

Part I: Tepoztlán 1926-1956:  
Hidden Answers

The disagreement about Tepoztlán began 50 years ago. Two American anthropologists went at different times to live in the same Mexican village. The first found life in Tepoztlán happy and satisfying. The second found it unhappy and filled with fear, envy, and mistrust.

The controversy did not stop there. Each of the men went on to distinguish himself in the field of social anthropology and in time to formulate his own theory on the way and views of life of poor people all over the world. These theories retained much of the essential character of the original Tepoztlán impressions they had formed as very young men. Both men are no longer living. Their prolonged debate would merely be of academic or historical interest did not their contradictory views still significantly influence the way we perceive the world's poor. This writer, a reporter by trade, stands outside the anthropological arena. But as the first American journalist to specialize in reporting peasants, in their villages or uprooted in cities, he shares some common interest with the two scholars, one the American pioneer in peasant studies and the second our pioneer in studies of the urban poor. Hence, I have chosen to subtitle this three-part Report, *Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis Restudied*.

The first part, Tepoztlán: Hidden Questions, which covers the years 1926 to 1956, is about the original

debate over Mexican village life. Part II, *The World: Hidden Answers*, spans the past 20 years and concerns the formulations of Redfield's theory of the "peasant view of the good life" and Lewis's theory of the "culture of poverty." Part I also contains excerpts from a letter from Mrs. Ruth M. Lewis, the author's widow, and Part II includes some remarks from Daniel P. Moynihan, who challenged Lewis's theory in the late 1960s, and this writer's own provisional conceptual model of the "universal peasant culture," based partly on the work of Lewis and Redfield. Part III describes Tepoztlán as it is today, and discusses the true identities of the hitherto anonymous "Sanchez" family, including some remarks from actor Anthony Quinn, who will play the leading role in a new film, *The Children of Sanchez*.

The purpose of this Report is to try and shed a little more light on how we perceive the poor, who make up the vast majority of humankind, and to see what practical lessons for our future use can be drawn from the long Redfield-Lewis dialectic now that it is securely in the historical past.

**Anthropologists vs. Journalists**

In further preface, I should like to define what I see as the difference between the anthropological and the journalistic approaches to studies of villagers or urban slum dwellers. The anthropologist has the right to ask why a reporter should be raking up the ashes of an old professional debate at all.

My answer is that we are both investigating the human whole. Anthropology today, particularly American anthropology, has developed from the study of small, isolated primitive tribes to the study of just about everything human. The anthropologist, although using a much more systematic and scientific approach, attempts, like the journalist, to characterize a person, a village, a city, a people, a nation, or even a civilization.

Most anthropologists have done their field work in villages (or in the urban neighborhoods that are their counterpart), and my own method begins similarly. That is, when I go to a village I start with its ecological and economic system, or agriculture; the plowing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing of the basic crops. Since hard physical labor is the central activity of traditional village life, I also engage in it alongside my peasant subjects. This is the quickest way I have found to win their friendship and acceptance and also to get the *feel* of life in any rural community. If the villagers relax by drinking in the evening, as many do, I join them.<sup>1</sup> I almost always use an interpreter, preferably from the village itself, whether I speak the language or not. I find the presence of an associate who shares the local culture helps me to form a greater sense of objective detachment. I also try to make stenographic notes of as much dialogue as I can, preferring the natural unfolding of information through normal conversation rather than written or tape-recorded inter-

views. Even the best intentioned interviewer tends to "lead," consciously or unconsciously, his subject along preconceived paths.

In this fashion, a look at agriculture naturally leads to an understanding of systems of marketing and converting crops to food for the family. From agriculture one also moves naturally into social life and religion and the way a certain people think and feel. So far the investigation does not differ much from that of the anthropologist. Like the anthropologist, I also have had to study the larger civilization in which a village finds itself, its history, religion, philosophy, art, literature, and present-day politics and economics. Where possible, I also try to interview the nation's political leader.

The difference comes in the more technical aspects. Anthropologists usually begin a village study with a conceptual model to guide their choice and arrangement of the facts. They are likely to use technical procedures, such as any of a wide variety of scientifically accepted psychological tests. They may use questionnaires to gather statistics from a broad sampling of the village people. Whatever their specific techniques, they will follow a path of understanding marked "theoretical," or "scientific," or "scholarly."

