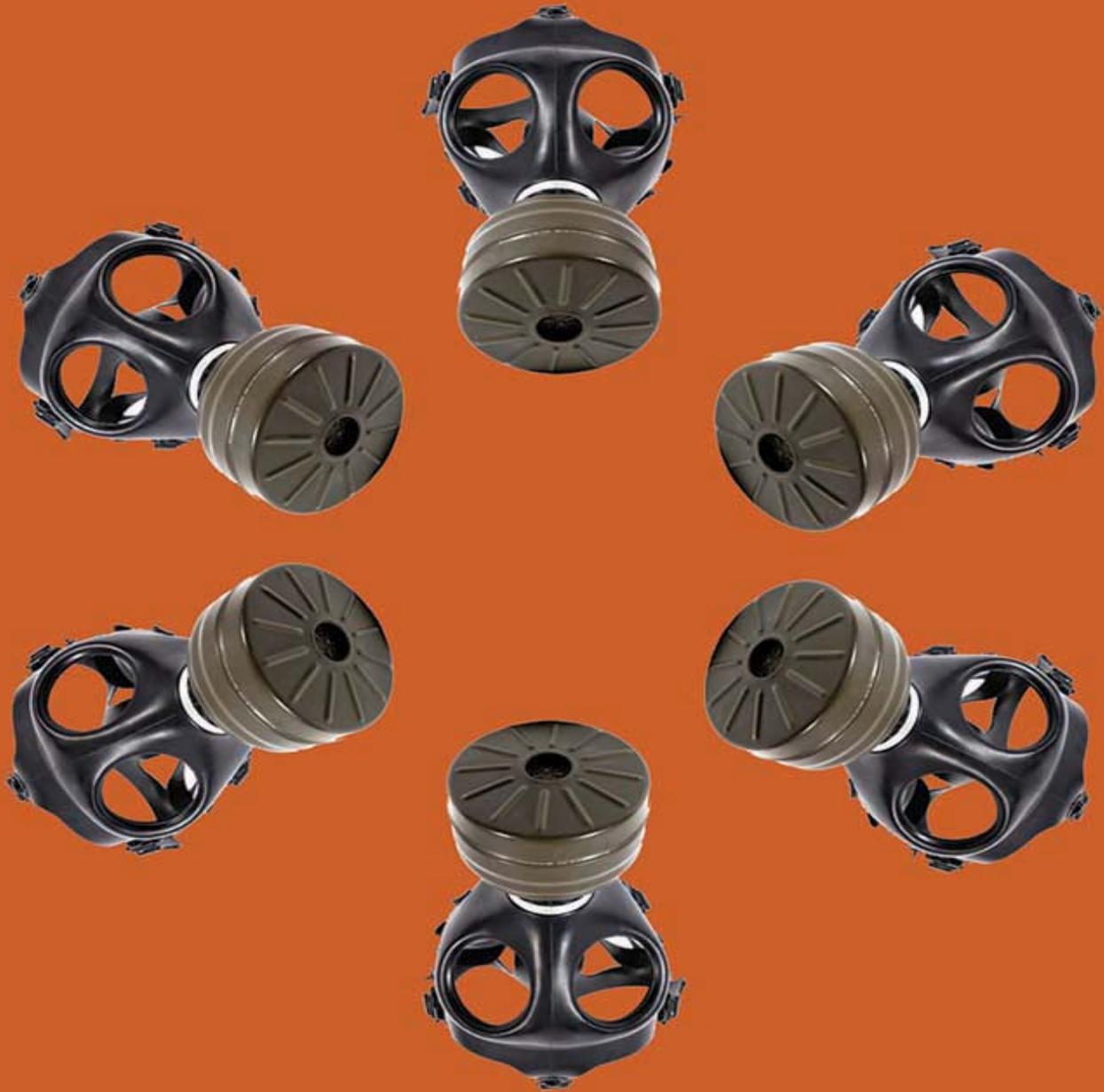


CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY



PROTEST

A Cultural Introduction
to Social Movements

James M Jasper

Protest

Cultural Sociology series

James M. Jasper, *Protest: A Cultural Introduction to Social Movements* Frederick
F. Wherry, *The Culture of Markets*

