



culture and
poverty

why are **poor** countries poor?

cultural approach

beginning **assumptions**

- cultural explanations must begin with the assumption that culture has at least some degree of **separateness** (or independence) from other social, political or economic forces



- at the same time, most culturalists agree that there is a highly **interactive relationship** among cultural factors, politics, and economy: culture, in short, does **not** act alone



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some basic **caveats**

remember, too: good cultural explanations do **not** presume that cultures are fixed, univocal, and unidirectional

- good cultural explanations are not in the business of “blaming the victim” (or, conversely, of excusing the victim); instead they focus on understanding and analyzing the often complex and **contingent effects** of culture



- good cultural explanations understand that both **agency** and **structure** matter



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some basic **caveats**

- early studies on culture (and many, if not most, non-academic “analyses” today) were often fundamentally misguided

example: “old” modernization theory

old modernization theory treated culture as **generic** (e.g., culture was either modern or traditional); it saw traditional culture as unavoidably “**backward**”; it failed to examine the **interaction** between culture and larger political, economic and other social forces



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some basic **caveats**

- consider the supposedly “backward culture” of **confucian** societies

“east asia’s paternalistic values were said to have thwarted the development of the market because they promoted nepotism and rigid hierarchy, discouraged individual effort and creativity, blocked the development of rational business practices, and inhibited the emergence of universalistic norms”

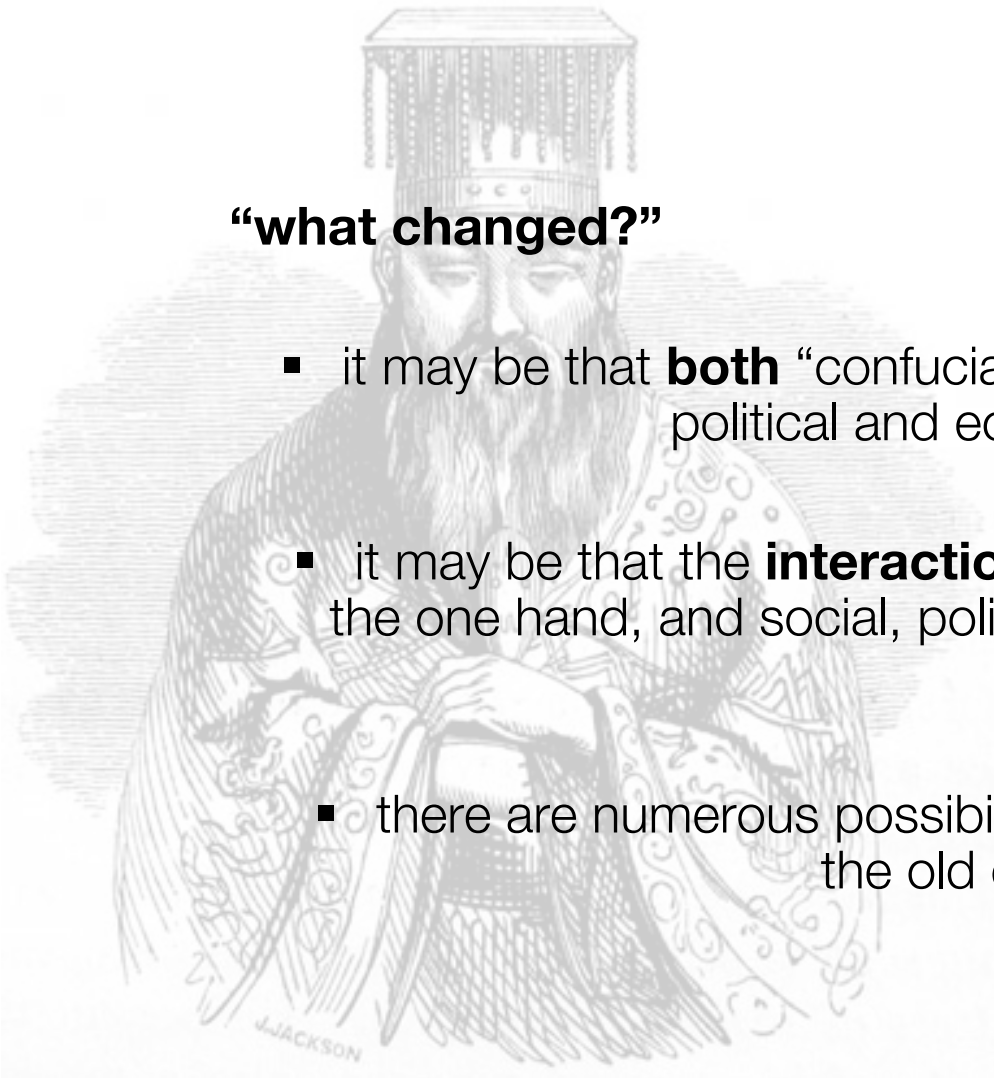
later, many of these same values were said to have been responsible for east asia’s economic success ...
so, what **changed?**