Journalists, with their different interests, training, and variety of academic attachment, will follow another kind of search for understanding. They, too, may study a village as an ecological system, or as a social structure, or develop a case study of an individual or a family, or study the characterization of a villager as one generalized type of human being, or to perceive an outlook on life, or view the village study as a history; all things anthropologists do.

They may study a village or another form of small community to try to gain understanding of the history of that *kind* of community in a specific part of the world. In 1971, for example, I spent some weeks each



*Winnowing wheat in Michoacan.*

with Bedouin shepherds, primitive agriculturalists, and highly sophisticated modern farmers, and visited archaeological sites in Khuzestan province of southwestern Iran, once the eastern edge of the greater Mesopotamian Plain, to learn more about the origins of settled villages, the historical development of agriculture and irrigation, and the development of the first Elamite and Sumerian cities.<sup>2</sup>

A second kind of village study can be undertaken to understand a complex region not so much historically but as to its contemporary condition. In spring 1970 I undertook this type of study in northern India's Punjab state to learn more about the impact of the so-called Green Revolution of new high-yielding dwarf wheat in southern Asia.<sup>3</sup>

A village can also provide a convenient focal point from which to study a special problem, as I did on the southern Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius in 1969. The World Bank's population experts had described Mauritius as perhaps suffering the world's "first true Malthusian breakdown," and as a veritable laboratory and "microcosm" of the global problem of overpopulation.<sup>4</sup>

But while an anthropologist or a journalist undertakes such studies for similar purposes, both the methods and results are very different.

Good anthropologists, of course, are not mere statisticians nor are the

characterizations of the journalist all that imprecise. Factual accuracy is just as important to them. But as a journalist writing about villagers, I do try to communicate the nature of a certain way and view of life, its essence if you will, by choosing certain fact, detail, and dialogue for emphasis, and then modifying them and rearranging them in ways that satisfy my own intuitive feelings that the arrangement brings the overall portrait closer to reality and truth. As a journalist, without any scientific claims or training but with a good deal of practical experience with peasants and the differences between their culture and our own. I do a kind of verbal portraiture of village life. This is not science. But it can get one equally close to truth. The difference is one of degree since anthropologists also mix some art with their science. As should become evident, Robert Redfield was as much a humanistic philosopher as an anthropologist and the power of Oscar Lewis's later work owed as much to his artistry as his science. Both reporter and anthropologist, in writing about villages, try to economize on their characterizations to the point where a reader finds within their portrayal some all-pervasive qualities that identify it and distinguish it.

All study of human beings lies in a borderland between science and art. But both anthropologists and journalists, if they are honest and responsible to the facts, aim to increase understanding with as true a portrait or as scientifically acceptable a study

as they are able to perceive and write. As such, both are mutually complementary and equally valuable.

### Social Anthropology

The study of peasants and their villages is something quite new. Indeed, social anthropology, the science most identified with village studies, only began to explore peasant society 51 years ago.

The pioneer was a young American, Robert Redfield. In 1926, at the age of 29, he spent 8 months in a village 50 miles south of Mexico City. Four years later his findings were published as a book, *Tepoztlán—a Mexican Village*.<sup>5</sup> In his preface, Redfield disclaimed his study was "an ethnographic monograph," saying he did not have time to collect enough data and that he had "merely a fair knowledge" of Spanish and none of the local Indian dialect. Redfield found Mexican village life good and said so. His impressions were appropriated by a number of popular journalists and travel writers and received wide currency in the United States. Though Redfield intended his book to be a modest introduction to peasant culture, it set off a debate on the true nature of village life and of peasant society that has reverberated through five decades and is yet to be resolved: are peasant villages made up of relatively contented and satisfied people or are they miserable and riven by suffering, fear, and hostility?

The interest of American anthropology in peasant villages since Redfield first blazed the trail has coincided with a historically unprecedented global mass migration of peasants into cities. A field of study originally designed to focus its attention upon isolated, primitive tribes now expands its subject to include tribes, peasants, and poor city dwellers, or, in 1977, what amounts to just about three out of every four people on earth. Conceptual models and definitions narrow enough to meet scientific acceptability barely have time to be developed before they are old hat. Population growth,



the communications revolution, and the transfer of industrial and farming techniques have created a kaleidoscopic world in which village and urban studies are quickly dated.