Protest

A Cultural Introduction to Social
Movements

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polity

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For Frank Dobbin and Michèle Lamont

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Preface

The last several years have seen a worldwide outpouring of protest, by citizens in North Africa and the Middle East, Tea Partiers and Wisconsin public employees in the US, the Indignados in Spain, Occupiers around the world, anti-austerity rioters in Europe, Iran's green movement, Istanbul's Taksim Square, Kiev's revolutionaries, and many others. But we should not forget, as we congratulate ourselves for living through an important moment in world history, that protest occurs every day, around the planet, and it always has. Most of the time we don't even hear about it – it is not dramatic or sustained long enough for the media to cover it. Protest is a fundamental part of human existence, and every period in history has the potential to bring about important changes.

Social movements are the form that protest takes most often in today's world. They give regular people an opportunity to explore, articulate, and live out their most basic moral intuitions and principles. Individuals join together to try to recruit, persuade, and inspire others, using all the tools they can find: money, media, stories, collective identities, jokes, cartoons, and sometimes weapons. Some participate casually and sporadically, while others devote their lives to a series of deeply felt causes.

In a cynical world, where we suspect self-interest behind the most seemingly altruistic actions, it might appear hard to understand people who give up material comforts, financial stability, time with family, a normal life, in favor of moral projects and risky tactics that seem to have a

vanishingly small chance of success. Who are these people, who often provide such benefits for our society, while taking relatively few for themselves? What motivates them? How do they think about the world? What helps them win or makes them lose?

In recent years scholars who study social movements have come more and more to appreciate the cultural meanings and feelings that accompany protest, and the ways that people weave these together to make sense of their lives and advance their moral dreams. Protestors and those they engage “feel their way” through actions and decisions, expressing and creating their own goals and identities as well as sifting through a variety of tactics to try to get what they want. We can’t understand social movements without understanding participants’ points of view.

Looking at voluntary collective action for a cause is also a good way to see how culture works, because central to any social movement is the effort to create new meanings. Nowhere is the creation of culture, or its effects on the world we live in, more obvious. We need to appreciate culture to understand protest, but protest also helps us to understand where culture comes from.

Culture is meaning: how we make sense of the world, including how we understand our own actions and motives, how we signal them to others, how we understand the actions of others, and figure out who we are and who we wish to be. It is both in our heads and embodied in physical carriers such as a couple of words painted on a sheet to make a banner to carry in a march. It is both a continuous process and the occasional products of that process.

One aspect of culture consists of the many emotions that give cognitive understandings their power to attract attention or motivate action. Feelings are present in every stage and every aspect of protest, just as they are there in all human life. Once thought to be a source of irrationality,

emotions can also aid us in making decisions and pursuing our goals. Indignation, an emotion that combines anger with moral outrage, is the heart of protest, the first signal that we feel there is something wrong in the world that must be fixed. It also gives us the energy to try to fix it.

Strategy is another cultural dimension of protest: decisions about goals and the means to pursue them; the creation of alliances and the identification of opponents; the mobilization of resources to enable the tactics we select. Strategic choices are rarely straightforward; there are innumerable puzzles and dilemmas that protestors must negotiate. For every choice, there are costs and dangers alongside the promises and benefits. As we proceed, I will identify some of the most common of these tradeoffs, because to understand how protestors do what they do (and whether they win or lose), we need to watch them struggle with these dilemmas. (Tradeoffs become dilemmas when decision-makers recognize and grapple with them.) We can't understand how they make strategic decisions except through the cultural meanings that they have available or which they invent. Even the most pedestrian choices are filtered through a cultural lens.

I will use three labels, *social movement*, *protest movement*, and *protest*, almost interchangeably. Most social movements are protest movements, focused on what participants find offensive in their world, even though they may also go on to develop positive proposals for alternatives. (Some do and some do not develop ways of doing things differently.) British citizens battling to stop new roads are a protest movement; those promoting craft ales over mass-produced lagers are a social movement. So protest movements are a subset of social movements.

