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[Part I Introduction] In/Exclusion: The Question of Inclusion

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Part I

In/Exclusion

The Question of Inclusion

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Recently, I have found myself in a recurring debate with scholars and activists I admire greatly. As my research and scholarship increasingly focuses on the politics of inclusion, they insist that we pay attention to the entrenched and expanding contours of exclusion. As I trot out examples of various discourses and programs of inclusion – from financial inclusion to paradigms of inclusive growth to slum legalization and upgrading – they shake their heads in disagreement and even despair. “The poor are still getting screwed, and all of this is simply the latest fashion in how to dress it all up and make it look pretty,” said one of them, a human rights activist, to me the other day. I do not disagree with him. Persistent poverty and growing wealth and income inequality, along with vast disparities of political power between the rich and the poor, are defining features of our present historical conjuncture. How can anyone argue against the simple and seemingly incontrovertible fact that the poor keep getting screwed?

But my interest in the politics of inclusion, manifest in my previous work on microfinance or my current work on the efforts in India to craft something akin to an urban welfare state, is not a naïve neglect of exploitation and dispossession but rather an attempt to formulate a nuanced understanding of *how* such exploitation and dispossession actually takes place, and most of all how they continue despite the devastations they usually wreak. I am also interested in the discourses and programs of inclusion because they tell us something important about the complex role of the state in governing and managing poverty and inequality. That role is too often reduced, in our critical theoretical formulations, to the handmaiden of neoliberalism. But there are many aspects of the state that such formulations ignore, notably the ongoing reinvention of the

developmental state in several countries of the Global South. Financial inclusion is a key part of this renewal of development, and, in turn, the deployment of information technologies is a key part of financial inclusion. This book, with its meticulous attention to how the “unbanked” come to be included and integrated into programs of development and governance, is timely. In particular, it broaches the important question of how we study discourses and programs of financial inclusion while being attentive to the transnational geographies of global capital and the enclosures enacted by technological innovation. To this end, I suggest that we carefully consider the analytical device suggested by Taylor and Horst in their essay on financial inclusion and exclusion at the Haiti–Dominican Republic border – that of the “living fence.” For them the living fence is a “metaphor,” one that allows us to “interrogate and move beyond the inclusion-exclusion binary.” I think this is immensely useful. As analytical tool and metaphor, the living fence allows us to understand the brutality, even violence, of enforced borders, as well as the negotiations and contestations that unfold in how these borders are lived through ordinary practices of ordinary people. As the authors note, it gets us out of the bind of having to prove exclusion or justify inclusion.

To pay attention to the “living” in the “living fence,” it is necessary to consider the methodologies through which financial inclusion, associated technologies, and everyday practices are studied. The editors of this book advocate “a distinctively ethnographic approach,” calling this “an anthropology of low finance.” This is an important and compelling research agenda, and the various chapters in this book, especially in this part on “In/Exclusion,” demonstrate its contributions. Writing against stereotypes of the financial practices of refugees, Omeje and Githigaro foreground how Somalian refugees mobilize diasporic capital to create business communities in Nairobi. This is not a story of the inherent entrepreneurial capacity of Somalian refugees but rather a historicized analysis of local and transnational kinship networks and (re)emergent cooperative forms of financial lending and pooling.

In relation to an anthropology of low finance and the metaphor of the living fence, I want to pose two questions. The first concerns the organization and institutionalization of financial inclusion. By this I mean the proliferation of programs and platforms of inclusion, some initiated as state policy, others as nongovernmental, even profit-making, endeavors. What is the relationship between these norms and rules (the word “structure” could be used here but perhaps would overemphasize a structuralist understanding of these processes) and everyday practices of low finance? I see this to be one of the main issues at stake in the essay by

Niiti and Mutinda on “vulnerable populations” in Kenya. This term signals a category, one produced through the norms and rules of governing. As their work demonstrates, governing is not only financial inclusion or poverty reduction but also the special concessions made for specially designated “vulnerable populations.” Put another way, the question of inclusion necessarily raises the question of how vulnerability, disability, and disadvantage mark and categorize social difference and how such social difference is managed and governed. My second question has to do with the relationship between low finance and high finance. My own interest in financial inclusion lies in how it is implicated in what I like to call “bottom billion capitalism,” the diverse efforts to integrate the world’s bottom billion – the billion or so people living under conditions of extreme poverty – into new global markets. For example, many of the financial practices made visible in this part, from remittances to ROSCAs (rotating savings and credit associations), are also those that are seen to generate forms of value that can be monetized and capitalized. I thus end with the self-description provided by NextBillion.net, a website and blog dedicated to “development through enterprise”: “We chose Next Billion for its dual meaning: on the one hand, the phrase represents the next billion people to rise into the middle class from the base of the economic pyramid (BoP); on the other, it indicates the next billion(s) in profits for businesses that fill market gaps by integrating the BoP into formal economies” (<http://www.nextbillion.net/About.aspx>). Here then, in a pithy sentence, is the politics of inclusion. As the living fence is a metaphor, so is “next billion” – for the aspirations of a global economy premised on inclusive growth, for a vision of capitalism in which socioeconomic mobility and expanding profits exist in harmony. This too demands of us ethnographic scrutiny.

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