Other Americas: Transnationalism, Scholarship, and the Culture of Poverty in Mexico and the United States

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The anthropologist Oscar Lewis first used the term "culture of poverty" in a 1959 article published in Mexico on rural migrants to Mexico City. The formulation became available in English in his 1959 book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*.[1] Within months, the idea that the poor had a distinct culture became part of a passionate, decade-long, worldwide debate about poverty. Scholars, policy makers, and broader publics discussed what caused poverty and how to remedy it. How entrenched were the class and racial differences that led to poverty? How did those differences affect a country's standing in the community of nations?

Lewis's initial formulation of a culture of poverty drew on his training as an anthropologist in the United States, his extensive dialogue with Mexican intellectuals, and his fieldwork in Mexico. Over the years, Lewis and others reformulated the notion in response to intense public controversies in Mexico and Puerto Rico; the vehement U.S. discussions surrounding the War on Poverty and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report on the Negro family; and larger events such as the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. civil rights movement, decolonization,

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1. Oscar Lewis, "La cultura de la vecindad en la Cuidad de México," *Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* (July–Sept. 1959): 349–64. Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

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the Vietnam War, and second-wave feminism.[2] This article tracks the concept of a culture of poverty as a way of probing the reciprocal, if unequal, connections between Mexico and the United States and their relation to national narratives and policy debates.[3]

U.S. participants in the debates on the culture of poverty drew from and created knowledge about the United States as they came to know the Mexican Other, a process that anthropologist Fernando Coronil has termed Occidentalism. In this process, they reified differences between the two nations and papered over the transnational connections out of which ideas about "Self" and "Other" emerged. Mexicans similarly drew on and constructed knowledge

2. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-action Social Science and Public Policy Report*, by Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 39–124.

3. For a transnational perspective on Lewis see Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002). On scholarly exchanges between Mexico and the United States see Ricardo Godoy, "Franz Boas and His Plans for an International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology in Mexico," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 13, no. 3 (July 1977): 228–42; Salomón Nahmad Sittón and Thomas Weaver, "Manuel Gamio, el primer antropólogo aplicado y su relación con la antropología norteamericana," *América Indígena* 50, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1990): 291–321; Guillermo de la Peña, "Nationals and Foreigners in the History of Mexican Anthropology," in *The Conditions of Reciprocal Understanding*, ed. James W. Fernandez and Milton B. Singer (Chicago: Center for International Studies, 1995), 276–303; Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, "Stereophonic Scientific Modernisms: Social Science between Mexico and the United States, 1880s–1930s," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (Dec. 1999): 1156–87; Jesus Velasco, "Reading Mexico, Understanding the United States: American Transnational Intellectuals in the 1920s and 1990s," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (Sept. 1999): 641–67; Casey Walsh, "Eugenic Acculturation: Manuel Gamio, Migration Studies, and the Anthropology of Development in Mexico, 1910–1940," *Latin American Perspectives* 138, no. 31 (2004): 118–45; Mechthild Rutsch, *Entre el campo y el gabinete: Nacionales y extranjeros en la profesionalización de la antropología mexicana (1877–1920)* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 2007). On the relation between peripheral and metropolitan anthropologies see Quetzil E. Castañeda, "Stocking's Historiography of Influence: The 'Story of Boas,' Gamio and Redfield at the Cross-'Road to Light,'" *Critique of Anthropology* 23, no. 3 (2003): 235–63; Fernando Coronil, "Transculturation and the Politics of Theory: Countering the Center, Cuban Counterpoint," introduction to *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, by Fernando Ortiz (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1995); Claudio Lomnitz, "Bordering on Anthropology," in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 228–62; Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, "Peripheral Anthropologies 'Versus' Central Anthropologies," *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4, no. 2 / 5, no. 1 (1999/2000): 10–31.

about Mexico's national character as they compared themselves to the United States. But, given differences of power between Mexico and the United States, Mexican attempts to reverse the U.S. gaze were qualitatively different from U.S. Occidentalism and produced a distinct kind of nationalism.[4] Nationally bounded public and scholarly conversations shaped transnational exchanges. Transnational conversations, in turn, produced differences, hierarchies, and national identities that were reflected in spatial divisions such as North–South and United States–Mexico.[5]

Recently, scholars such as Micol Seigel, Ann Stoler, and Frederick Cooper have shown how, by comparing certain things and ignoring others, scholars create and cement differences, especially national differences, and elevate the importance of the specific categories compared. Seigel, Stoler, and Cooper have argued that essentialized and often dichotomous views of race have been especially important in shaping the rigid notions of national character that have often resulted from comparison.[6] Yet, as Stoler points out, comparisons rest on notions of commensurability.[7] I argue here that comparison may lead to the

4. Fernando Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism: Towards Non-Imperial Geohistorical Categories," *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996): 51–87. By showing the impact of Mexico on the United States, I "provincialize" the United States and challenge narratives that give primacy to the West or North in global processes. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations*, no. 37 (Winter 1992): 1–26. See also Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997).

5. Nancy Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, "Introduction: Racial Nations," in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, ed. Nancy Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003); Micol Seigel, "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn," *Radical History Review* no. 91 (Winter 2005): 62–90; Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002); Sandhya Shukla and Heidi Tinsman, "Editors' Introduction," *Radical History Review* no. 89 (Spring 2004): 1–10. I am arguing not for national traditions but for nationally bounded circuits of debate. See Esteban Krotz, "Mexican Anthropology's Ongoing Search for Identity," *Ethnos* 47, no. 1 (1982).

6. Seigel, "Beyond Compare"; Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (Dec. 2001): 829–65; Frederick Cooper, "Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History," *American Historical Review* (October 1996): 1516–45. See also Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 41–58; John D. French, "The Missteps of Anti-Imperialist Reason: Bourdieu, Wacquant and Hanchard's *Orpheus and Power*," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 1 (2000): 107–28.

7. Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties."

assertion of similarity and to projections from one context to another (as in modernization theory). By contrast, lack of comparison may lead to strident assertions of singularity and hierarchy.

To understand the meaning and effects of comparison, and how audiences use ideas of similarity and difference for political ends, we need to pay attention to the specific contexts in which comparisons take place.[8] We also need to examine the categories that structure comparisons and transnational exchange, including race. Scholars and their readers used explicit and implicit notions of race both to delineate particular groups within and across national borders and to assert the similarity, or comparability, of those groups. Scholars, policy makers, and the broader reading public also used ideas about race both to affirm distinct and essentialized national identities and to stress the similarity of Mexico and the United States. By acknowledging the contingent and variegated nature of racial categories, this essay reveals the choices made by commentators who drew on reified ideas about race to stress national differences. Those choices often relied on specific conceptualizations of biology, visible bodily differences, and culture. They also invoked allied beliefs that have received less scholarly attention: ideas about personality, intelligence, and the self; about economic conditions; and about the role of historical legacies in shaping national character.[9]

As I argue below, scholars invoked certain ideas about the body and the mind and their relationship to culture, economy, and history to highlight the intransigence of class in Mexico and of race in the United States. Scholars also used these ideas to assert similarities across borders in ways that undermined essentialized ideas about nation. This ability to make connections across borders was made possible in part by the easy movement between explanations based on race and class; biology and environment; and historical, cultural, and economic determination and the agency of individuals. The key concept of *inheritance*—with its cultural, biological/genetic, and economic registers; its

8. Here I follow a suggestion made by Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism."

9. On race, culture, biology, and the body see Peter Wade, *Race, Nature and Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). Pioneering works on psychology and intelligence include Alexandra Minna Stern, "An Empire of Tests: Psychometrics and the Paradoxes of Nationalism in the Americas," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 325–43; Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts, 1940–1970* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996); Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997).

conflation of biology and environment; and its insistence on the centrality of family to cultural and economic processes—helped scholars and policy makers to move from race to class and to cross national borders. Many scholars adopted the view, prevalent in the United States, that biological race was immutable; other scholars saw class-based cultural inheritance as fixed; still others viewed as unchanging the entrenched economic inequalities that resulted from the historical legacy of colonialism. Some scholars saw biology as plastic and responsive to material conditions; some saw mental predispositions and cultural patterns as hard to dislodge. This essay tracks these positions, paying close attention to context, circulation, and change in the deployment of ideas.

Lewis's Training in the United States and First Encounter with Mexico

Lewis's initial culture of poverty formulation drew both from his anthropological training in the United States, which inclined him to see race as irrelevant in explaining social phenomena, and from his extensive contact with Mexican intellectuals. An avid fieldworker who spent long stretches in Mexico, Lewis first traveled there in 1943 with his wife and collaborator, Ruth Maslow Lewis. As the U.S. representative to the recently formed Inter-American Indigenous Institute (IAII, Instituto Indigenista Interamericano), Lewis translated articles for the Institute's journal, *América Indígena*. He also coordinated a team of Mexican professionals and students that investigated "the personality development of the Indian child with reference to sociological, biological, and ecological influences," the influence of government programs on child development, and the national state's effects on Indian self-government. The research, based in the village of Tepoztlán and supervised by a committee of noted Mexican scholars, was modeled after a project carried out in U.S. Southwest indigenous communities and was intended to provide a comparative complement to that study. Lewis and his team, like their U.S. counterparts, conducted surveys and interviews, recorded field observations, and applied psychological tests to gauge personality development and acculturation.[10] Through the psychological tests that Ruth and Oscar Lewis applied in Tepoztlán, Lewis first identified many of the traits he would later associate with the culture of poverty.

10. Oscar Lewis, "Memorandum on the Recent Progress of the Personality Study in Mexico," 28 Dec. 1943, Oscar Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives (hereafter cited as Oscar Lewis Papers), Correspondence 1942–1946 folder, box 107.

Lewis arrived in Mexico only three years after receiving his PhD from Columbia University. At Columbia, Lewis studied anthropology with Ruth Benedict, herself a student of Franz Boas. Benedict and Lewis came from a U.S. academic world that increasingly defined "culture" and "biology" as separate and independent. In the 1920s, as Mendelism became a dominant paradigm in the U.S. academy, scholars increasingly rejected the neo-Lamarckian view that acquired characteristics could be inherited. Anthropologists and other social scientists now distanced themselves from biology and argued for the primacy of culture. Boas and later Benedict were key figures in this transition. If prior generations of anthropologists had seen linguistic, biological, and cultural evolution as related, Lewis's and Benedict's generations would embrace ethnology as distinct from physical anthropology, in contrast to Boas but also following the path he cleared. Physical anthropology was for them biologically determinist and racist. Cultural anthropologists, including those who developed the research in the U.S. Southwest on which Lewis based his Tepoztlán work, concentrated on understanding the relation between individuals and cultures. Some enthusiasts of this "culture and personality" approach were more interested in how individuals replicated or deviated from their cultures. Others, such as Benedict, saw cultures as patterned, integral wholes. Benedict sought to distill the essences of cultures and specify their effects on individuals. She pioneered the study of national character.[11]

Despite their explicitly antiracist position, students of culture and personality incorporated key issues and methods of racial science. The idea that cultures and nations were bounded and could be characterized through certain essential traits reproduced elements of racial thinking, even when the essences posited were cultural rather than biological. Scholars now saw as cultures entities that had previously been characterized as races, including nations and Native American tribes. The "typing" of individuals—by measuring skeletons or IQs—had long been central to racial science. Students of culture and personality likewise aggregated measurements of individuals to determine the essences of cultures.