But not all protest takes the form of protest movements: those with complaints may follow normal channels exclusively, satisfied with writing to their elected representatives or to their local newspaper; at the other

extreme, some protestors form revolutionary armies instead of protest movements. Often, political parties channel protest without the need for distinct movements; the parties *are* the movement.

Individuals do not always wait for social movements in order to protest. Some find ways to protest all by themselves, in dramatic acts that others cannot ignore, such as hunger strikes or self-immolation. In 1953 India created a new Telugu-speaking state, Andhra Pradesh, in part because one man, named Potti Sreeramulu, starved himself to death to bring attention to this cause. (As I write, other Indians are setting themselves on fire in the hope of splitting a part of Andhra Pradesh off to form yet another new state, just as dozens of Tibetans have done the same to protest China's occupation of their nation.) But if individuals are going to coordinate their protest, they form movements.

At any moment thousands of social movements are active around the world. Even those readers who participate in one or two social movements will encounter most other movements by reading about them and seeing them on television. What should we ask about them when we read about them? How do we get beneath the biases of media coverage? How can we make sense of what they are up to? We need to approach them with a cultural lens.

I have taught graduate and undergraduate courses on social movements since 1987, and I have learned more from my students than they have from me. Many or most had been activists before taking my class, while taking it, or after taking it. The causes have changed, from AIDS and gay and lesbian rights in the early years to global justice and the Occupy movements more recently, but similar challenges and dilemmas have confronted them all. My students at the CUNY Graduate Center – itself a protected space that nurtures political activism – have been especially helpful as I have tried to figure out what happens during political engagement. I thank them all, and especially Kevin Moran,

Marisa Tramontano, and Gabriele Cappelletti for their research assistance. The weekly Politics and Protest Workshop at the Grad Center gave me extensive comments, and Liz Borland and her students at the College of New Jersey generously did a test run of the manuscript and provided excellent feedback. Naomi Gerstel, A. K. Thompson, and Jonathan Smucker provided far-reaching commentaries on earlier drafts. I also thank the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Wassenaar, which provided food, lodging, fellowship, and a charming office where I wrote the first draft of *Protest*.

I try in this book to give an introduction to protest and social movements that highlights action and intention – the subjective – without ignoring structure and constraints. It covers the main kinds of questions that researchers have asked about social movements and related engagements in recent decades, presenting these in a style that I hope any reader can understand. To make the book classroom-friendly, I have placed in jarring **boldface** the concepts that I think a student should know after reading the book, using italics for lists and other normal kinds of writing emphasis. (Thus **bloc recruitment** is in bold, while *music* is italicized as part of a list of physical carriers of meaning. I don't think you need me to define music for you.) I have placed the most common dilemmas in sidebars. To make the book more readable I have been sparing in my use of citations, and apologize to all those scholars whose work I could have cited but did not.

Each chapter begins with a case that I then exploit for evidence to illustrate my themes in the remainder of the chapter. I have tried to mix important historical movements like “Wilkes and Liberty” and the women's movement with recent efforts like Occupy, as well as including one rightwing movement, the US Christian Right, and one attempted revolution, in Egypt. For those who would like to read more,

including graduate students preparing to take examinations in the field of social movements, I have placed asterisks next to some of the entries in the bibliography because I think they would add up to a good survey of the field. I welcome feedback via email: jjasper@gc.cuny.edu.

Introduction: Doing Protest

Joyous bivouacs: Occupy Wall Street

For two exciting months in the fall of 2011, Occupy Wall Street held the world's attention and inspired similar camps elsewhere. The initial occupation on September 17 was organized by an email blast from Adbusters, an anti-consumerist group known for its "subvertisements" - humorous spoofs of popular commercials.

Almost immediately, the militants occupying Zuccotti Park adopted the label "99 percent" and its companion "1 percent," which summarized most Americans' moral disgust with neoliberal policies pursued by both Republicans and Democrats since 1981. It was a brilliant pair of terms that implied solidarity with the vast majority and defined a villain that had arrogantly usurped more than its share of the economic pie. This was exactly the kind of **moral battery** - a pair of contrasting emotions, one positive and the other negative - that generates indignation and attracts people toward the good pole.