In the more leisurely nineteenth century, most of what we learned about remote and exotic peoples came from journalists, natural history expeditions, novelists, or missionaries. Today television reaches everywhere but has been a mixed blessing. With its size trivialization, it reduces the Watusi to the dimensions of the Flintstones, and its competition has inflicted shorter story lengths and shrinking attention spans upon the written press. A vacuum has been created. If the world's poor nowadays are not in revolt, rioting in the streets, or dying of famine, they stay out of sight and out of mind. We rarely get a good grasp of why they revolt, riot, or starve, but are soon diverted by the next sensation. It jars our nervous system and feeds our anxieties. It also breeds, not only indifference to the fate of the poor, but ignorance, which stands in the way of finding common sense foreign policy solutions to what needs to be done. The American failure in Vietnam was not a failure of power but a failure of knowledge. This first defeat in a war in our history should be taken as a warning that in today's small world we cannot afford such a lack of wisdom about the rest of the people on this planet.

Our city-oriented global cosmopolitan culture—cities are where the

wealth and power is—is something fairly new and a creature of jets and modern communications technology. Peasants commanded more attention in earlier times. The Bible provides a wealth of information on peasant life, right from God's curse upon Adam, through the Hebrew prophets (though as pastoralist nomads, they didn't like either peasant villages or cities), to the teachings of Jesus, whose parables and analogies are all drawn from peasant culture. Books on peasant life go back to antiquity; the first we know about being Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a description of Boeotian rural culture in Greece in the sixth century B.C. Pharaonic Egypt has left us many accounts of village life, such as Meches' description of the Nile community of Kerkeosis in 120 B.C. The greats of literature have always been fascinated by peasantry, perhaps none more so than such nineteenth-century Russians as Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov.<sup>6</sup> American literature is an exception since we are one of the few peoples who never had a peasant tradition. American novelists have written about peasants—Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* being the prime example—but those in other cultures.

The founder of anthropology, E.B. Tylor, wrote about religion, language, and culture in general, in what was then usually called ethnography. Tylor studied culture but not cultures and society, and in Europe even today the study of people tends toward *völkskunde* (folklore and the study of folk

life)—which this writer studied for a year in 1958-59 in the Austrian Tyrol—rather than *volkerkunde* (the study of primitive tribal life), the direction anthropology took in the United States.

In the early nineteenth century, village studies were made, but mostly by missionaries who lived for long periods with "heathen" well before anthropology came into existence. Exotic peoples were also described by explorers, members of natural history expeditions, and journalists, such as Captain Cook and that relentless discoverer of "darkest" Africa, Sir Henry Stanley. It was not until the late nineteenth century that scholarly studies began to appear; one by Lewis H. Morgan on the Iroquois Indians came out in 1851 and another by Franz Boas on the Eskimos in 1888. Boas, originally a biologist, and Morgan, a lawyer, at first had not called themselves anthropologists, but were regarded as such by the students they influenced. Morgan did not found a university department, while Boas became the first Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in 1899.

The research model for social anthropology was not established until 1922 when A.R. Radcliffe-Brown published *The Andaman Islanders* and B. Malinowski *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. These two works set the conceptual model that American anthropology has followed ever since: a man or a woman goes to a small and self-contained remote community and comes back to report a culture as a unique whole, and as a whole that can be understood as a system of functionally interrelated parts. Margaret Mead still uses what she calls the "disciplined use of the primitive society as a conceptual model" even when she is analyzing the cultural character of whole modern nations or something as sweeping as teen-age problems, or the need to keep grandma in the home. Even today when most people think of anthropologists, they think of individual scholars living for years with some isolated, primitive tribe

like the Canadian Kwakiutl, the Zuni, or the Melanesian Dobu.

Yet in actuality American anthropology only paused to catch its breath and plunged from tribal studies of North American aborigines and South Sea islanders into Latin American, and especially Mexican, villages, there to study peasants. Redfield went to Tepoztlán just four years after Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski established the form of anthropological research.



His study led anthropology in a completely new direction, into peasant communities that were parts of much larger civilizations. A peasant village was very different from a tribe because it had a relationship with the city and was dependent on the city for its laws, religion, and many other aspects of its culture.

Redfield never went back to Tepoztlán, partly because he felt it was too large (2,500+ people then, about 9,978 now—there are 18,623 in the *municipio*) and too close to Mexico City. His most developed statement on the nature of peasant life, based upon the much smaller Mayan Indian village of Chan Kom, was published later in *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1941). By then he had become one of America's most distinguished and respected anthropologists.