11. George W. Stocking Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), esp. 161–233; George W. Stocking Jr., *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1992); George W. Stocking Jr., ed., *Malinowski, Rivers, Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Hamilton Cravens, *Triumph of Evolution: The Heredity-Environment Controversy, 1900–1941* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988); Kathy J. Cooke, "The Limits of Heredity: Nature and Nurture in American Eugenics before 1915," *Journal of the History of Biology* no. 31 (June 1998): 263–78.

They tended to measure invisible personality traits rather than visible features. But, like racial thinkers, they were concerned with how to know if any given individual belonged to, or was representative of, a specific group. Scholars who embraced the culture and personality perspective focused principally on the family and child rearing as critical sites for the reproduction of culture and the formation of personality. While these scholars examined culture and socialization rather than biology and genes, they drew from racial paradigms a concern with inheritance and downplayed other aspects of the environment such as job markets, housing, and health care.

The professional proclivities of Ruth Lewis and her family no doubt helped attract Lewis to the culture and personality approach. Ruth Lewis's brother, the psychologist Abraham Maslow, had introduced Oscar to Ruth Benedict. (Along with Carl Rogers, Maslow went on to create humanistic psychology.) Ruth Lewis herself had studied psychology, and Oscar Lewis was chosen as the IAII's U.S. representative in part because Ruth was qualified to perform the psychological tests needed for the Tepotzlán project.[12]

Lewis, it must be noted, did not accept the culture and personality approach wholesale. His work was marked by an interest in economy, material culture, and history, as shown by his PhD dissertation, a historical study of commerce between Euro-Americans and Native Americans on the U.S. Plains. His Tepoztlán project included a wealth of historical research, and in this and later work Lewis emphasized economic conditions and material culture, taking inventories of the possessions of the poor. He carefully located his Tepoztlán subjects within the local class structure. A 1947 article by W. E. B. DuBois applauded Lewis's attention to class in Tepoztlán.[13] Lewis objected to the tendency of the culture and personality approach to produce inadequate generalizations, a problem that had plagued racial thinkers who searched for the essences of racial types. Studies of primitive cultures, Lewis noted, wrongly presumed cultural homogeneity and on that basis extracted generalizations about the culture from interviews with a few informants. Anthropologists, he lamented, had "come to deal more and more with averages and stereotypes rather than with real people

12. Susan M. Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 11.

13. Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Rôle of the Fur Trade* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1942). Oscar Lewis, "The Possessions of the Poor," *Scientific American* 221, no. 4 (Oct. 1969): 114–24. Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (1951; Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1963). W. E. B. DuBois, *Chicago Defender*, 30 Aug. 1947. DuBois was likely referring to Lewis's essay "Wealth Differences in a Mexican Village," *Scientific Monthly* 65, no. 2 (Aug. 1947): 127–32.

in all their individuality." In studying families, Lewis wished to highlight members' individuality and to avoid presenting individuals as "insubstantial and passive automatons who carry out expected behavior patterns." He wished to show that a range of behaviors and values could characterize any given culture and even individuals socialized by the same parents.[14] While Benedict had replaced the search for racial essences with the search for cultural and national essences, Lewis turned to examining the unique way each individual was formed by his or her culture and family.

Mexican Influences on Lewis

Lewis followed his Mexican colleagues in linking cultural and racial differences to economic development, class, and material culture. He collaborated on the Tepoztlán research with top Mexican scholars, including Manuel Gamio and Alfonso Caso, and over the years Lewis worked with many other Mexican professionals and Mexican anthropology students. Many of them were part of the heterogeneous and changing intellectual current known as *indigenismo.* Mexican indigenismo sought to uplift and redeem native peoples by integrating them politically and economically into the Mexican nation. *Indigenistas* glorified the achievements of native populations, especially the great Indian civilizations of the past. Yet they promoted *mestizaje* (cultural and biological mixing) as a way of inculcating in native peoples economic, political, and cultural habits that, though mixed and Mexican, they saw as more modern. Indigenistas were particularly concerned with promoting economic progress. Historian Alexander Dawson has recently argued that early state efforts to assimilate indigenous peoples to Euro-Mexican culture failed, generating a revised indigenismo that was more pluralist and tolerant of differences. Indigenistas, while still insisting that Spanish was important as a shared national language, began codifying, preserving, and teaching native languages. And as the Mexican scholar Luis Villoro suggests, indigenistas increasingly portrayed racial mixing as an unpredictable process rather than a march toward white European culture.

Manuel Gamio, the undisputed intellectual leader of Mexican indigenismo, was Lewis's boss at the IAII. Gamio advocated social engineering to retain what he believed were positive aspects of mestizo and indigenous cultures, especially languages and folk arts, and to jettison presumably negative elements, especially inefficient and backward economic practices. Influenced by the cultural pluralism of Boas, with whom he had studied at Columbia University, Gamio lamented

14. Oscar Lewis, "An Anthropological Approach to Family Studies," *American Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 5 (Mar. 1950): 470, 471.

that schools were ignorant of "complex intercultural problems" and taught only Western science and technology. He supported training teachers in "the history, ethnography, and even psychology of the indigenous population."[15]

Mexican indigenistas and Mexican intellectuals more generally sometimes referred to native peoples as "races," but, like an increasing number of social scientists in the United States, they sought to avoid the word. At times, they employed it as roughly synonymous with "peoples" or "nations"; at times, they used it (as Boas had) to mean "type" or "physical type." Gamio opened his now-classic *Forjando patria* (1916) by referring to the "virile races" that did battle in the Americas. He claimed that through the consequent "mixing and confusion of peoples, a miraculous alloy . . . was consummated," leading to a shared "blood" that ran throughout the American continent. Later he mentioned the "Latin" and "indigenous" races. Elsewhere in *Forjando patria*, Gamio spoke more of classes, cultures, and ethnicities than of races, almost always employing the term "race" in conjunction with these other terms. For instance, criticizing the scant ethnic diversity at a Pan-American scientific congress, Gamio noted that—in terms of race, language, and culture—participants represented only 25 percent of their home countries' population: they spoke Spanish and Portuguese and belonged to "a race and civilization of European origin." France and Germany were countries united in "race, culture, and language," in contrast with Mexico's "ethnic heterogeneity."[16] In short, Gamio did not separate biological race from concepts such as class, ethnicity, nationality, culture, and language. Lewis, as we will see, would follow U.S. social science in rejecting the relevance of biology. But his use of the term "culture" would conjure the multiple forms of difference so often equated by his Mexican colleagues.

The 1920 Mexican census had counted three "races" (indigenous, mixed, and white; Mexico's African American citizens remained invisible), but the 1930 census explicitly eschewed these labels and substituted indicators of material culture (footwear, bedding), food (tortillas versus bread), and language.[17] This

15. Alexander S. Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2004); Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1950); Manuel Gamio, "Población Indo-Mestiza," in *Acculturation in the Americas: Proceedings and Selected Papers*, ed. Sol Tax (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), 267–70. See also Alan Knight, "Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910–1940," in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990), 71–113.

16. Manuel Gamio, *Forjando patria (pro nacionalismo)* (Mexico City: Porrúa Hermanos, 1916), 3–4, 6, 9–10, 58.

17. Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, *Resumen del censo general de habitantes de 30 de noviembre de 1921* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1928), 62; Dirección

official excision of "race" did not fully expunge the term from the Mexican vocabulary. For instance, a 1937 indigenista study of proletarian schoolchildren noted that investigating morphological characteristics "did not at all imply an interest in racial problems." Yet the term "race" nonetheless crept into the work. The authors claimed that "papillary ridges . . . have racial characteristics," and that fingerprinting would therefore help gauge a person's "evolutionary stage, from a racial point of view."[18]

Class distinctions increasingly replaced, but also subsumed, racial distinctions in Mexican social science. Scholars considered poverty and economic deprivation as racial conditions and believed that economic uplift would do away with racial inequality, as Villoro has argued in his study of Mexican social thought. President Lázaro Cárdenas, speaking to the 1940 Inter-American Conference on Indian Life, which established the IAII, asserted: "More than their skin color, or external forms of political organization or artistic expressions . . . their position as an oppressed social class reveals the unity of the native peoples." Indigenista José Gómez Robleda equated racial fusion with economic leveling: "The progress of civilization—or the surmounting of material obstacles to the fusion of individuals that were until now distinct—and the destruction of economic barriers will without doubt lead to the homogenization of humanity and destroy racial differences."[19]

More generally, Mexican social science increasingly adopted class labels, characterizing rural indigenous peoples, especially in communities where indigenous languages and/or dress were not widely used, as economically deprived "campesinos" (peasants). The city presumably uprooted differences. Urban migrants therefore became "proletarians," and urban migration could help create a united, and modern, Mexican nation. Oscar Lewis's own research retraced this trajectory away from race. Having gone to Mexico to study an indigenous community, he ended up studying Tepoztlán, a town in the process of becoming "mestizo." Lewis documented material and cultural change: the paving of the road connecting Tepoztlán to the Cuernavaca–Mexico City highway, the

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General de Estadística, *Sexto censo de población 1940, resumen general* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Estadística, 1943), 34–35.

18. Secretaría de Educación Pública, Departamento de Psicopedagogía Médico Escolar, Instituto Nacional de Psicopedagogía, *Características biológicas de los escolares proletarios* (Mexico City: n.p., 1937), 8, 63, 64.

19. Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo.* Lázaro Cárdenas, "Los indígenas, factor de progreso" (1940), in *La antropología social aplicada en México: Trayectoria y antología*, ed. Juan Comas (Mexico City: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1976), 136. Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Características biológicas*, 274.

rise of Spanish and decline of Nahuatl, and the increasing prevalence of modern over traditional dress. In later research, Lewis followed Tepoztecans to Mexico City, where they became just Mexican and poor. His object of study ostensibly became their poverty, which he linked to culture rather than ethnicity or race.

