

QUEEN'S Quarterly

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Oscar Lewis and the Cuban Revolution

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The late Oscar Lewis, for many years a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, earned fame and fortune with his widely read studies of life in the slums of Mexico and Puerto Rico. The three fat volumes which comprise what is described as an "oral history of contemporary Cuba" are the product of his last, and unfortunately not completed, research project. Oscar and Ruth, his wife and collaborator in nearly all his previous publications, arrived in Havana early in 1969 for what they had planned to be a three year stay. Using the technique of tape-recorded autobiographies developed in their earlier work, and assisted by a sizeable staff of Cubans and non-Cubans, they managed to accumulate many thousands of pages transcribed from tape, when their work was suddenly halted. At the end of June 1970, with less than half of the planned research completed, the Cuban authorities abruptly forced the project to close down and confiscated its files. At the time, they contained about half the materials which had thus far been collected, the other half having been removed from Cuba earlier.

When the Lewises returned to the United States, the question as to what to do with the 20,000-odd pages of transcripts which remained in their possession was further complicated by Oscar's unexpected death six months later. Subsequently Ruth decided to seek publication based on the available material. The Ford Foundation, which had funded the original project, agreed to underwrite her proposal. As a result, in January 1971, she and a number of helpers began the laborious task of organizing, translating and editing. In September 1972, Susan Rigdon joined the group as co-editor.

FOUR MEN: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977. Pp. xxvii + 538. \$15.00.

FOUR WOMEN: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977. Pp. xxxiv + 443. \$15.00.

NEIGHBORS: Living the Revolution, An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978. Pp. xlii + 581. \$15.00.

The circumstances under which the original project was undertaken, and arbitrarily terminated, warrant extended comment since they shed light on aspects of the Cuban Revolution not covered in the interviews; and in a broader sense, on what might be called the comparative sociology of knowledge in the Marxist-Leninist, as contrasted with the "bourgeois" democratic, environments. Ruth Lewis deals with this topic in a twenty-five page foreword to *Four Men*, the first volume of the trilogy. It is an important document, to which I can add a few details and suggest a perspective in some respects different from that of the author.

I had known Oscar for a number of years when, after a long lapse, we met in Montreal in the summer of 1967. I had been at the University of Havana since 1962 and had come for a brief holiday, including a visit to *Expo 67*. Whatever else brought Oscar to Montreal, he was anxious to get my opinion about the feasibility of doing one of his now classic type of studies on family and community life in socialist Cuba. His interest in Cuba was not new, having spent a few months as a visiting professor at the University of Havana in 1946. Nor was his interest in the Cuban Revolution and socialism new. He had managed to spend a few days in Havana in 1961 and had already noted promising changes in the slums he had previously visited. Now that socialism was firmly established, he could reveal in intimate detail how life had changed, and it would be another, and bigger, feather in his cap. No western anthropologist had thus far been able to penetrate a socialist country and describe the impact of the new values on the "culture of poverty." The question he wanted me to answer was: could he persuade the Cubans to allow him to undertake such a project?

I told him that it was unlikely. The kind of freedom he would require to conduct his research, and then publish its results, was incompatible with the rigid controls maintained by any Marxist-Leninist state, including Cuba. In any event, he would have to take it up directly with Fidel Castro, since only he could authorize such a project. Castro was erratic, and might conceivably be persuaded. Even then, Oscar would have to assume that the project would be subject to surveillance by the security police.

The following February (1968) Oscar showed up in Havana. When he came to see me he was bubbling over with enthusiasm. On his way to Cuba, he had stopped off in Mexico City where he interviewed one of the slum dwellers featured in his *The Children of Sanchez*. The topic was Fidel Castro and the result was a fulsome tribute to the great Cuban champion of the poor and oppressed. Oscar played the tape for Fidel, who was deeply moved. Moreover, he had accepted Oscar's proposition. I did not see Oscar again. I left Cuba in April, nearly a year before he returned to set up his project.

As Ruth tells the story, in his meeting with Castro, Oscar explained

that he would undertake the project only if certain basic conditions were met, including "freedom of investigation, that is, the right to decide what and whom to study, without censorship or intervention by the government, including the right to take taped interviews, manuscripts and other material out of Cuba without having them read or inspected," and "assurance that the government would not harm or punish any of the subjects for cooperating with the study." Castro accepted the conditions. As the project got under way, and for some time thereafter, it appeared that Oscar's stipulations were respected, although Ruth notes that "field work in socialist Cuba was a profoundly unique experience. . . . not a single important aspect was not affected in some degree by the great societal changes in Cuba, above all the ubiquitous presence of the state." From the moment that they arrived at the airport, "the government had assigned a trusted militant [euphemism for Communist Party member] . . . to administer to the needs of the project and its staff and act as intermediary with the government and its agencies." Among the multitude of services he performed was to introduce "Oscar to the local authorities in places where community studies were to be conducted." Given the total bureaucratization of life under socialism, it is understandable that Ruth found his role in the project to be "indispensable."

The full impact of the "ubiquitous presence of the state" struck Oscar on 25 June 1970. Summoned to appear before the Foreign Minister, "he was shocked to be formally notified by Dr Roa that Project Cuba, as they called it, had been suspended by the government. Reasons were given in the form of alleged breaches of the original agreement." To say that Oscar was shocked is to put it mildly. At the moment when Roa finished reading the indictment, Oscar suffered a heart attack and collapsed, although Ruth unaccountably fails to mention this. The charges were groundless, with ugly connotations of intentional deceit and even espionage. These were later spelled out in lurid detail in a speech by Raúl Castro, Minister of the Armed Forces, Fidel's brother and designated successor.

The real reason, as the Lewises at once suspected and then confirmed, was that three months earlier Oscar had begun to interview an individual sharply critical of the regime and its leadership. Data considered highly objectionable had also begun to emerge in another study. All this material formed part of the files which security agents seized, and was therefore lost to the project. Before his departure Oscar tried desperately to contact Fidel, but without success.

The final blow came soon after the Lewises left Cuba. They learned that their disident informant was in prison. He had accepted Oscar's assurance that under the agreement with Castro, no harm could befall him for cooperating with the project. Hence, as Ruth laments: "The

