in more diverse societies, as Richard Shweder points out in his comments. Part of the reason for more equality in Europe is also due to cultural notions that operate more under the radar. A human resources director at a Swiss corporation once told me that executives there turned down the large pay increases the new Russian owners wanted to give them. The reason? Along with a sense of modesty and ethics, executives anticipated the resentment and envy this could engender in Swiss society. Compare this to Wall Street, through the revelatory account Sam Polk (2014) recently gave in the New York Times about his “addiction to wealth” as a trader, unrestrained by any sense of social pressure or judgment—only a nagging sense of guilt that saw him eventually walk away from that lifestyle. Swisslike social pressure is more likely to occur in less pluralistic societies, which is not so much an argument against diversity as one that says we must realize the implications of it. Without strong ethical codes, market forces and, along with it, inequality are likely to get stronger.

Richard Shweder highlights some very relevant country data on the connection between equality and diversity and the controversy over this “equality-diversity paradox.” At the end, he asks about the ideal balance between these principles in complex societies where both are generally valued.

First, we must simply recognize the trade-off exists, the main point of my essay. Better awareness would allow us to be more realistic and modest in our goals, such as the unreachable “ending poverty,” which would certainly eliminate much diversity by forcing all nonmainstream groups into modernist lifestyles. Certain groups, like old-order Amish, would certainly be defined as poor by most income data, though they have wealth in other ways.

On the other end, we would also be more careful about “celebrating diversity.” If that means a rather superficial acceptance of different ethnic groups, it is certainly admirable, but when it shades into tolerating all lifestyles, it becomes an unworkable and extreme relativism, an issue which anthropologists have thoroughly dissected before, most notably in Geertz’s “anti-anti relativism.” In some contexts, we end up with high rates of extreme poverty, mortality, and other social ills, as among the indigenous in Australia, and we draw lines.

Partly in answer to Shweder’s question, Patrick Chabal asks for concepts that can apply outside the West, and his own work takes us in that direction. Similarly, Bjørn Thomassen (2012:171–173) deals with the relationship between modernity and diversity, points to some of the inconsistencies in our discourse of celebrating diversity, and argues that we should study the “frictions” of multiple modernities, as in Bhutan’s floundering flirtation with “happiness” as a unified national goal (Harris 2013). Diversity, he argues, is a part of modernity, but it offers no solution since one inevitably needs to rely upon specific traditions to address the dilemma. Chabal is right that poverty is a problematic and relative concept, as defining poverty only materially is simply not sufficient. Many have recognized this, from Mary Douglas to Amartya Sen, but it often becomes too complex an issue for the public and policy makers to easily discuss, and it muddies up the simple statistics that people prefer. There are more promising and precise ways of measuring poverty in multidimensional ways, including things like inner capabilities and relational resources (Wagle 2014). Or one could take the broad concept of human “flourishing” (Smith 2014) as a guide, though one should be cognizant of the multiple ways that it is defined. This does not solve the issue, but makes it one of ongoing public contention to be worked out in most places through the often imperfect mechanisms of liberal democracy.

Once we understand we are dealing with a trade-off and avoid political extremes, the political and legal system kicks in at all levels, from the Supreme Court down to local ordinances and zoning boards, and involves liberal democratic processes, as mentioned above. This is where the United States has been more flexible than countries like France. Shweder is right that allowing a certain amount of inequality is a sign of tolerance. A key question, one I am working on right now in research on antipoverty nonprofits, is: To what extent do we “push” in order to reduce poverty, to nudge people, à la the behavioral economists, to do what is good for them—eat better, act more responsibly, show concern for their families, neighbors, and the wider society? Or, to what extent do we

8. I am both honored and saddened by the comments of Patrick Chabal, as they are likely among the last things he wrote before his death in January 2014, after a very influential career. I was looking forward to future correspondence with him.
allow diversity here? Do we want to enforce work, or allow people who can work to avoid it?

This gets to the heart of Shweder’s question, and it takes us into tricky areas of paternalism or conditionality—other anathemas to social scientists but ones we cannot avoid, as my research on even the most tolerant nonprofits reveals. Organizations that work with the poor simply do not have the luxury of removing the human agent, as structuralist accounts tend to do. All of these considerations are fine balances or edges to maintain, and people will lean different directions on this and hopefully find an (uneasy) balance. We will need to keep space for diverse communities, not to acquiesce to all poverty or to deny injustice and oppression, but to allow lifestyles that are stable and can flourish, even if they skew the statistics on inequality or sometimes violate norms of middle class respectability.

As I write this in early 2014, another book on culture and success, by “Tiger Mother” Amy Chua and her husband, is about to be released amid much publicity. Early reviews make me doubt that these two lawyers have handled it well, with heavy reliance on psychological language (superiority complex, sense of inferiority, and impulse control) rather than stronger social theories. Here, and with the debate on inequality now at the top of the political agenda, anthropologists and sociologists are again left behind. The 2007 American Anthropological Association annual meeting theme was “Difference, (In)Equality, & Justice,” but the description and connected panels showed no awareness of the tension between these concepts, so an opportunity went wasted. We must realize we face a stickier issue than most people realize, with roots in deep-seated cultural and social changes, besides the economic ones at the forefront of the discussion.

Michael Jindra

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