Race and Biology: Divergent Views

Though Lewis's research converged in certain ways with Mexican social science, his relations with Mexican colleagues were filtered through his allegiance to the questions and approaches he brought with him from the United States. In the United States, social scientists associated physical anthropology with racial science. In contrast, Mexican social scientists' aversion to racial labels did not diminish their interest in peoples' physical condition. By the late 1930s, this concern was articulated through "biotypology," a science that measured the physique, physiology, psychological character, and intelligence of diverse groups; determined their most statistically salient characteristics; and categorized them based on those measurements. As historian Alexandra Minna Stern has noted, biotypology allowed Mexican social scientists to embrace Mendelian inheritance partially while still accepting key elements of the now-discredited neo-Lamarckism, especially that biological heredity and environment were equally important and interrelated. Biotypologist Gómez Robleda questioned prevailing views that physical characteristics were "constitutional" and hard to transform while mental characteristics were "temperamental" and easily changed. For him, an individual's physique was not always part of an innate, unchangeable, genetically transmitted inheritance. Instead, the body was plastic, and food, education, and environment interacted with natural endowments to shape both the soma and physiological processes. Gómez Robleda distinguished hereditary, persistent characteristics from acquired, variable ones but believed that only statistical analysis could determine if a characteristic was persistent and therefore "racial." In his view, persistent and hereditary traits, manifested in psyche and body, were what constituted "race." Bodily traits, per se, did not.[20]

Mexican biotypology had much in common with the constitutional and psychosomatic medicine then current in the United States and with the North

20. Alexandra Minna Stern, "From Mestizophilia to Biotypology: Racialization and Science in Mexico, 1920–1960," in Appelbaum, Macpherson, and Rosemblatt, *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, 187–209. Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Características biológicas*, 272–73.

American field of biopsychology. All of these fields stressed relationships among environment, body, and mind, making room for the inherited elements of constitution but also recognizing the interactions of body and mind with each other and with social and natural settings. Members of the U.S. research team whose work provided the prototype for Lewis's Mexico project embraced biopsychology; Lewis did not.[21]

In Mexico, the persistence of the belief that environment molded biology helped keep physical and cultural anthropology joined to each other and to archeology and linguistics. To Lewis, steeped in a U.S. cultural anthropology that dissociated itself from biology and race and therefore from physical anthropology, this rapprochement seemed old-fashioned and racist. Complaining in a letter to a U.S. colleague that Mexican social sciences were "years behind the U.S.," Lewis called Gamio unfamiliar with "recent developments," ignorant of the critical culture and personality texts, and enamored of his "beloved 'biotypology.'" To please Gamio and physical anthropologist Juan Comas, both of whom were members of the committee supervising Lewis at Tepoztlán, a physical anthropology component had been added to the research plan. (Apparently, this research was never carried out.) But Lewis believed this physical anthropology research was unnecessary because a medical doctor was already on the research team. "I felt . . . that Gamio was just on the verge of seeing the relative unimportance of cephalic indices in cultural studies, but he must have relapsed to the old Mexican tradition of which he has been a part for so many years."[22] Lewis failed to understand that, for the Mexicans, physical markers of Indianness included illness, and those markers were important precisely because "a medical doctor" or teacher, and state policies more generally, might address them. Believing in the superiority of the U.S. social science he had learned, Lewis evaded questions about the relation of person and environment that would later be central to criticism of his work.

The research design for Tepoztlán had originally incorporated elements of biotypology and biopsychology, aiming to gather data on the natural, economic, sociocultural, and historical environment on the one hand, and the psyche and

21. Sarah W. Tracy, "An Evolving Science of Man: The Transformation and Demise of American Constitutional Medicine, 1920–1950," in *Greater Than the Parts: Holism in Biomedicine, 1920–1950*, ed. Christopher Lawrence and George Weisz (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988); Alexander H. Leighton, *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964), 250.

22. Oscar Lewis to Laura Thompson, 28 Dec. 1943, Oscar Lewis Papers, Personality Study Correspondence 1944–1976 folder, box 107.

soma on the other. But where his Mexican collaborators stressed the impact of the environment on the body and mind, Lewis himself jettisoned all reference to biology and found it difficult to reconcile the two remaining "related but somewhat distinct objectives," namely the sociohistorical study of government policy's impact on politics and culture, and the study of personality.[23] His published book reflected this failure to reconcile these approaches: one section discussed history and social structure; another addressed interpersonal relations. Despite his research on social, economic, and historical contexts and on material culture and daily life, Lewis's later writing increasingly focused on individual psychology. Lewis could not integrate analysis of economic conditions and history (much less biology and the body) with attention to the psychology of the self, although he never abandoned attention to economic conditions. Later U.S. discussions of the culture of poverty would reject Lewis's attention to psychology. But they, too, failed to draw connections between economic conditions and other aspects of the environment, on the one hand, and interpersonal and familial relations, on the other.

Views on the Mexican Psyche and History

If Lewis's continuing emphasis on psychology reflected the popularity of the culture and personality paradigm and the long-standing interest in socialization within U.S. anthropology, it also drew strength from a growing Mexican interest in psychology. Spurred by Erich Fromm's immigration to Mexico in 1950, the publication of Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* the same year, and the return to Mexico of psychoanalysts trained in Argentina and at Columbia University, Mexico's first psychoanalytic groups formed at the time Lewis was first conducting field research in Mexico City in the 1950s. Lewis interacted with pioneering Mexican analysts: he enlisted Fromm to interpret a set of 300 dreams he collected in Tepoztlán (though the work was never completed), and he collaborated with analytic psychologist Carolina Luján on projective tests of subjects in *Five Families* and later works.[24]

Mexican psychoanalysts stressed the relationship of psychology to history

23. Lewis, "Memorandum on the Recent Progress."

24. Humberto Durán C., "El psicoanálisis en México: Entrevista a Santiago Ramírez," http://www.cartapsi.org/mexico/entsan.htm (accessed 19 May 2005); Juan José Sánchez Sosa and Pablo Valderrama-Iturbe, "Psychology in Latin America: Historical Reflections and Perspectives," *International Journal of Psychology* 36, no. 6 (2001): 391. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude . . .* , trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (1950; New York: Grove Press, 1985); Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 64–65, 71 n. 36.

and an engrained national character rooted in colonialism. For instance, psychiatrist Santiago Ramírez, who exchanged letters with Lewis, suggested in *El mexicano: Psicologia de sus motivaciones* that Mexican history was sedimented in the Mexican psyche and Mexican national character. For Ramírez, like Paz, Mexican masculinity was troubled. Mexican men—born metaphorically of rape or the illegitimate union of conquistador and indigenous consort and abandoned by their fathers—learned a defensive, reactive, and violent masculinity. They also felt ambivalence and resentment toward father or authority figures, including presumably superior nations such as Spain, France, and the United States.[25]

The psychologically oriented studies of the 1950s on Mexican national character did not foreground race per se. They linked Mexico's inferiority to its lack of technology or consumer goods as often as to its racial character. References to race were embedded, however, in texts describing the originary meeting of Spanish and indigenous cultures, or "blood," and the difficulties of forging a healthy national identity from ethnic inequality. In a 1951 book that opened Lewis's eyes to the possibility that the urban poor were pathologically disorganized, author José Iturriaga equated the harmonious racial and cultural mixing of Spanish and indigenous peoples with a homogeneous middle class. He argued from history, viewing change as possible, if difficult:

> As our country matures, a preference for the indigenous angle of our mestizaje becomes stronger, and, at the same time, the figure of Cortes is still polemical. . . . [O]ur two bloods will not rest until the 2 and a half million bilingual and monolingual Indians [*indígenas*] are perfectly melded into the middling cultural level and the middle economic level of the country; and, perforce then we will be able to recognize him [Cortes] as one of our grandfathers, as he in reality is.

Despite indigenous peoples' geographical isolation, economic inferiority, and "cultural and linguistic endogamy," economic integration would improve native peoples' material conditions. Echoing Gamio, Iturriaga maintained that economic, technical, and cultural mixture could and should "conserve the positive values of the aboriginal culture."[26]

25. Santiago Ramírez, *El mexicano: Psicología de sus motivaciones* (Mexico City: Editorial Pax-México, 1959). The correspondence between Lewis and Ramírez can be found in Oscar Lewis Papers, Santiago Ramírez folder, box 58.

26. José E. Iturriaga, *La estructura social y cultural de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951), 227–28, 109–10, cited by Lewis in "Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study," *Scientific American* 75, no. 1 (July 1952): 41.

Lewis for the most part rejected these Mexican studies of national character. He chided Ramírez for his attempted "historical reconstruction . . . of the psychological conditions of a whole class of women," who must have exhibited "quite a range of variation." Yet Lewis shared with Ramírez and others the view that Mexico's colonial history had bred pathology, writing in his 1961 book *Children of Sánchez* that the culture of poverty was a response to colonialism (as well as contemporary capitalism).[27]

This, then, was the context that shaped Lewis's initial formulation of the culture of poverty. If Lewis rejected the overgeneralizing nature of a U.S. academic approach based on culture and personality, he nevertheless asked similar questions: What was the relation of individuals to their cultures? How did cultures reproduce themselves through child rearing? Lewis also adopted aspects of both U.S. and Mexican national character studies. Despite deriding generalizations based on insufficient data, he sometimes slipped into generalizing language, calling his life histories "portraits of contemporary Mexican life." Although each of the five families he studied was, in his words, "unique" and represented "a world of its own," each also reflected "something of the changing Mexican culture." Lewis was especially prone to adopting psychoanalytic analyses of Mexican machismo, considering it a prime example of a trait that reflected "national and class cultural values." Specifically citing Mexican psychiatrists and their work on the "absent father," Lewis followed Luján in arguing that Mexican men identified with the mother figure, the lower-status parent.[28]

Lewis also adopted the Mexican view that ethnic and racial differences were dying out as the nation developed and left behind its colonial past. Echoing the characteristics that signaled ethnic and racial identity in Mexico's 1930 census and Mexicans' view of technological innovation as critical to modernization, Lewis wrote in *Five Families*: "More and more rural people sleep on beds instead of on the ground, wear shoes instead of huaraches or instead of going barefoot, use store-bought pants instead of the homemade white *calzones*, eat bread in addition to *tortillas*."[29] The notion that national economic development would erase the backward cultural practices that were remnants of a colonial history, a

27. Oscar Lewis to Santiago Ramírez, 7 Apr. 1959, Oscar Lewis Papers, Santiago Ramírez folder, box 58. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (1961; New York: Vintage, 1963), xxv.

