

15/2/20
Liberal Arts and Sciences
Anthropology
Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, 1944-76

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Oscar Lewis: 1914 - 1970

Oscar Lewis was born in New York City and grew up on a farm in upper New York State. He took his BSS degree from the City College in 1936, and went on to graduate work in anthropology at Columbia University, taking his doctorate in 1940 with a thesis on cultural change among the Blackfoot Indians. At Columbia he studied under Ruth Benedict, and although in many ways the focus of his work differed from hers, Benedict's influence as a teacher and a person remained with him. Throughout his life, he retained great interest in psychological anthropology and the ethnography of changing, modernizing cultures. Thus, throughout most of his work he insisted upon building up a meticulously gathered corpus of materials on families and individuals, and rejecting as premature generalizations not founded on such studies.

His work was also suffused with a great moral concern for the social problems of poverty, a concern going well beyond the limits of his concerns as an academician. But his intent was always just as much to make clear in the context of academic anthropology and social science the methodological and theoretical importance of looking at the fine patterning of individual and family life, in order to understand how cultural and social life is organized.

Lewis was a member of the faculty of the University of Illinois from 1948 to his death, having earlier taught at Brooklyn College and at Washington University in St. Louis. He helped bring anthropology to the University of Illinois as one of the first two anthropologists on this campus when it was still a part of the department of Sociology. He was particularly instrumental in getting a well-rounded and distinguished program in the subject going here, and in getting such distinguished colleagues as Julian Steward to join the faculty, and finally in having a separate department of anthropology created here in 1959. He took students into the field on several occasions, demanding of them a great deal in dedication and rigor, and giving them a thorough training in field method.

His field work extended to many places and peoples: the Blackfoot Indians of Alberta; the impoverished rural people of a part of Texas in the 'forties; his long series of researches among the peasants and urban slum dwellers of Mexico from 1943 well into the 'sixties; a peasant village in North India, where he went in 1952 under the aegis of Ford Foundation and at the invitation of the Planning Commission; the poor of rural and urban Puerto Rico and their relatives in New York and New Jersey; and over eighteen months of work in Cuba from 1969-70, studying the character of community life under the revolution, part of his investigation of the

culture of poverty and of the social forms addressed to its problems. Each of these periods of research led to the publication of distinguished books and innumerable articles of wide impact both within and beyond anthropology. Oscar Lewis was in New York, following up some of his work on the Puerto Ricans when he died on December 16th, 1970, of heart failure. He had endured cardiac difficulties for over a year and his health had been poor for some time, but he was unwilling to desert his field work while it remained incomplete.

Two elements of a non-professional character contributed to his achievements because they enriched him as a human being. One was his passion for vocal music. He had a beautiful voice of professional quality, and in earlier years he would occasionally sing for small circles of his friends. He often remarked that he should have selected singing rather than anthropology for his career to fully express his inner self. In various tours abroad, he sought out prominent voice teachers to take additional lessons.

Another element was Oscar Lewis' Jewish upbringing and sensitivities. He was not observant for much of his life, but his humanism was strongly colored by his consciousness of Jewish ethical values. He abhorred injustice and the violence which invariably accompanied it. He spoke out publicly against U. S. military involvement in Vietnam.

His wife Ruth died on April 24, 2008, and they are survived by and two children: a son, Eugene, and a daughter, Judith.

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