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some basic **caveats**

“what changed?”

- 
- it may be that **both** “confucian culture” and the larger social, political and economic environments changed
 - it may be that the **interaction** between cultural variables on the one hand, and social, political and economic variables on the other hand changed ...
 - there are numerous possibilities. one thing is clear, though: the old cultural arguments were **wrong**



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so what's a **better** cultural argument?



a **general answer**: an argument that takes account of how culture **interacts** with larger forces; an account that underscores the independent causal power of culture, while recognizing that culture is fluid and adaptable

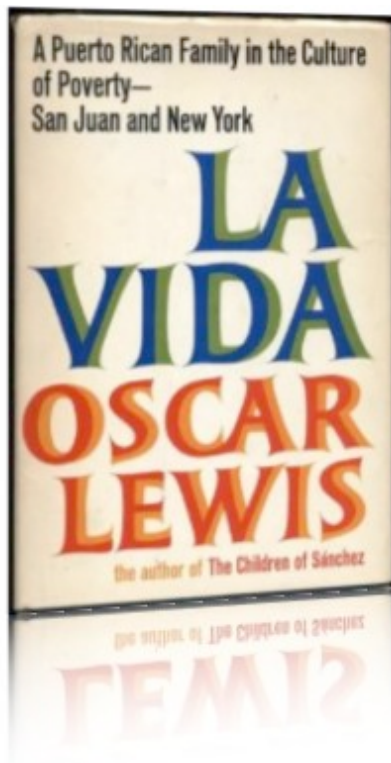
let's consider an example ...



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a **better** cultural argument on poverty

- oscar **lewis'** *a study of slum culture: background on la vida* is a seminal work, using a cultural perspective, on the problems of poverty
 - it is a dated, but **representative** and very useful example of how to use culture an analysis of poverty
 - however, it's also an argument that is very, very easily **misunderstood**



**we will break his argument down into
two parts ...**

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a simple, light-colored garment, stands in a rural setting with a paved road and grassy fields. The text "why are **poor** countries poor?" is overlaid in white, with "poor" in bold. Below it, "cultural approach" is written in a smaller, lighter font.

why are **poor** countries poor?

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the culture of poverty: the **basic** argument

part i: lewis observed that the attributes, values, and practices that people in poor communities embrace tend to be very similar

- more specifically, he **observed** that the people of poor communities are generally (though not universally) apathetic, hedonistic, present-time oriented, irresponsible, impulsive, provincial, unreliable, suspicious of outsiders, and fearful of authority



- in particular, there is a tendency for poor people to have a critical attitude toward and even fear of the **institutions** of “mainstream” society: banks, polices, the courts, and so on (which prevents their effective integration into society)



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the culture of poverty: the **basic** argument

- **in sum**, lewis argued that poor people tended to live very different lives than their more prosperous counterparts, and, more importantly, that **the poor behaved in a way kept them poor**
- also, lewis' main focus was on poor communities within larger societies: he called these **slums** and argued that, within many slums, there existed a **culture of poverty** (more accurately, lewis talked about **sub-cultures** of poverty, but he also suggested these could exist on a national-scale)





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the culture of poverty: **a simplistic example**

envison a “poor” person who inherits \$100,000, but, over time, becomes poor again through a series of “bad” decisions such as spending the money on frivolous “luxuries,” on drugs and alcohol, on gambling, etc. the money is not invested, say, in education, job skills, or even in savings. as result, all the money is soon spent, and the person becomes poor again

in this case, the poor person’s **return to poverty** is the product of a certain set of values, beliefs and practices that profoundly shape the behavior of that individual

note

we may say that the actions of the individual were “rational,” but rationality **does not** tell us how and why the individual would choose to be poor again, nor does it tell us from where the individual’s “preferences” came from





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another example: professional athletes who go broke

sports illustrated magazine estimates that 78 percent of former NFL players, within two years of retirement, are bankrupt or “under financial stress because of joblessness or divorce.” within five years, an estimated 60 percent of NBA players “are broke.”

the reasons are fairly clear: overspending, bad investments, costly divorces, an unwillingness to change their lifestyles. the underlying “cause,” however, is a mindset (a set of cultural values) that leads to formerly rich individuals to systematically make “bad decisions,” all of which leave them (relatively) poor after only a few years.



