

Apology for a Trainwreck

The ethnographies of Oscar Lewis paint a bleak picture of lower-class life. The thousands of pages of published interviews in books like *Five Families*, *The Children of Sanchez*, *Four Men*, and *La Vida* show a relentless trainwreck of impulsive sex, unplanned pregnancy, child neglect, child abuse, drug addiction, drunkenness, degenerate gambling, intra-family violence, near-random violence, parasitism, and gross financial mismanagement. The picture is so bleak that I struggle to believe Lewis' subjects are representative of any human subculture. But if his subjects are representative, it's hard to imagine how a thoughtful person could look upon their "culture of poverty" with anything but horror.

Yet in the rare moments where Lewis stops letting his subjects speak for themselves, he is far from horrified. From the Introduction* to *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty - San Juan and New York*:

Middle-class people — and this would certainly include most social scientists — tend to concentrate on the negative aspects of the culture of poverty. They tend to associate negative valences to such traits as present-time orientation and concrete versus abstract orientation. I do not intend to idealize or romanticize the culture of poverty. As someone has said, "It is easier to praise poverty than to live in it"; yet some of the positive aspects that may flow from these traits must not be overlooked. Living in the present may develop a capacity for spontaneity, for the enjoyment of the sensual, for the indulgence of impulse, which is often blunted in the middle-class, future-oriented man. Perhaps it is this reality of the moment that the existentialist writers are so desperately trying to recapture but that the culture of poverty experiences as natural, everyday phenomena. The frequent use of violence certainly provides a ready outlet for hostility so that people in the culture of poverty suffer less from repression than does the middle class.

Yes, Lewis even finds something positive to say about "the frequent use of violence." Sure, the victim gets a savage beating, often leading in his narratives to permanent disability. But on the other hand, the perpetrator eases his "repression"! Frankly, if social scientists

are going to “overlook” anything, this dubious “positive aspect” of violent crime should be near the top of the list.

Why would Lewis makes such bizarre claims? The only plausible explanation is the painful psychological tension between his scrupulous empiricism and his fervent Marxism.

A typical Marxist would have searched the world’s slums for heroes to interview, but Lewis had too much integrity for such trickery. An apolitical ethnographer would have followed Lewis’ methods, but drawn the obvious conclusions that (a) his subjects’ culture is plain evil, (b) since the subjects refuse many opportunities to exit this culture, they’re evil too. The most sympathetic thing you can reasonably say is, “I feel so sorry for the innocent children in these families.”

Intellectually, however, Lewis was stuck between a rock and a hard place. So he showed his readers the trainwreck in gory detail, then tried to convince us that trainwrecks have “positive aspects” that “must not be overlooked.” A crazy route, to be sure. But the day you admit that personal irresponsibility is the leading cause of adult poverty – and parental irresponsibility the leading cause of child poverty – you have left the church of Marxism.

* You can read the Introduction online; [go here](#), then scroll down to Chapter 7.