The movement's other great term was "occupy" itself, a tactical invitation that was soon applied to hundreds of figurative as well as physical places: Occupy Oakland, Occupy Toledo, Occupy Patriarchy, Occupy the SEC, Occupy Our Homes, Occupy Shabbat, Occupy Boehner, Occupy da Hood, or Cyprus's Occupy Buffer Zone.

The Occupiers used general assemblies, GA, to make decisions. Lengthy meetings at which all speakers were

welcomed, they were supposed to arrive at a consensus. The “people’s mic,” by which the audience repeated each of a speaker’s phrases, forced the entire group to articulate each thought as well as conveying it to those at the back of the crowd. Several simple hand gestures gave automatic feedback and made the lengthy meetings more fun and engaging. Protestors camping at Zuccotti Park had plenty of time to devote to participatory democracy, a cumbersome process nonetheless thrilling to those for whom “real” democracy is a core moral aspiration. Here was a new way of living that was far more democratic than anything they had experienced before. Democracy in the GA was either tempered or enhanced by “progressive stacks,” which moved certain people – considered underrepresented or disadvantaged or who had not yet spoken – ahead in the queue.

Mainstream news media, looking for an easy hook, complained that the movement had no demands, no policies it wanted President Obama or Governor Cuomo to enact. Indeed, it would not have been easy to extract precise proposals, much less elaborate plans, from the sprawling GA. But that was not the point, as one beaming fellow expressed with his poster’s adaptation of a queer slogan: “We’re here, we’re unclear, get used to it.” The Occupiers were clear enough about their indignation at economic inequality, united – like many movements – by their feelings more than by glib slogans or explicit policy proposals. Precise demands would have granted politicians too much legitimacy and power, making the Occupiers into powerless plaintiffs before the authorities.

Occupy Wall Street faced the same strategic dilemmas that most protests do. One was the **Janus dilemma**: how much time do you devote to internal issues and processes, like the GA or providing food to campers, building the sense of community that provided the biggest thrill of life at Zuccotti, versus how much time do you devote to other

players outside the movement, such as the media, the police, or allies like unions? Occupy always risked turning inward, becoming a festival of internal democracy, a joyous bivouac, satisfying in and of itself. But the regular marches and events elsewhere in New York balanced this, making Occupy a player on a world media stage. Almost all social movements must grapple with the Janus dilemma, which in this case often echoed tensions between full-time and part-time participants.

The Janus dilemma

Janus was the Roman god in charge of gates and doorways, who often appeared above the door on each side, with one face looking outward and the other inward. Some activities and arguments are aimed at a movement's own members, while others are aimed at outside players such as opponents, the state, and bystanders. Every movement does both, and must find the right balance. A movement can become overly inward, having meetings to motivate its members, reinforce their collective solidarity, and help them enjoy themselves. At the other extreme it can focus exclusively on external interactions, letting its members follow along or not. Eventually they stop following. Various decisions fall under the Janus dilemma: do you encourage a collective identity that emphasizes similarity to the broader society, or one that highlights difference (Bernstein 1997)? Do you pay to hire professional staff, or do you rely on volunteers from within, motivated by their enthusiasm and solidarity (Mansbridge 1986)? Do you spend more time on participatory meetings, or on carrying out the decisions they make (although internal democracy also has external benefits such as good public relations, and hopefully good strategic choices too.)?

Just as important were two dilemmas about internal organization. The **organization dilemma** is about how many rules to have governing your procedures: rules make things predictable, but in doing so they constrict what you can do. The **pyramid dilemma** is about how much vertical hierarchy to build into your group or organization: it can be efficient or pleasurable to have strong leaders, but they sometimes substitute their own goals for those of the rest of the participants. These dilemmas interacted in the case of Occupy: the formal rules about how to make decisions and how to run the GA were meant to keep the pyramid low, horizontal instead of vertical (although this did not prevent informal leaders from emerging).



Different generations of activists mix at Zuccotti Park. Credit: JMJ.