Lawrence Taylor, one of many former professional athletes who have “gone broke.” Taylor earned at least **\$50 million** in his career.

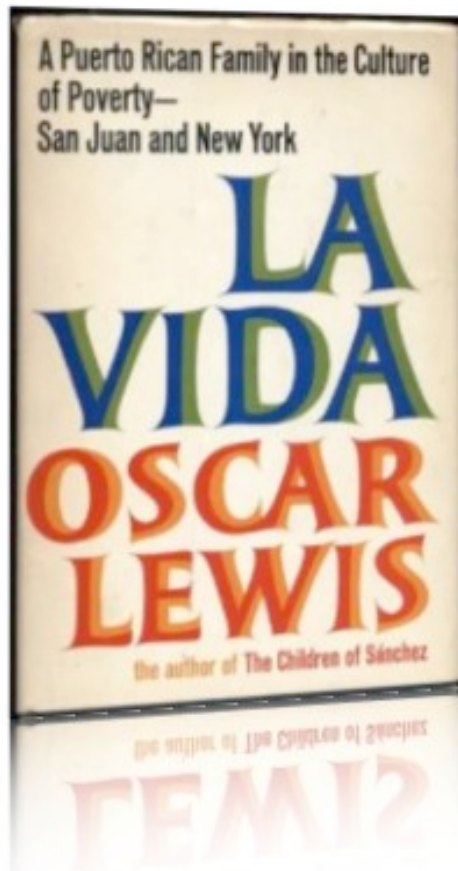
wait a minute!

isn't this the sort of crude cultural argument we just criticized? isn't lewis "blaming the victim"?



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the culture of poverty: **part 2**



- **on the surface**, lewis' argument does seem “crude,” but there is more to what he has to say
- to “save” lewis' argument, we have to recognize that lewis also tells us that we must examine how cultures of poverty **emerge** in the first place ...

so how do they emerge?



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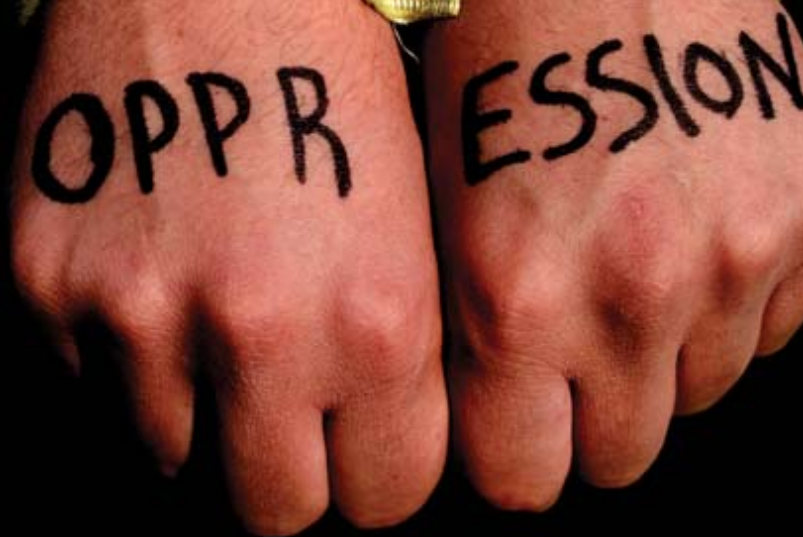
the culture of poverty: **part 2**

- to lewis, the “culture of poverty is both an **adaptation** to and a **reaction** of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, **capitalist** society



- in this regard, a culture of poverty represents “an **effort to cope** with feelings of hopelessness and despair that develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society”

the culture of poverty: **part 2**



put simply, slum cultures are a
consequence of *oppression*



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the culture of poverty: **part 2**