The Tepoztlán study was, however, resumed. But by another man, Oscar Lewis. Lewis, then just three years out of graduate school at Columbia University, began his study in December 1943. Seventeen years had passed since Redfield had lived in Tepoztlán. Just as Redfield had been, Lewis was 29.

In the meantime, Redfield had come to realize that a Latin American village had to be understood, not in isolation as a primitive tribe, but as a part of the state and the civilization around it. When one of his students published an account of a French-Canadian parish, it occurred to him that a peasant village, "intermediate between the tribe and the modern city," had a universal quality. He speculated that it might be possible to clarify the typical common characteristics of peasants generally. "Peasant society and culture has something generic about it," he was to write in 1956. "It is a kind of arrangement of humanity with some similarities all over the world."<sup>7</sup>

### Lewis in Tepoztlán

The obscure young anthropologist who had gone to Tepoztlán, ostensibly to complete Redfield's earlier study, did not publish his findings until 1951, under the title, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*.<sup>8</sup> As a joint project of the Inter-American Indian Institute of Mexico and the National Indian Institute of the United States, the expedition led by Lewis seems to have had quasi-official status and to have been fairly well financed. Lewis's team included not only a number of Mexican anthropologists and student researchers, but two agronomists, two doctors, two social workers, and an artist. Lewis spent six months in Tepoztlán in 1943-44 and returned again during the summers of 1947 and 1948.

*Tepoztlán Restudied* was a bombshell. It was encyclopedic, running to

512 pages in contrast to Redfield's modest 247-page work. Lewis was now 37, Redfield 54. Though the book was dedicated to Redfield and Lewis acknowledged his gratitude to the senior man for his help in getting funds for the 1947-48 research, *Tepoztlán Restudied* was an all-out attack on Redfield's earlier book and the theories on the nature of villages and peasant society he had developed in the intervening 17 years.

In his summation Lewis described the contrast between the impressions given of Tepoztlán village in the two books:

*The impression given by Redfield's study of Tepoztlán is that of a relatively homogenous, isolated, smoothly functioning and well-integrated society made up of a contented and well-adjusted people. His picture of the village has a Rousseauan quality which glosses lightly over evidence of violence, disruption, cruelty, poverty, disease, suffering, and maladjustment. We are told little of poverty, economic problems or political schisms. Throughout his study we find an emphasis upon the cooperative and unifying factors in Tepoztecan society.<sup>9</sup>*

Lewis summed up his own counter-impressions of the same village:

*Our findings on the other hand, would emphasize the underlying individualism of Tepoztecan institutions and character, the lack of cooperation, the tensions between the villages within the municipio, the schisms within the village and the pervading quality of fear, envy, and distrust.<sup>10</sup>*

Redfield was later to call these summary characterizations "on the whole, just."<sup>11</sup>

Lewis wrote that his original intention was not to restudy Redfield's work but to continue it; "fundamental" differences had quickly emerged. He pointed to several of what he regarded as Redfield's errors of fact. He then disagreed with Red-

field's view that the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 had halted a trend toward a merging of class differences, saying "we found that the Revolution had a marked leveling influence." (For the rest of their careers the rather radical Lewis and the conservative Redfield would differ on the impact of revolutions.)

Lewis described Redfield's analysis of Tepoztlán society as "oversimplified, schematic and unreal." He claimed his own study had involved



"twice as much field work," (an inaccuracy as it was 12 to Redfield's 8 months), had used "new methods of studying culture and personality" (Rorschach and other psychological tests), and had relied upon "over 100 informants compared to about a dozen for Redfield" (a dubious claim, as it is unlikely Redfield would have lived in Tepoztlán for eight months and only talked to six people). Lewis said that, together with an El Salvador anthropologist, he had worked on "an intensive family study" to be published at a future date. (This seems to be a reference to his research on the "Martinez" family, eventually to appear in *Five Families* in 1959 and *Pedro Martinez* in 1964.)

Lewis speculated that Redfield had placed his emphasis on "the formal

and ritualistic aspects of life rather than the everyday life of people and their problems" because he was trying to prove his theories about the nature of peasant society and its relationship to urban-centered civilization. "Redfield's interest," he said, "was primarily in the study of a single cultural process: the evolution from folk to urban, rather than a well-rounded ethnological account."