Many Occupiers insisted they had little in common with the global justice movement that had been born in Seattle

in 1999 (see [chapter 6](#)). Part of this distancing was generational, since successive cohorts of new protestors have different sensibilities from those who joined only a year or two earlier. Part was a genuine concern for nonviolence, arising out of a sense that the masked “black bloc” of anarchists who had broken windows in Seattle had tarnished the movement’s reputation (the naughty or nice dilemma, as we’ll see later).

Occupy had a big impact on those who were part of it, giving them a glimpse of a more exciting, participatory world, but also giving them a crash course in political tactics (Gitlin 2012). They will take the hopes and the know-how with them to future campaigns, in protest movements yet to be imagined. But Occupy also wanted to have an external impact. Extreme inequality has not diminished, and no new policies were enacted to deal with it, except possibly Cuomo’s decision to support a tax on New York’s millionaires.

Yet the encampments received extensive media coverage, and more favorable coverage than most protest gets. The media treated the Occupiers as real people with serious grievances, for the most part, even if they often portrayed them as grubby, unemployed young people – an earnest kind of slacker – with unrealistic utopian dreams. Beyond the direct coverage of the protests, articles and editorials began to appear about inequality in the United States, accepting it as a public problem that policymakers needed to take seriously. Coverage of the Tea Party, the rightwing group that one year earlier had tapped into some of the same populist anger as Occupy, shrank, with less impact on the 2012 elections than in 2010. Occupy’s effect may have been indirect, but it was not negligible.

Social movements

In common usage **social movements** are sustained, intentional efforts to foster or retard broad legal and social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels endorsed by authorities. “Sustained” implies that movements differ from single events such as rallies, which are the primary activities sponsored by most movements. Movements’ persistence often allows them to develop formal organizations, but they also operate through informal social networks.

The word “intentional” links movements to culture and strategy: people have ideas about what they want and how to get it, ideas that are filtered through culture as well as individual psychology. Movements have purposes, even when these have to do with transforming members themselves (as in many religious or self-help movements) rather than the world outside the movement.

“Foster or retard”: although many scholars define movements as progressive, dismissing regressive efforts as **countermovements**, this distinction seems arbitrary (not to mention the unfortunate effect that different tools are then used to analyze the two types). The anti-abortion movement is just as much a social movement as the abortion-rights movement, even if it wishes to turn back the clock on human rights, at least according to feminists.

“Non-institutional” distinguishes movements from political parties and interest groups that are a regular, stably funded part of most political systems, even though movements frequently create these other entities and often maintain close relationships with existing ones. Some protest groups evolve into interest groups or political parties.

Despite this definition, there is no clear boundary between social movements and other phenomena such as revolutions, riots, political parties, and interest groups. The more of each component – persistence, intention, a concern with change, and outside normal institutions – that we see, the more we want to call something a social movement. The

less we see, the more we search for other labels. Rioters may share some of the goals of a protest movement without acting explicitly on behalf of that movement (yet most rioters choose their targets carefully, expressing their feelings of indignation and sense of blame, and so implicitly share a movement's goals). They may show their political anger and frustration - yet at the same time grab a bottle of perfume from a broken storefront. Humans always have multiple motivations, which is why we need a cultural perspective to make their actions intelligible.

Throughout this book I use the words "activist" and "protestor" for people who are doing protest. But a word of caution: this does not mean that some people are born protestors, with unusual personalities that distinguish them from other people, any more than "students" or "professors" are defined by this one activity. Protestors are not some inherently distinct subspecies of human; any of us might end up in a social movement.

Just as multiple activities are involved, so there is no single question to answer about social movements, but a series of questions. Why does protest appear when it does? Who first imagines a movement, or expresses its vision? Who joins the movement? Who continues and who drops out along the way? What do protestors do? How do they decide what to do? When do they change their tactics? When do they win, when do they lose? What other effects do they have? When do movements end? No single theory, and certainly no simple theory, can answer all these questions. We need different ways to explain each of them, although each explanation will contain a cultural dimension.