28. Lewis, *Five Families*, 5, 6, 16, 18. In making these arguments, Lewis drew on Santiago Ramírez and Ramón Parres, "Some Dynamic Patterns in the Organization of the Mexican Family," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 3, no. 1 (June 1957): 18–21; and his correspondence with Luján, parts of which are reproduced in Rigdon, *Culture Facade.*

29. Lewis, *Five Families*, 7.

view Lewis acquired from Mexican scholars, likely encouraged Lewis to characterize the cultural differences he observed among the poor as a departure from national, and increasingly modern, norms.

Controversy Erupts in Mexico

Lewis was careful to call the cultural differences he observed among the poor a "subculture," rather than a national "culture" of poverty. He was also careful to argue that the culture of poverty sprung from the colonial past and global capitalism rather than any contemporary failings of the Mexican nation. His references to national character nonetheless prompted certain Mexican readers to criticize Lewis for his imperialist affront to Mexico.

Negative reactions to Lewis's work were muted at first. The Spanish version of *Five Families* caused little controversy when it appeared in Mexico in 1961, and Lewis's first book on Tepoztlán was not published in Mexico until 1968.[30] But in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and the Bay of Pigs invasion, mounting U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and U.S. civil rights struggles, the 1964 publication of *Hijos de Sánchez* caused a furor. In the context of the long-standing and increasingly evident U.S. presence in Mexico, a group of conservative Mexican intellectuals reacted to Lewis's work by articulating an anti-imperialist nationalism that foregrounded differences between Mexico and the United States. Other intellectuals rebutted that view. Picking up on Lewis's contention that the culture of poverty was a worldwide phenomenon linked to capitalist development, they outlined a less nationalist position and stressed the need to recognize inequality in both North and South.

The controversy over *Hijos de Sánchez*—a book that used first-person narratives to chronicle the lives of Jesús Sánchez and his children—began six months after the publication of the Mexican edition. Luis Cataño Morlet, secretary general of the Society of Geography and Statistics and a former judge of the Mexico City Superior Court, criticized the book at a talk sponsored by the society. Cataño Morlet objected to the crude language of the narratives, the foregrounding of sexuality and literal dirt, and the unfavorable portrayals of police and state officials. Some parts of the book, particularly Manuel Sánchez's statement that Mexico would be better off governed by a U.S. president, seemed so un-Mexican that Cataño Morlet assumed Lewis had fabricated them. Like Cataño Morlet, members of the audience at his talk were outraged that a for-

30. Arnaldo Orfila Reynal to Oscar Lewis, 17 Nov. 1961, Oscar Lewis Papers, Arnaldo Orfila Reynal folder, box 59.

eigner had published such an affront, and they urged the society to file charges before the courts. Several days later, the organization's leaders formally accused Lewis of the crime of "social dissolution." They asked Lewis's publisher, the state-funded Fondo de Cultura Económica, not to reprint the book. This action sparked a riotous debate on radio and television: some 583 articles appeared in the press in 43 days; a left-wing student forum at the Escuela de Economía drew between 700 and 1,500 spectators; and an event at the Ateneo Español held the audience for three and a half hours.[31]

Cataño Morlet and his supporters believed Lewis wanted to assert U.S. superiority over Mexico and that he had lied to do so. They claimed that the poor were less uncouth, the police less brutal, and the government less corrupt than Lewis had suggested.[32] The critics emphasized tourism and the upcoming 1968 Mexico City Olympics, noting the harm the book would do to Mexico's economy and international image.[33] Although themselves right-wing and anti-Communist, they compared Lewis's actions to those of the United States in Vietnam, a violation of national sovereignty.[34] Cataño Morlet even stated that he would prefer the criticisms of a "Russian" to those of a "yanqui."[35] Critics also likened Lewis's tape-recording of interviews to espionage, accusing the anthropologist of being an FBI agent—an extreme irony given the FBI's continuing investigation of Lewis for his presumed anti-U.S., Communist sympathies.[36] These critics took Lewis's book as a description of Mexico rather than

31. Lewis's collection of reviews, which forms the basis of my discussion below, can be found in Oscar Lewis Papers, *Children of Sánchez* Mexican Reviews folder, box 2. See "Los escritores y el periodismo defienden el derecho a la libertad de expresión," *La Gaceta: Publicación del Fondo de Cultura Económica*, Mar. 1965; "Más polémicas por el libro de Lewis," *Excelsior*, 12 Feb. 1965; "Agria disputa en la mesa redonda sobre la obra Los Hijos de Sánchez," *El Día*, 5 Mar. 1965; "Censuras, elogios y risas, en una reunión sobre 'Los Hijos de Sánchez,'" *Excelsior*, 14 Mar. 1965.

32. "Los Hijos de Sánchez han sido," *Novedades*, 22 Feb. 1965, p. 10.

33. "Texto de la denuncia de la Sociedad de Geografía y Estadística sobre el libro de Oscar Lewis," *El Día*, 12 Feb. 1965; "Censuras, elogios y risas."

34. On Vietnam, "Intelectuales y editores opinan sobre la denuncia en torno al libro de Lewis," *El Día*, 13 Feb. 1965; "Agria disputa."

35. "Más polémicas."

36. "Texto de la denuncia"; "Comentarios al libro Los hijos de Sánchez," *El Día*, 17 Feb. 1965; "Sorpresa por la acusación contra el escritor O. Lewis," *El Universal Gráfico*, 18 Feb. 1964, p. 18; "Que Lewis era un agente de la F.B.I.," *ABC*, 20 Feb. 1965, p. 3; "Reitera la Sociedad de Geografía los cargos al escritor Oscar Lewis," 20 Feb. 1965. David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 237–54.

as a denunciation of poverty. They viewed Lewis as representing U.S. national interests and, labeling his book imperialist, they created a triumphalist Mexican nationalism that did not admit criticism—at least not by foreigners.

Mexican opponents of the society's position included prominent intellectuals such as Rosario Castellanos, Carlos Fuentes, and Carlos Monsiváis and other notable social scientists and psychoanalysts. These opponents did not so much defend Lewis as argue that Mexico's problems had to be acknowledged. They also pointed out that Mexican authors had previously questioned the revolution's unfulfilled promises.[37] One scathing parody was Monsiváis's mock film script of *Hijos*, depicting Cataño Morlet's Mexico: a world of flawless poor people and of sensitive and generous government, where the teetotalling, chaste Sánchezes drank soda water, played golf, and spoke perfect Castilian. Workers could afford Paris vacations, and people praised the police and encountered courteous, efficient bureaucrats.[38] In other publications, psychoanalysts probed the "defense mechanisms" that made upper-class Mexicans deny their country's problems, implying that poverty was a painful and repressed aspect of the Mexican national Self. Still other opponents of the society equated its actions with racial, political, and religious intolerance, calling its members "*macartitos*" (little McCarthyites), Inquisitors, and Ku Klux Klansmen who perpetrated "lynchings" and "witch hunts."[39] These rebuttals chastised the society for denying class inequality, an attitude they portrayed as aggravating discrimination within the nation. They created a picture of a Mexico divided by class and cultural differences. Moreover, by equating the society's denial of class difference with anti-Communism, religious intolerance, and racial discrimination, they equated injustices across a variety of national contexts and even across time. Furthermore, they recognized that inequality had cultural as well as economic dimensions. This group of intellectuals characterized Lewis's detractors as jingoistic ("*patrioteros*"). Poverty was a universal problem, they insisted, so com-

37. "Nuevas opiniones en torno a la denuncia"; Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "¿El estudio de la pobreza es ciencia subversiva?" *Mañana*, 6 Mar. 1965, p. 5; "¿Es falso el México que vio Oscar Lewis en Los hijos de Sánchez? América, ante la maldita sociología," *¡Siempre!* ca. 24 Mar. 1965.

38. Carlos Monsiváis, "Vástagos del decoro," n.p., 10 Mar. 1965.

39. "Hablan Flores Olea y Fuentes sobre la denuncia contra Oscar Lewis," *El Día*, 15 Feb. 1965. Francisco López Cámara, "Los hijos de Sánchez ante la Inquisición," n.p., n.d.; "Santo remedio," *Ovaciones*, 21 Feb. 1965. "¿Linchamos a los hijos de Sánchez?" *Siempre*, 10 Mar. 1965. The term "witch hunt" is used in "¿Vamos a cazar brujas?" *Siempre*, 10 Mar. 1964, p. 33.

passion, concern, and activism should cross national borders.[40] Lewis himself observed that U.S. readers had responded to his work with great sympathy for Mexico, not disdain or imperial hubris.[41]

Opponents of the society did not deny the power of the United States or the privileges of its citizens. Many pointed to poverty in the United States, asking why Lewis did not look closer to home. Others suggested that his work demanded consideration of broader North–South inequalities. Foundation grants had allowed Lewis to study Mexico; Mexican social scientists were not so fortunate. In a Mexican mock ethnography, anthropologist "Luis Oscar Sánchez" portrayed "*los hijos de Jones*," a wealthy U.S. family, highlighting how vices operated across social classes and national boundaries. The Joneses were frivolous, apathetic, and often drunk. Father Jones told the Mexican anthropologist: "I've heard that *south of the border* you handle all this much better. You have one party that always wins and you know the results beforehand; you don't waste time with *handshakin* and *baby-kissin*, TV debates and electronic equipment . . . . Here in New York . . . there's no unity. There's no *leadership*. I imagine things are different in Mexico. I might even dare suggest that we have a Mexican President here in the United States. . . ."[42] Beyond emphasizing widespread portrayals of the United States as wealthy and Mexico as poor, the parody suggested that vice existed in the United States and among the rich and was not a matter of nationality and/or class. And it brought to light the inequalities that made it impossible for Mexicans to study the United States or for the poor to study the rich. Recognizing these inequalities, Lewis told Mexican collaborators that it was "high time some Mexican anthropologist came up to study our slums, our Negro problem, our migrant workers, etc. etc. I would personally help such a scholar get a grant from a Foundation."[43]

In the Mexican debate on the culture of poverty, then, a triumphalist nationalism that posited a united, homogeneous Mexican nation confronted a more cosmopolitan approach to poverty, one that acknowledged both the privileges that allowed U.S. scholars to study Mexico, and difference and inequality

40. "Los hermanos de Sánchez," *El Día*, 15 Feb. 1965. Rosario Castellanos, "Intelectuales y editores opinan sobre la denuncia en torno al libro de Lewis," *El Día*, 13 Feb. 1965.