Lewis accused Redfield of "a system of value judgments which contains the old Rousseauan notion of primitive peoples as noble savages, and the corollary that with civilization, has come the fall of man. Again and again in Redfield's writings," he went on, "there emerges the value judgment that folk (peasant) societies are good and urban societies bad." Lewis quoted Redfield as observing in 1939 that the "usual view of peasant life as something to be escaped, 'an ignominy to be shunned' may be wrong."<sup>12</sup>

Lewis also quoted the concluding passage of Redfield's book on the Mayans of Yucatan, *A Village That Chose Progress, Chan Kom Revisited*:

*The people of Chan Kom are, then, a people who have no choice but to go forward with technology, with a declining religious faith and moral conviction into a dangerous world. They are a people who must and will come to identify their interests with those of people far away, outside the traditional circle of their loyalties and political responsibilities. As such they should have the sympathy of readers of these pages.<sup>13</sup>*

Such sentiments were anathema to Lewis. He complained that the "same old values" kept reappearing in Redfield's work, even his most recent. "Progress and urbanization are now seen as inevitable," Lewis wrote, "but they are still evil."<sup>14</sup> Lewis's views sound strangely dated today, when most world leaders see increased urbanization as an evil and threat to their nations' stability, but they must have had a certain trendiness in 1951.

Lewis accused Redfield of "cultural primitivism" or the discontent of the civilized within civilization.<sup>15</sup> The attack must have shocked the anthropological community of the early 1950s; certainly Redfield himself was stunned.

Redfield has warned that with continued urbanization would come greater secularization and individualism, family instability, a decline in parental authority and respect for elders, and greater social disorganization. Lewis took strong issue on

Lewis also described the psychology of the Tepoztecan villagers as "a psychology of living with problems, rather than solving them, of constantly adjusting to difficulties, rather than eliminating them." It is the first hint we find of his eventual theory of a global "culture of poverty."<sup>17</sup>

#### Oscar Lewis Considered

*Tepoztlán Restudied* did not enjoy the popular success of Lewis's later books on Mexico and he went off to India in 1952 to spend eight months

*Martinez* and *La Vida* of seemingly bringing poor Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to life in his long tape-recorded autobiographical interviews.<sup>20</sup> He interested a number of Americans for the first time in the poor of other countries; his "culture of poverty" hypothesis was to significantly influence the Johnson Administration's "war on poverty."

Yet, despite my great admiration for many of the Lewis books, over the years I have come to feel a deepening sense of uneasiness and curiosity about them, as to what was the thing that seemed to lend them, those written after *Five Families*, that tiny touch of the spurious, that faint hint of staginess.

Several things have troubled me. Tepoztlán, beginning with *Five Families*, is no longer given its true name but fictionalized as "Azteca," though anyone in Mexico interested knows it is the same village.<sup>22</sup> The characters are also given false names; we are told the true identity of the Sanchez family "must remain unknown," that the true names of the five families have been changed to "protect them," that the Martinez family "must remain anonymous."<sup>23</sup>

Why? In my own village studies, subjects insisted their real names and photographs be used. In some cases they materially benefited. It is sometimes said that Lewis's tape-recorded autobiographies were inspired by the tremendous popular success in Brazil of *Child of the Dark*, the autobiography of Carolina Maria de Jesus, a São Paulo rag picker whose published diary broke all book sales records in Brazil when it appeared in 1960.<sup>24</sup> Carolina's death in March 1977 was front page news; I happened to be in Brazil at the time and it was clear she was a much beloved and respected figure and in her old age had become something of a television talk show personality. In *Child of the Dark*, Carolina attacked Brazilian presidents by name in the most scathing language, yet she never felt she needed "protection" and, indeed, profited enormously



the question of parental authority, said he found "no decline" in Tepoztlán and, indeed, he was to make the harsh, authoritarian father the central figure in *The Children of Sanchez* and *Pedro Martinez*.

Lewis did find, as had Redfield 17 years earlier, "great value placed on work, strong ties to the land, the view of farming as the ideal occupation, the persistence of almost tribal localism, the stability of the family, the continued belief in *los aires*, *mal ojo*, *El Tepoztoco* [evil winds, the Evil Eye, and a local legendary folk hero] and herbal medicine."<sup>16</sup> Thomas Wolfe once said that every man's life was a search for his father; one wonders what Lewis's own must have been like.

as a consultant with the Ford Foundation. During this time he did manage to undertake a rather conventional village study just outside Delhi which was published in 1958 as *Village Life in Northern India*.<sup>18</sup> It was not until the publication of *Five Families, Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*<sup>19</sup> that both his fame and theories about the culture of poor people were finally launched.