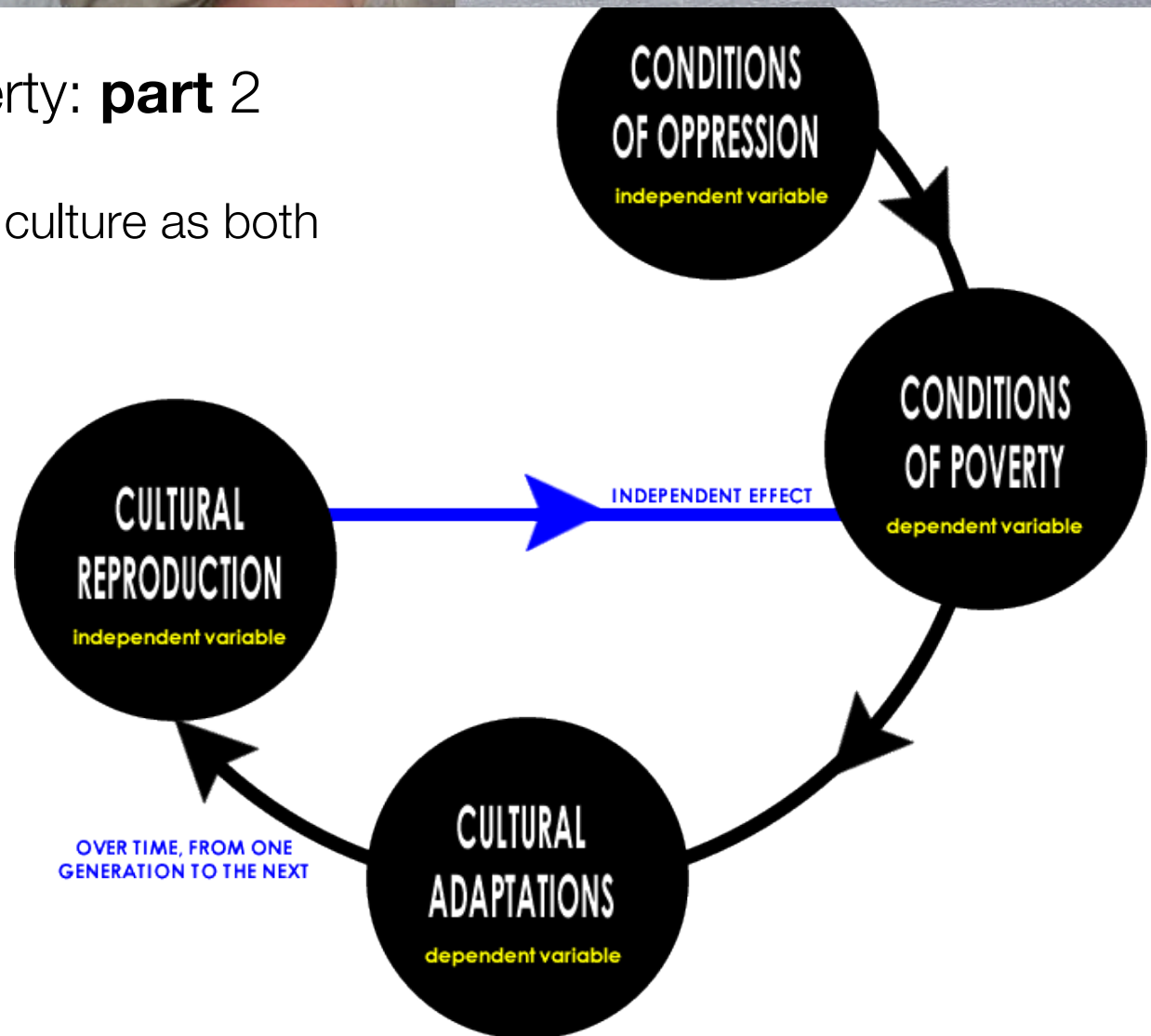
- to say that culture is a **consequence of other forces** seems to go against the assumption we started off with, that is, that culture has to have “some degree of separateness (or independence) from other social, political or economic forces”

how can this contradiction be **reconciled**?

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the culture of poverty: **part 2**

consider the notion of culture as both
cause and effect ...