41. See, for instance, the sources cited in footnote 48 below.

42. "Los hijos de Jones," *Mañana*, 6 Mar. 1965. Italicized terms were boldface in the original.

43. Oscar Lewis to Julio de la Fuente, 24 Oct. 1961, Oscar Lewis Papers, Julio de la Fuente folder, box 55.

within Mexico. Lewis's right-wing critics defined Mexico in opposition to the United States, using comparison to deflect sustained attention to the Mexican national Self. By contrast, left-wing opponents of the society's position assumed that the problem of poverty required a political solution, and they used the debate to expose the ruling party's lack of attention to poverty.

Participants in Mexico's debate on the culture of poverty alluded, often obliquely, to the racial coordinates of poverty. José Domingo Lavín, the society's president, associated race and the culture of the poor with Mexicanness, declaring that *Hijos* showed the "moral, economic, and cultural level" of Mexico as inferior to "African tribes." One author opposing the society invoked colonialism to explain a variety of persisting racial, cultural, and economic differences: conquest had created in Mexican society deep rifts between "*pelados*" (impoverished rural migrants to Mexico City) and decent people, black and white, the poor and those with resources adequate for survival. A journalist found the "real" Jesús Sánchez; he described him as "short, dark [*moreno*], and with indigenous characteristics [*rasgos*]."[44] These muted expressions likely reflected views on poverty that were more stridently racial and racist than mainstream Mexican public discourse.

In the public debate, however, neither side saw poverty and its presumed cultural manifestations as either so inherited or so entrenched that they could not be addressed by state policies, and neither saw the causes of or the solutions to poverty as lying with the poor. Mexican psychoanalysts, who believed in the historically embedded nature of Mexican racial-national character, counseled that the negative effects of poverty might be harder to root out than many admitted.[45] But the central questions in Mexico's debate were not about whether the government could address poverty or how. Rather, debate circled around how Mexicans would come to terms with U.S.-Mexican cultural and economic proximity, and how that might—or might not—cloud Mexicans' attempts to understand their country, its inhabitants, and their problems. The central issue was whether Mexico could defend its sovereignty and dignity and at the same time recognize poverty and difference. By contrast, participants in U.S. debates

44. "Reitera la Sociedad de Geografía los cargos al escritor Oscar Lewis," *Excelsior*, 20 Feb. 1965. Fernando Benítez, "El drama nacional de los hijos de Sánchez," Suplemento de *Siempre*, 10 Mar. 1965. "¡Los hijos de Sánchez han sido localizados!" *Novedades*, 22 Feb. 1965.

45. Francisco González Pineda, cited in "Debate en la tribuna de la juventud," *La Gaceta: Publicación del Fondo de Cultura Económica* 12, no. 127 (Mar. 1965); González Pineda in "Censuras, elogios y risas."

would eventually come to equate poverty with race and an entrenched culture that presumably could not be addressed by state policy.

Readers Respond

Cataño Morlet and his supporters feared readers of Lewis's work would use it to affirm national differences and U.S. superiority. But, as Lewis suggested, his vivid, first-person narratives prompted many U.S. as well as Mexican readers to reflect on poverty and racism in the United States and to think about U.S. responsibilities toward Mexico. Readers of Lewis's books drew parallels between Mexico and the United States and between different forms of class inequality and racial discrimination. For instance, letters from readers to Lewis alluded to the Sánchez and Castro families featured in *Five Families* and to Lewis's *Children of Sánchez*. Phil Rude of Guanajuato, Mexico, wrote: "I wonder how does the 'poor white trash' of the United States 'live?' Has anyone studied the 'Redneck?' The skidrow family of the urban poor? How about male hypergamy in the U.S.A.? Would the picture be like the Castros? I think there is good reason to believe that the people of the U.S.A. do not even know their own 'Children of Sanders.' And I don't mean the negro." Kyle Myer, an eighteen-year-old from Ohio, proposed that Lewis "further the awareness of the 'culture of poverty' [by publishing] . . . a similar personal narrative of a ghetto family in Watts or Harlem, or of a transplanted Appalachian family in Chicago or in Kentucky." And Porfirio Lemus Mendoza, a Mexican, wrote: "Well Mr. Lewis, haven't you stopped to think that charity starts at home? You are the richest country in the world, you boast about your riches . . . . Professor: I think you have visited Texas, Arizona, California, and many other States in your country where there is more hunger and misery than we Latin Americans have."[46]

Rude and Lemus reasserted national difference when they countered the notion that Mexico was inferior to the United States with the suggestion that the United States was more depraved and perhaps had greater poverty than Mexico. But we can also read in these letters a lack of firm distinction between Mexico and the United Sates. Myers and Lemus marked off geographical differences within the United States, and Lemus mentioned "Texas, Arizona, California," parts of the United States that were more Mexican and, like Mexico, more "Indian." Kyle and Rude singled out black poverty as a uniquely U.S. problem

46. Phil Rude to Oscar Lewis, 2 Sept. 1964; Kyle Myer to Oscar Lewis, 7 Nov. 1968; and Porfirio Lemus Mendoza to Oscar Lewis, 7 Oct. 1966, all in Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail c. 1962–1970 folder, box 56.

even as they posited equivalences among U.S. blacks, impoverished whites in the United States, and the Mexican poor.

Some readers who wrote to Lewis warned that his books might lead U.S. readers to view Mexicans, or the Puerto Rican families featured in Lewis's 1966 *La Vida*, as Other. They believed, as Lewis's Mexican critics had, that Lewis's books would be understood as representing all Mexicans or all Puerto Ricans and that the negative aspects of his subjects' lives that Lewis described would overshadow their humanity and warmth.[47] But most U.S. readers expressed a deep compassion for Lewis's subjects. A group of Indiana junior high school students wrote: "[We have] read about the Gomez and Martinez families and their problems and we have an idea for them to earn more money." Reverend Anthony di Russo wrote from a Colorado monastery that he wanted to send money, shoes, and clothes. Several readers asked to work with Lewis and meet real "Sanchez's."[48] In some cases, solidarity veered into paternalism. Some readers were subtly judgmental. Quite a few linked Lewis's account to their own, often sensational, travel and study experiences.[49] Still, for every representation of Mexico or Puerto Rico as distant and exotic, there was an expression of deep empathy.

Lewis's 1964 book *Pedro Martínez* recounted the life of a Tepoztlán peasant who fought in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Reviews of that book characterized the Mexican peasant experience as alien for U.S. readers, and reviewers alluded frequently to the Cold War and U.S. foreign (rather than domestic) policy. One reviewer called *Pedro Martínez* "a superb short course and textbook on the Twentieth Century's revolutionary man." Though according to the reviewer the book was of no use in understanding a U.S. "hoe hand," it could provide "insight into the mind of the peasant embroiled in the upheavals of Cuba, Viet Nam, Laos, and nobody wants to think of how many more areas in the next 20 years." This author, like Lewis's Mexican critics, viewed Lewis's work on the peasantry through the optic of imperial conflict, stressing conflict

47. Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty — San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966). Wm. Walter Duncan to Mr. John Barkham, 23 Sept. 1966, Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail 1966–1969 folder, box 56; Pedro A. Perez Jr. to Oscar Lewis, 7 Dec. 1966, Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan mail 1962–1970 folder, box 56.

48. Sixth Grade Class of Jimtown Junior High School to Oscar Lewis, 7 Jan. 1971, Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail: Posthumous 1970–1976 folder, box 56. Rev. Anthony di Russo to Oscar Lewis, n.d., Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail c. 1962–1970 folder, box 56.

49. Patricia R. Wofford to Oscar Lewis, 13 Mar. 1972, Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail: Posthumous 1970–1976 folder, box 56; Dr. Solomon Goldhirsch to Oscar Lewis, 19 Dec. 1962, Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail c. 1962–1970 folder, box 56.

and national difference, exacerbated by Cold War struggle. But *Children of Sánchez*, the same review noted, offered a worthwhile "guide through the mind of Harlem man."[50]

More generally, U.S. readers of Lewis's books set in urban areas related Lewis's reportage to more proximate settings. Educators and welfare workers connected Lewis's books to their experiences with poor Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the United States.[51] One reader characterized the War on Poverty as a domestic equivalent of the Alliance for Progress.[52] In response, perhaps, to such comments and to the Mexican debate around his work, Lewis considered doing research on U.S. African American migration to northern cities.[53] He ended up studying Puerto Ricans. His final work, on Cuba, challenged the view that the socialist world was so different from the capitalist that it could not be studied by asking similar questions.[54]

The Eclipse of Mexico and the Rise of U.S. Black Poverty as Problem

Lewis's books intervened in a broader U.S. discussion of poverty that had begun to simmer with the publication in 1958 of John Kenneth Galbraith's *Affluent Society*. A 1959 *Commentary* article by Michael Harrington followed, presumably inspired by Lewis's *Five Families*. In 1960, James Agee and Walker Evan's

50. Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Random House, 1964). *Delta Democrat*, 21 June 1964, Oscar Lewis Papers, Reviews of Pedro Martinez American Reviews folder, box 20. See also "Father of a Rural Mexican Family Interviewed by an Anthropologist," *New Haven Register*, n.d., Oscar Lewis Papers, Reviews of Pedro Martinez American Reviews folder, box 20; Robert E. Scott to Oscar Lewis, 9 May 1963, Pedro Martinez Correspondence with Readers folder, box 117.

51. Anna-Louise MacNeil to Oscar Lewis, 7 Dec. 1966; Marilyn Reis [?] to Oscar Lewis, 16 Mar. 1967; "The Culture of Poverty: A Review by Enid A. Larson, Pleasant Hill High School"; Dorothy Sue Burman to Oscar Lewis, 10 Feb. 1964; all in Oscar Lewis Papers, Fan Mail 1962–1970 folder, box 56.

52. Raymond W. Mack, review of *Pedro Martinez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family*, *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Apr. 1964, Oscar Lewis Papers, Reviews of Pedro Martinez American Reviews folder, box 20. The Alliance for Progress was a program of U.S. foreign assistance instituted in 1961. It sought collaboration between the United States and Latin American nations to reduce poverty and diminish the appeal of revolutionary social movements.

53. "Mito y realidad de la pobreza en la vida cotidiana del mexicano," *¡Siempre!* 19 June 1963, p. iv, Oscar Lewis Papers, *Children of Sánchez* Mexican Reviews folder, box 2.

54. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977).