Culture

Culture is composed of shared thoughts, feelings, and morals, along with the physical embodiments we create to express or shape them. It is through cultural processes – from singing to reading to marching together down a street – that we give the world meaning, that we understand ourselves and others. Culture permeates protestors’ actions, and also those of all the other players with whom they interact, such as judges, police, legislators, reporters, and others. We need to understand both sides – or many sides – in a conflict.

Culture has three main components. For one thing, it consists of **cognition**: the words we use, the beliefs we have about the world, the claims we make about how the world is, the distinctions we draw between one thing and another (between one group and another, for instance). These include frames, such as “the 99 percent,” implying a theory of victims, a theory of villains (the 1 percent), and a diagnosis of the problem, namely the enormous gap between the two. They also include collective identities, in this case again the 99 percent and the 1 percent. Stories, each with a beginning, a middle, and an end, are also part of cognition. Even tactics, such as “occupy,” are ways to tap into culturally formed understandings of how to act.

Scholars like to analyze these cognitive elements of culture because they are easy to detach from action, to list in a table, to identify by reading brochures and transcripts of speeches. But in taking them out of context like this, we risk losing sight of how people experience these ideas, how they use them to persuade others, how they are motivated by them. People don’t carry their ideas in their heads like books on a library shelf; they live them out through their actions.

Emotions, the second part of culture, keep us closer to people’s actual lives, because humans feel their way through situations more than they consciously think about them. Emotions have a bad reputation, since the philosophers who tend to write about them prefer to talk

about abstract thoughts instead of the messy act of thinking, ideas over feelings, products over processes. They have portrayed emotions as the opposite of thinking, as unfortunate interferences that lead us to do dumb things. Only recently have psychologists shown that emotions also send us signals and help us process information, evaluate our situations, and begin to formulate paths of action. Far from always disrupting our lives, emotions help us carry on. They are functional, sometimes even wise. They are a part of sensible actions as well as regrettable ones. They are neither good nor bad, but simply normal. Emotions are part of culture because we learn when and how to display them, and what to call them (fear versus anger, for instance). They also permeate cognition: emotions bring stories to life, make us care about collective identities, help us hate villains or pity victims. Cognition and emotion are inseparable.

In addition to cognition and emotions, **morality** is the third component of culture. It consists of two parts. One is a set of explicit *principles*, like “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” We formulate statements like these in order to persuade others or to indoctrinate children in our viewpoint. It is the second part of morality that actually drives actions most of the time, in the form of *intuitions* that are felt rather than explicitly formulated. When we blush over an indiscretion or wince when we see a horse whipped, we may not be able to say exactly why. But our feelings are telling us that we know something is wrong. More people are led into politics by their moral intuitions than by their principles. The principles usually come later. Our emotions help us think, including thinking about right and wrong.

Cognition, emotion, and morality are usually all present in real-life political statements and actions, constantly shaping

each other. We distinguish them only when we analyze those concrete cases.

Culture is not just in our heads (and hearts). A photo captures a protest group's indignation, analysis, and anger. A book may elaborate a movement's ideology or philosophy, for instance demonstrating in detail, complete with photos, the impact of inequality on the poor and the urgency of fixing the problem. Actions also express meanings. A march is carefully choreographed to send a message about who the demonstrators are, what they want, or who is blocking them. Rituals eventually develop to express a group's fundamental beliefs and feelings, reminding insiders as well as outsiders about who they are.

These physical embodiments of meanings don't matter much if they don't correspond to our internal feelings, but they often help us to sustain those meanings, focus on certain ones rather than others, and transmit them to new people. Once embodied, meanings can travel: an Occupier carried a poster saying, "I'll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one," a lovely dig at the death penalty as well as the myth of corporations as individuals with inalienable rights. She was photographed, then her image made it into websites, newspapers, and eventually books, with her crisp message available to new audiences at each step.

Not culture

Culture is everywhere, but it is not everything. If there were nothing except culture, that would actually make it less useful as a concept. It would fail what I call the "oxygen test" in social science: there would be no social life without oxygen, but adding it to our explanatory models isn't very useful. We can assume its existence, and move on.