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the culture of poverty: **part 2**

CONDITIONS
OF OPPRESSION

independent variable

cause and effect

- to **repeat**: it is clear, in lewis' view, that a culture of poverty is produced as a response or in relation to dominant social, political, and economic forces
- at the same time, once it comes into existence, a culture of poverty tends to be **perpetuated** from generation to generation—the perpetuation (or reproduction) of these values, in turns means that poor people tend to engage in practices that keep them poor even if the “objective conditions” of their poverty change

INDEPENDENT EFFECT

CONDITIONS
OF POVERTY

dependent variable

CULTURAL

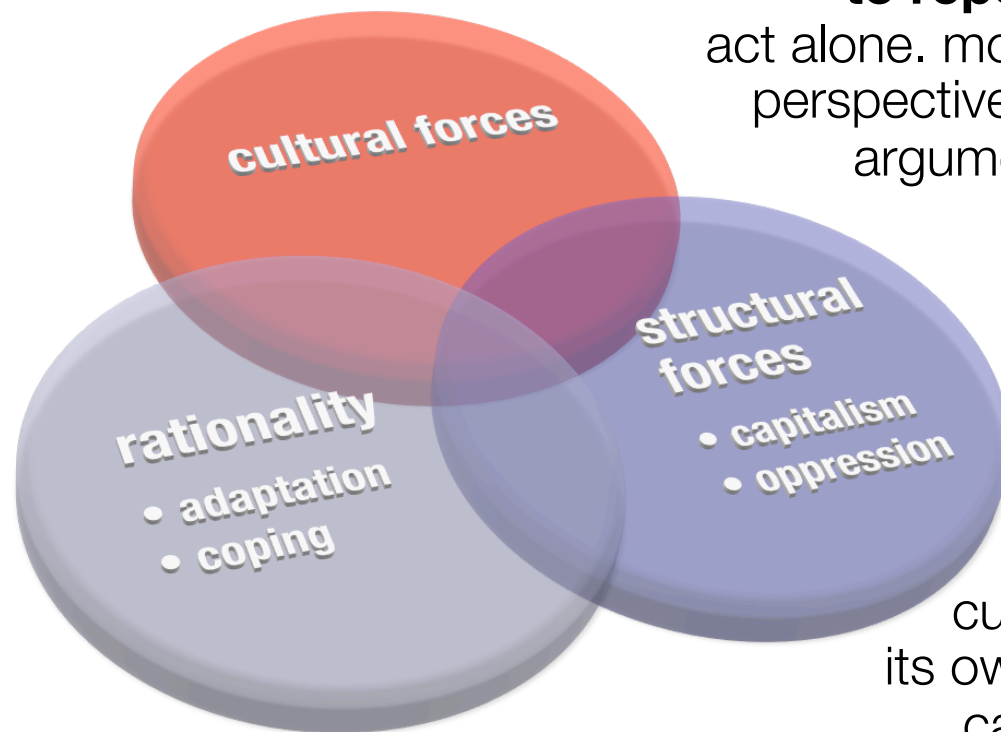
this is what is meant by culture being both cause and effect



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the culture of poverty: **summing up**



to repeat. cultural forces do not act alone. moreover, from a theoretical perspective, we can see that cultural arguments take account of both structure (i.e., capitalism) and rationality (i.e. the tendency of poor people to adapt to the strategic environment)

however, once created, culture can take on a “life of its own,” to be an independent causal force in its own right



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the culture of poverty: **final comments**

remember: the **malleability** of culture

- lewis understood that, while subcultures of poverty are **powerful**, as an essentially **intersubjective** force, they are not **unchangeable**; nor are they all the same (from one place to another, or from one time to another)

- this is one important way in which the cultural perspective **differs** from the structural perspective: cultures are **amenable to dramatic change** through human consciousness “and agency”—they are, to some extent, a “self-generated” constraint





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the culture of poverty: **part 2**

- even more, lewis was careful to make a strong **distinction** between poverty itself and a culture of poverty; in making this distinction, as he explained it ...

There is nothing in the concept [of the culture of poverty] that puts the **onus of poverty** on the character of the poor. Nor does the concept in any way play down the exploitation and neglect suffered by the poor.

Indeed, the subculture of poverty is part of the **larger culture of capitalism**, whose social and economic systems channels wealth into the hands of a relatively small group and thereby makes for the growth of sharp class distinctions.