1941 book on sharecroppers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was reissued.[55] In this context, Lewis's subsequent books attracted a broad audience. He appeared on radio and television, and Italian film director Vittorio de Sica planned to make *Children of Sánchez* into a film. Lewis's 1966 book *La Vida* became a best seller and won a National Book Award.[56]

The poverty debate had already come to a boil by 1963, when President John F. Kennedy, apparently influenced by a review of Harrington's *The Other America* (a popular 1962 book that expanded on his *Commentary* piece), instructed Walter Heller, then chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisors, to study the possibility of an antipoverty program.[57] Lewis's culture of poverty formulation thus entered the policy world indirectly, mediated by the work of U.S. scholars. This made it easy for politicians to ignore the Mexican context of the original work.

Although policy makers focused on the culture of poverty as a theoretical construct, attention to this aspect of Lewis's work was hardly inevitable. Few lay readers of Lewis's work had much to say about the introductions to his books, where the author laid out his theory of a culture of poverty, and even many scholars overlooked the theoretical formulation. In 1967, 16 international scholars commented in the journal *Current Anthropology* on Lewis's ideas and methods; their applicability to places such as Australia, India, or Africa; and the wisdom of using case studies to generalize. The scholars barely mentioned the concept of a culture of poverty.[58]

55. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958). Michael Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor: Forgotten Men of the Affluent Society," *Commentary* 28, no. 1 (July 1959): 19–27. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960). I have not found direct evidence that Harrington read Lewis. The connection is alleged in Edwin Eames and Judith Goode, "On Lewis' Culture of Poverty Concept," *Current Anthropology* 11, nos. 4–5 (Oct.–Dec. 1970): 479; Douglas Butterworth, "Oscar Lewis 1914–1970," *American Anthropologist* 74, no. 3 (June 1972): 747–57; Oscar Lewis to Richard Morse, 23 Nov. 1965, Oscar Lewis Papers, Richard Morse folder, box 56.

56. On the film project see Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 149 n. 8.

57. Dwight MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor," *New Yorker* 38, no. 48 (19 Jan. 1963): 82–132. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). Nicholas Lemann mentions that Kennedy had read MacDonald; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 130. See also Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 82.

58. Review forum on *The Children of Sánchez*, *Pedro Martínez*, and *La Vida*, by Oscar Lewis, *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5, pt. 1 (Dec. 1967): 480–500. See also Eames and Goode, "On Lewis' Culture of Poverty Concept," 479.

By contrast, the U.S. public intellectuals involved in the War on Poverty debates zeroed in on the culture of poverty. At the same time, as U.S. African American mobilizations escalated and white liberal fear grew, intellectuals such as Harrington and especially Moynihan narrowed the focus of debate to blacks in the United States and portrayed racial differences as particularly tenacious. They transformed the debate from one in which race was embedded in discussions of development, material culture, history, and psyche into one that largely reduced poverty to race, saw race as a quasi-immutable form of embodied inequality grounded in "culture" and family, and equated "race" with "black." The War on Poverty became a war on the poverty of the black ghettos.[59]

That shift was related to policy makers' exclusive concern with the United States. Ignoring Lewis's arguments about the worldwide reach of capitalist modernization, policy makers took a debate in which ideas about transnational processes had coexisted with ideas about national and subnational differences and made it into one that foregrounded the exceptional and exemplary nature of the United States. By reducing backwardness and poverty in the United States to a (noneconomic) question of race and culture, U.S. exceptionalism was made compatible with modernization theory, which posited that countries were fundamentally similar in economic terms. Persistent poverty that could not be erased by economic progress or overcome by individual effort was equated with culture and inheritance, and ultimately with a blackness seen as inherent and essential. The idea that capitalist development would erase poverty was affirmed along with the exceptional economic power of the United States.

In Michael Harrington's influential work, which first translated Lewis's concepts for application in the United States, poverty was "*not* primarily racial."[60] It afflicted not only minorities but also the elderly, the unemployed, the mentally and physically ill, and residents of Appalachia or urban ghettos. Still, Harrington called the marginalization of the poor "segregation" and portrayed black poverty as both emblematic and exceptionally severe, "the most institutionalized poverty in the United States, the most vicious of the vicious circles." "In a sense," Harrington wrote, "the Negro is classically the 'other' American." For Harrington, poverty was *incorporated*—made manifest in body

59. Lemann, *Promised Land*, 156–57; Katz, *Undeserving Poor*, esp. 81–90; Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001); James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

60. Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor," 22 (emphasis in the original); Harrington, *Other America*, 20.

and mind. The outside environment, including diet, unsanitary living conditions, and lack of medical attention, affected the individual psyche and soma: "Poverty twists and deforms the spirit," he wrote.[61] Following Galbraith, Harrington distinguished individual and incidental "case" poverty, which might be transient, from the "insular," or clustered, poverty that produced durable, cultural traits. "Disease, alcoholism, low IQ's, these express a whole way of life. They are, in the main, the effects of an environment, not the biographies of unlucky individuals," he asserted.[62] Harrington thus envisioned environment as affecting culture and read life histories such as those Lewis had compiled as embodied representations of a culture, not of individual idiosyncrasy.

Harrington followed Lewis in arguing that the poor had a distinct, "alien" culture that separated them from mainstream society, equating the "vicious cycle" of black poverty (Gunnar Myrdal's phrase) with Lewis's notion of culture.[63] "There is . . . a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, a world view of the poor," Harrington claimed. Blacks ate, drank, and danced differently from the rest of America. Poverty was persistent, Harrington also stressed, as it was passed down from parent to child. Negroes constituted a "hereditary poor."[64]

Following the postwar orthodoxy that denied the importance of biological race, Harrington was quick to point out that Negro poverty was caused by neither natural nor genetic factors. And it was not simply about skin color. Harrington wrote: "The Negro is poor because he is black; that is obvious enough. But, perhaps more importantly, the Negro is black because he is poor." But even in rejecting biologically determinist arguments, Harrington portrayed the culture of poverty as so deeply embedded, so long-standing, and so profoundly affecting the body and spirit that it could not be changed without a massive program of outside help. With their will bent, the poor needed state programs or labor unions to help them mount the "escalator of social mobility."[65]

These arguments about the causes of entrenched poverty and its remedies became central to the debates about President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Pov-

61. Harrington, *Other America*, quotations on 4, 71–72, 2. See also p. 78.

62. On Galbraith's insular poverty see MacDonald, "Our Invisible Poor"; O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 146–50. Harrington, *The Other America*, 11.

63. Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor," 25. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 78, cited in Herbert J. Gans, *People, Plans, and Policies: Essays on Poverty, Racism, and Other National Urban Problems* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 336.

64. Harrington, *Other America*, 17, 67.

65. Ibid., 72. Harrington, "Our Fifty Million Poor," 25.

erty. Harrington and Lewis both participated in programmatic planning meetings held by Sargent Shriver, appointed by President Johnson to lead the War on Poverty, and the scholars' language permeated policy documents.[66] A 1963 memorandum of the president's Council of Economic Advisors had claimed: "The vicious cycle, in which poverty breeds poverty, occurs through time, and transmits its effects from one generation to another." The belief that the culture of poverty formulation actually shaped the War on Poverty would follow. The anthropologist Charles Valentine, a staunch critic of Moynihan and Lewis, would write in 1968 that "the 'war on poverty' was mainly aimed at changing the 'culture of poverty' rather than altering the conditions of being poor" (a formulation that, in contrast to Harrington, figured culture and environment as separate realms). Lewis disagreed. After lengthy talks with the architects of the War on Poverty, he was certain that they "had only the vaguest conception of the difference between poverty and the subculture of poverty." The War on Poverty, Lewis said, was "correctly directed at economic poverty and not at the subculture of poverty."[67]

The work of Harrington and Lewis nonetheless put discussion of culture at the center of policy debates about poverty. Lewis said Harrington and others misinterpreted him by equating poverty and the culture of poverty. Yet for the subset of the poor who lived in a culture of poverty, Lewis did counsel that "basic changes in the attitudes and value systems of the poor must go hand in hand with improvements in the material conditions of living."[68] Increasingly, Lewis, like Harrington, depicted cultural poverty as responding only very slowly to environmental changes such as economic reform, therapy, interventions by social workers, or government programs. In the work of Lewis and especially Harrington, then, "culture" took on the fixity previously attributed to biology. The use of the key word "inheritance," which had cultural and bio-

66. Lemann, *Promised Land*, 150–51.

67. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ed., *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 8, see also 85–87. Charles Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), 155. Oscar Lewis, review of *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals*, by Charles Valentine, *Current Anthropology* 10, nos. 2–3 (Apr.–June 1969): 191.

68. In Latin America, Lewis argued, revolution would make social work interventions unnecessary. *Children of Sánchez*, xxx–xxxi. Oscar Lewis to Richard Morse, 23 Nov. 1965, Oscar Lewis Papers, Richard Morse folder, box 56; Oscar Lewis to Herbert Gans, 23 Nov. 1966, Oscar Lewis Papers, Herbert Gans folder, box 56; Oscar Lewis, reply to reviews of *The Children of Sánchez*, *Pedro Martínez*, and *La Vida*, *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5 (Dec. 1967): 499; Oscar Lewis, review of *Culture and Poverty*, 191.

logical valences, and the insistence on the family as a site of reproduction, eased the shift from biology to culture and from the culture of poverty to culturally defined race differences. Still, both Lewis and Harrington saw the culture of poverty as afflicting a variety of racially, culturally, and geographically defined groups (even as they at times associated the culture of poverty with blackness).

Poverty Internalized: History, Family, and the U.S. Black Psyche

The view of poverty as a deep-seated way of life was reinforced by ideas about the historically engrained nature of gendered cultural and psychic differences. Lewis's work on Mexico drew on the Mexican tradition that traced the psychic effects of race and class inequalities to Spanish colonialism. Although Lewis saw inequalities as deeply rooted in history, he believed they could be overturned by the nationalist anti-imperialism of the triumphant Mexican Revolution. He also wrote that the culture of poverty was a response to contemporary economic and political dislocations caused by capitalist modernization and urbanization.[69] In *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), Moynihan and coauthor Nathan Glazer similarly portrayed U.S. Negro problems as the result both of the deeply rooted legacy of slavery and of recent social processes such as urbanization and migration. But in making the former argument, they drew from Stanley Elkins's controversial *Slavery* (1958), which argued that the intransigent form of slavery practiced in the United States had broken the will of the slaves and created a psychically deformed male "Sambo" unable to revolt. This personality was, for Elkins, patterned and persistent, a "type," akin to a national character, that would not be "reversed overnight."[70]

Glazer, who had read Lewis's *Children of Sánchez* as an editor for Random House, wrote an introduction to a new edition of Elkins's book published the same year as *Beyond the Melting Pot.* Moynihan in turn drew on that introduction in his report on the Negro family. According to the Moynihan report (a document initially drafted for the Department of Labor), a stunted, childlike, docile male personality rooted in slavery explained black men's contemporary

69. Lewis, *Children of Sánchez*, xxv; Oscar Lewis to Joseph Monserrat, 29 Oct. 1965, Oscar Lewis Papers, Joseph Monserrat folder, box 58.

70. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1963), 52. See also Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report*, 27, 250, 318, 468. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), 83, 126–33, 228–29, 241–42, quotations on 228, 133.

emasculation. Moynihan's analysis, like Elkins's, resonated with anticolonial discussions about damaged masculinity. It also drew from a postwar U.S. social science that had focused on the psychic damage that school segregation caused black children. But children were deemed plastic and educable in contrast to the adult male "Sambo," and the Moynihan report confirmed the intractability of the problems faced by black families.[71]

Moynihan's and Lewis's work appeared in the wake of the birth control pill, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), the intensification of Cold War conflicts around gender, and anticolonial movements' attention to masculinity. In this context, both authors underscored the importance of women and child rearing to the culture of poverty.[72] But though the parallel emphases on women's reproductive and sexual conduct suggested associations between the two works, Moynihan drew not on Lewis but on E. Franklin Frazier's analysis of family disorganization, which again emphasized history as well as gender.[73] Frazier believed that urban, black, female-headed families were less disciplined and united in northern cities, where community institutions were weak, and he attributed this in part to slavery's weakening of the Negro family. Moynihan used Frazier to argue that black poverty was a problem based in family dynamics with deep historical roots. More than Lewis, who had originally pinpointed the family because it mediated between the individual and the larger society, Moynihan suggested that nonnormative family arrangements were a kind of cultural bedrock that *caused* poverty.[74]

71. On Glazer's reading of Lewis's manuscript, David Riesman to Oscar Lewis, 26 Jan. 1961, Oscar Lewis Papers, David Riesman folder, box 60. Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 150–56. Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*.

72. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive America: Sex, Women, and the Bomb," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 154–70. Nathan Glazer, foreword to *The Negro Family in the United States*, by Edward Franklin Frazier (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), xi–xii. "American Poverty in the Mid-Sixties," special issue, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 26, no. 4 (Nov. 1964).

73. For instance, Moynihan and Lewis are connected in Seymour Parker and Robert J. Kleiner, "The Culture of Poverty: An Adjustive Dimension," *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 3 (June 1970): 516–27.

74. Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968). On Frazier see Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002); Tony Platt, "E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan: Setting the Record Straight," *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 11, no. 3 (Sept. 1987): 265–77; Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 188–90.

The issues of gender, history, and psyche so evident in Moynihan's report on the Negro family were also evident at a conference on "The Negro American" sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) in 1965. The conference, held two months after Moynihan's report was released but before it became public in the fall of 1965, convened leading academics, most of them white, including Moynihan (but not Lewis, who was present with Moynihan at similar events).[75] The proceedings reveal how questions about the severity and depth of poverty, its psychic manifestations, and its gendered and cultural nature intersected with understandings of blackness in the United States. They also reveal a diversity of opinion regarding the relation of culture, poverty, psyche, and blackness, which would soon narrow.

Conference participants debated whether, following the passage of civil rights legislation, economic changes alone could solve Negroes' remaining problems. Three strands of conversation addressed this issue. The first attempted to clarify the distinct problems of different social strata of blacks, and the diverse strategies needed to address those problems.[76] This strand flowed into a second one about the black poor, labeled "the other Negro Americans." Some participants focused on aspects of Negro life that were potentially unresponsive to a jobs program or economic improvements. Responding no doubt to the increased attention to women and the family that second-wave feminism prompted, they focused on the deficient families of the Negro poor, which they compared to a normative, middle-class, patriarchal family. Edwin C. Berry, executive director of the Chicago Urban League, spoke of "a very strong matriarchal situation in the Negro community" and the "cultural castration" of the Negro male, who had been denied the resources to care properly for his family. Moynihan

75. Subsequent events included a yearlong American Academy of Arts and Sciences seminar on Negroes and poverty that met during 1966–67; and sessions at the American Anthropological Association. There were also two lengthy debates in *Current Anthropology*. See Eleanor Burke Leacock, *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 7; Thomas McCorkle to Lee Rainwater, 17 May 1963, Oscar Lewis Papers, Lee Rainwater folder, box 58. Review forum on *The Children of Sánchez*, *Pedro Martínez*, and *La Vida*, by Oscar Lewis, *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5, pt. 1 (Dec. 1967): 480–500; and review forum on *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals*, by Charles Valentine, *Current Anthropology* 10, nos. 2–3 (Apr.–June 1969): 181–201. Moynihan, *On Understanding Poverty*; and James L. Sundquist, ed., *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

76. "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American—May 14–15, 1965," *Daedalus* (Winter 1966): 287–441, esp. 311. Moynihan, "Negro Family," followed this line, noting that middle-class black families did not manifest the pathologies he described.

stressed, as in his report, the alleged overemployment of Negro women relative to Negro men (in comparison, of course, to white labor force participation). Contesting this position, Peter H. Rossi, director of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, argued that the children of mothers who worked outside the home were no different from those of housewives, and that a misplaced emphasis on the absence of a father derived from a "middle-class Freud-saturated viewpoint." Berry replied that he wanted to "help the family structure mean what it is supposed to mean," according to precisely that middle-class viewpoint, because the rules Negroes had to follow were "white middle-class rules." "Family" thus came to stand for cultural, racial difference. Black family disorganization was, for Moynihan, "the most important discontinuity between the white world and the Negro world."[77] This notion was reinforced by the idea that it was through women's socialization of children that the cultural pathologies of poverty were passed down. Participants thus equated the male-headed family with "middle-class" and "white," in the process papering over class differences within the black community, which had been clearly recognized earlier in the debate.

The third, closely related strand of debate explored whether poverty had a psychic and cultural "hard core" that would not respond to economic incentive. Were pathologies simply a "transitional" phase prompted by massive black migration to northern cities? Or were they a more historically and culturally engrained phenomenon? These discussions culminated in a consideration of whether Negroes carried a unique "stigma," and, if so, if it persisted or varied over a lifetime. Psychiatrist Robert Coles argued for a situational view of culture and psyche and body, suggesting the importance of looking at changes over a life span, which did not necessarily correspond to "childhood memories."[78] Moynihan argued against attributing black problems to historical roots: "If we could, for heaven's sake, find something besides the inheritance from slavery," he pleaded. Public policies could readily respond to poverty caused by new circumstances, he said, but could not overturn deep historical legacies.

Despite Moynihan's recognition of the problematic nature of historical arguments, he had made precisely that type of argument in his report. And in a speech he coauthored and that President Johnson delivered at Howard University less than a month after the AAAS conference, Moynihan and his coauthor characterized the problems faced by blacks as the "scars of centuries": a cultur-

77. "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 291, 299, 301.

78. Ibid., 334, 349.

ally engrained historical legacy embedded in the psyche, leading to a recalcitrant form of difference. The speech, which outlined the president's strategies for addressing the inequities faced by African Americans in the wake of civil rights legislation, proposed enhanced access to jobs, housing, health care, and social programs. But it also characterized blacks as "another nation . . . crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope . . . [trapped in] inherited, gateless poverty." Efforts to help blacks were hampered by "the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and injustice."[79] This historical legacy had so deformed the bodies and souls of blacks as to create a distinct race—segregated, visibly different, with its own way of life. Moynihan and Johnson believed public policy could change this situation. But increasingly they confronted the criticism that because they focused on history, personality, and family inheritance they were advocating individual solutions, such as psychotherapy, rather than structural, economic solutions. Critics focused on an environment they deemed separate from history and from history's effects on the individual.

Blackness and U.S. Exceptionalism

It is ironic that, given the Pan-American existence of racial slavery, Johnson's speech invoked it to underscore the notion that the United States was not just different but also exceptional. The speech linked both entrenched racism against blacks and the nation's presumed ability to overcome that legacy to the unique place of the United States in the world. Offering the United States as a model for other countries, Johnson papered over influences *on* the United States.[80] In his report, Moynihan had responded to perceived foreign policy imperatives, writing on the first page that strife at home could divide peoples of different races around the globe, and vice versa. In the then-current context of decolonization, he suggested, the peaceful assimilation of blacks in the United States might also be an important "sign of what can, or must, happen in the world at large." President Johnson's Howard speech opened similarly:

> Our earth is the home of revolution. In every corner of every continent men charged with hope contend with ancient ways in the pursuit of

79. Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report*, quotations on 24, 125, 126, 128.

80. On race and U.S. foreign policy see Mary Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000); Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003).

> justice. . . . Our enemies may occasionally seize the day of change. But it is the banner of our revolution they take. And our own future is linked to this process of swift and turbulent change in many lands in the world. But nothing in any country touches us more profoundly, nothing is more freighted with meaning for our own destiny, than the revolution of the Negro American.[81]

In a perverse twist, revolutions abroad and foreign pressures on the United States to end discrimination against African Americans—including those expressed in Mexico's culture of poverty debates—were reinterpreted as responding to the United States and *its* revolution.

Moynihan's report also cited a question from Glazer's introduction to Elkins's book: "Why was American slavery the most awful the world has ever known?" Moynihan, like Elkins, emphasized differences between the United States and Latin America, highlighting the presumably more severe form of slavery in the United States and the consequent severity of racial discrimination.[82] Building on this assumption, they portrayed black poverty in the United States as resulting not from the contemporary failings of the economic system but from an unavoidable past that had generated psychic pathologies and pathological cultures. Unequal development and its attendant economic problems were issues faced by "Third World" Latin American countries with presumably different pasts, which had left legacies of economic backwardness and racial mobility.

At the AAAS conference, where social mobility was also a topic of discussion, Talcott Parsons had suggested (as had Glazer and Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot*), that Negroes could follow the assimilationist path of immigrants to the United States. C. Vann Woodward opposed this view, pointing out that blacks had been in the United States far longer than other immigrants. And Harvard social psychologist Thomas Pettigrew argued that Negroes' "really special and particularly potent" situation was not comparable to that of immigrants.[83] Assertions about the uniqueness of the African American experience thus generated a debate about the relevance of comparison among U.S. ethnic and racial groups. The practice of comparison across national borders—the very practice that so vexed Mexicans—was not discussed, much less analyzed.

81. Moynihan, "Negro Family," 1. Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report*, 125.

82. Moynihan, "Negro Family," ix–x, quotation on ix. Elkins, *Slavery*, 63–80.

83. "Transcript of the American Academy Conference on the Negro American," 325–41.

The Mexican origins of the culture of poverty formulation were obliterated as scholars debated the unique history of the United States and of its black citizens. Latin America was invoked only to make starkly drawn comparisons that affirmed the racial and economic singularity of the United States.

The Debate Escalates

As Lee Rainwater and William Yancey have pointed out, the debate surrounding the Moynihan report and the culture of poverty heated up less because of the concepts used than because of the broader context within which they were read. The Moynihan report became public scant weeks before the Watts uprising, and press accounts seized on family dysfunction to explain escalating nationwide racial violence. As the views that would come to be associated with Black Power gained ground, questions of historical responsibility and agency came to the fore. The Johnson administration's increasing attention to the Vietnam War made black leaders skeptical about the government's commitment to implementing civil rights laws and enacting further reforms.[84]

In this context, activists and political leaders reframed debates about family, economy, culture, and history in terms of the specific policies they presumably supported. Moynihan's report actually avoided policy recommendations. Some press reports of Johnson's Howard University speech implied that self-help solutions would be most effective, a point Glazer made explicitly in the 1963 work he coauthored with Moynihan. Other press reports called for a massive program of public aid. Moynihan himself sought to promote state policies that could reshape family life by providing employment opportunities for men and a family allowance. Affirmative action was on the Johnson administration agenda. After the Watts disturbance, however, the press sensationalized and simplified the Moynihan report, stressing male frustration and family dysfunction. In turn, civil rights leaders protested the report, which they now read as positing insurmountable, innate differences. Martin Luther King wondered if Negro problems were being "attributed to innate Negro weakness and used to justify neglect and rationalize oppression." Participants in a church-sponsored Detroit civil rights conference said the Moynihan report implied not only that "the Negro family had degenerated . . . [but] that the American Negro was, in fact . . . , somewhat less than human." In general, civil rights leaders feared Moynihan's focus on history would detract from efforts to address current conditions.[85]

84. Rainwater and Yancey, *Moynihan Report.*

85. Ibid., 53, 84–85, 134–36, 202, 214, 240, 244. Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 53.

Amid escalating controversy, critics of the Moynihan report framed the factors perpetuating poverty as either internal to the black community (family organization and cultural values) or external (economy and environment). They portrayed the former set of factors as static or innate, the latter as fluid and the rightful target of government action; the former as entrenched cultures or deeply rooted stigma, the latter as the result of recent events. Explanations stressing the former, critics believed, implied that poverty would be surmounted through personal responsibility; explanations stressing the latter suggested government responsibility. Stressing the former was wrongheaded, stressing the latter was expedient. William Ryan, a Boston psychologist and civil rights activist, elaborated these distinctions in a widely read essay in which he coined the term "blaming the victim" to criticize Moynihan's approach. Unlike old-style racial ideologies, Ryan wrote, existing racial ideologies did not portray racial differences as genetic, intrinsic, or hereditary but as environmental and acquired. Moynihan and his ilk could thus "concentrate . . . on the defects of the victim, condemn the vague social and environmental stresses that produced the defect (some time ago), and ignore the continuing effect of victimizing social forces (right now)." This served to justify "a perverse form of social action" that would change "not society . . . but society's victim."[86]

In a 1968 book that provided a comprehensive critique of Moynihan, Lewis, and Frazier, Marxist anthropologist Charles Valentine similarly stressed that the problems of black poverty were caused by external forces. "Both material resources and human events from external sources are ultimately prior to, and therefore separate from, the culture of any human collectivity." Countering Lewis's contention that family socialization transmitted culture, he noted that the "the distinct patterns of social life . . . [were] determined by structural conditions of the larger society beyond the control of low-income people." Valentine also viewed culture as rather static, in contrast to situational behaviors and structural forces subject to political intervention. This view supported his cultural relativist affirmation of a presumably distinct African American culture.[87]

In sum, radicals who denied the pathologies of black family and culture questioned whether family and "internal" factors were most important. They did not question the framing of culture, psychology, and family as internal, private, and separate from the economic environment. Though most supported the reaffirmation of patriarchy, a project they shared with the liberal establish-

86. William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, rev. ed. (1971; New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 8.

87. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty*, quotations on 6, 129.

ment, they did not view the family as a legitimate object of direct political intervention.[88] Nor could they see the variety of ways in which family and culture were not just the products of an internalized, static history and environment but themselves sites of social conflict and change. Lewis himself struggled to combine analyses of culture, environment, and history, but he increasingly portrayed culture as autonomous and inert, embracing the terms in which his supporters and critics had recast his work. *Five Families* had not claimed that poverty was transmitted from generation to generation. Lewis first articulated that view in 1960. *La Vida*, drafted amid the Moynihan report controversy, included what became perhaps his most often-quoted passage:

> The culture of poverty is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.[89]

Conclusion: Culture, Economy, and Nation

The broader approach to poverty manifested in Harrington's work, or to race manifested at the AAAS conference, thus turned into a simplified and polarized debate about the Negro poor. Harrington had related poverty to industrialization and urbanization. Lewis, like his Mexican colleagues, had tied racial, ethnic, and class inequalities to both colonialism and continuing capitalist underdevelopment. But Moynihan and other U.S. liberals did not see anything wrong with the economy overall. This assumption led them to frame poverty as a personal or cultural problem rather than a by-product of the capitalist economy. In general, the view that poverty was "insular" and restricted to well-defined groups facilitated the reduction of poverty to culture and the transit from culture to race. The ideas that cultural patterns and inheritance were persistent and that culture was embedded in the psyche and body echoed core elements of thinking about race, and such ideas facilitated the transit from class to race. The inability of Marxist critics such as Valentine to see gender, family, and reproduction as sites for intervention encouraged a view of family and cultural inheri-

88. This point is made by Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, 204–5.

89. Oscar Lewis to Conrad Arensberg, 3 Nov. 1960, in Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 224. Lewis, *La Vida*, xlv.

tance as static and separate from (if dependent on) politics and economy. U.S. left-wing critics of Lewis and Moynihan did not question the notion that these were distinct realms. They figured family relations and inheritance as natural, and stressed economic factors and capitalism as they underplayed the political importance of culture and family.

The reduction of class problems to race problems and the foregrounding of gender in intellectual discourse were, as I have suggested, responses to black militancy in the United States and to revolutionary and anticolonial movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Civil rights and black power mobilizations forced policy elites to recognize that race inequalities did not end with the end of legal segregation. The rise of feminist sentiment and the gendering of anticolonial struggle pushed gender to the fore. As the United States sought to show the world that it could overcome its most vexing national dilemma, it paradoxically reaffirmed that gendered race inequalities were part of the nation's unique history and offered capitalism to the world as a (nonracial, heteronormative) solution.

Mexicans configured the relations among history, biology, culture, and the economy to create a national identity different than that of the United States, one that continually made reference to Mexico's place in the world. Biotypologists believed that biology and the inscription of difference on the body were variable, formed by environment, and amenable to government action. Studying them was a necessary part of developing corrective government policies. For most Mexican intellectuals, the past both deeply affected the national psyche and could be left behind because it was colonial. In contrast to U.S. scholars, Mexicans saw economic conditions as a key aspect of their history. Despite seeing class divisions and material backwardness as a deep-seated colonialist legacy, Mexicans saw improvement as both necessary and possible, part of a national project that asserted itself against colonialism. This perspective on social change sprang from a country where popular and official memories of revolution were very much alive.

Over the years, Mexican scholars increasingly replaced a vocabulary of race and ethnicity with one of class. This allowed them to emphasize a shared identity for oppressed groups amid ethnic particularity and to subsume non-Indian ethnic minorities within an economically pragmatic indigenismo. Debate tended to shift away from biology, culture, and language and toward economic modernization and capitalism—the latter presumably universal processes. Whether economic changes should lead to assimilation or be reconciled with difference was perhaps the key question for Mexican indigenistas. In the 1960s, a new generation of Mexican scholars denounced its indigenista predecessors

for their presumably nationalist and assimilationist efforts to annihilate native lifeways.[90]

Lewis saw his work as the collection of diverse cases of capitalist modernization, industrialization, and urbanization, and he continued to wonder how his ideas about a transnational culture of poverty could accommodate both national differences and individual idiosyncrasies. For Lewis, Mexico was not the Other that confirmed the economic and technical superiority of the United States but simply another case. This view was perhaps naive for a North American working at a time when the United States aggressively exported both modernization and modernization theory to the "underdeveloped" world. Lewis's detractors (and even some supporters) in Mexico and Puerto Rico knew that comparisons involving the United States could be used to cement U.S. claims to superiority. Some nevertheless understood that empathy and solidarity neither began nor ended at national borders. They could at least imagine a more cosmopolitan politics, one where Luis Oscar Sánchez studied "los hijos de Jones" and nationalist elites could no longer use accusations of imperialism to dismiss charges of inequality at home.

Scholars in the United States and Mexico shared a repertoire of ideas about culture and inheritance that Lewis drew from in his initial formulation of a culture of poverty, a repertoire that allowed Mexicans and North Americans to apply the formulation across borders. This shared repertoire was evident in readers' letters to Lewis, in Harrington's initial borrowing, and in Lewis's own work in different locales. It drew from and contributed to the U.S. embrace of a universalizing modernization theory that dismissed local contexts as "culture" separate from economics, and made those Others who did not comply with the United States' modernizing project into Cold War enemies. It was also woven into a more cosmopolitan orientation.

The consolidation of ideas about the unique race and class characteristics of the United States and Mexico must therefore be accounted for. We must also account for the specific articulation of ideas about history, culture, economic conditions, the body, and the psyche that constituted race and class as categories that articulated fixed, essential national differences. Comparisons played a role in the assertion of national singularity and the delineation of ideas about race and class, but, as I have argued here, comparison also allowed many to see, and create, connections. In the United States, it was the discounting of any comparative or transnational frame in policy discussions and the refusal to analyze

90. Arturo Warman et al., *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana* (Mexico City: Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, 1970).

capitalism and racism as worldwide phenomena that led to ideas about U.S. and Latin American national character.

The widespread view that the United States was unique led to an impoverished understanding of U.S. racism, one that stressed racism's basis in determinist biology and racial slavery, sedimented in a bounded, unchanging culture, and largely failed to theorize its roots in ideas about family, inheritance, the self, and the economy. It also allowed Mexicans, and other Latin Americans, to ignore the local roots of capitalism and portray it as foreign. Mexicans and other Latin Americans would claim that they had a milder form of slavery and less racism, but more entrenched class differences and economic backwardness. As a result, certain solidarities—within and across national boundaries—were precluded.