Oscar Lewis was brilliant; more, after Margaret Mead, he remains perhaps the best known and most widely read American anthropologist. A thought too gloomy perhaps, a shade too trendy. But good. He performed a major, if shocking, public service in *The Children of Sanchez*, *Pedro*



from her notoriety. And Mexico is a far more liberal country than Brazil.

The lurid sections in *La Vida* and the latter half of *The Children of Sanchez* are also bothersome to anyone who has ever made village or urban slum studies. Episodes such as Roberto's spectacular prison escape in Veracruz or the two forcible seductions Consuelo falls prey to while trying to break into the Mexican film industry may certainly be true, but do they really fit in a book purporting to present a picture of representative lower-class Mexican life?

Lewis also had a pronounced urban bias. While his publisher notes he was born in New York City and "grew up on a farm in upstate New York," he did spend eight years in Manhattan attending the City College of New York and Columbia University and a good bit of the "city slicker" shows through. In *Tepoztlán Restudied* he described villagers who moved to Mexico City as gaining weight and looking "happier and more relaxed." He described one girl as feeling, once she had escaped Tepoztlán, as if "a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders." It probably was true in her case; but Lewis goes on to generalize, "Of course, this sensation is common among all people who shift from a small rural town to a large city."<sup>25</sup> There is no "of course" about it; most of the villagers I have known become culturally disoriented, depressed, and rather frightened when they go to the city.

Most disturbing is the demonstrable rigidity of Lewis's ideas. As a young man he found Redfield's description of Tepoztlán had a "Rousseauan quality" which ignored the "pervading quality of fear, envy, and distrust in interpersonal relations." Twenty years later, writing in his preface to *Pedro Martinez*, he found contemporary life in Tepoztlán hardly encouraged "a Rousseauan view" but was still characterized by "a pervading quality of fear, envy and distrust in interpersonal relations." A generation later, Lewis not only found the village unchanged,



Carolina, author of *Child of the Dark*.

but used exactly the same words to describe it.<sup>26</sup>

### The Controversy

In 1951, publication of *Tepoztlán Restudied* brought only the restrained comment from Redfield that it was "rich in fact and provocative in ideas." He noted Lewis had "corrected and deepened" the "sketch of the same people I wrote about many years ago" and that Lewis had "put before other students my errors and his own in a context of intellectual discussion." It was all to the good, he reasoned, because Lewis had "once more shown the power of social science to revise its conclusions and move toward the truth."<sup>27</sup>

Then two years later, in 1953, while delivering a series of lectures at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, Redfield fought back.<sup>28</sup>

"When I was a young man beginning the study of anthropology," he told his audience, "I wrote a book about a large village in Mexico. Seventeen years later, Dr. Oscar Lewis, who is now at the University of Illinois, wrote another book about the same village." Redfield then quoted the passages from Lewis's book already cited. He went on, "The two accounts of the same community do give these contrasting impressions: the one of harmony and a good life, the other of a life burdened with suffering and torn with dissension and corroding passion." Redfield granted that Lewis had established that half the villagers were landless, some suffered serious want, brute

force had been used in politics, the rich and the poor appeared to dislike one another, there was some quarreling, stealing, and violence and "especially within many families there were many kinds of frustrations, suspicions, and sufferings."

Redfield admitted it was if the two books were about "two different peoples occupying the same town."

How did he explain it? Had they changed so much in 17 years? Neither he nor Lewis, he noted, thought so.

No, the difference in the two descriptions of life and character in Tepoztlán, Redfield said, "is to be found in the difference between the two investigators."

"It must be recognized," he went on, "that the personal interests and cultural values of the investigator influence the content of a description of a village." Any village study, he said, was bound to be written "in a way in some significant degree determined by the choices made, perhaps quite unconsciously" by the person making the study.

"There are hidden questions behind the two books that have been written about Tepoztlán. The hidden question behind my book is, 'What do these people enjoy?' The hidden question behind Dr. Lewis's book is, 'What do these people suffer from?'"

It is the most damning criticism ever made of Oscar Lewis and his work. Neither man was ever again quite able to let the argument go.

Aside from the 12 months in Tepoztlán, Lewis spent little time in villages. Research for the only peasant family in *Five Families* was done during the earlier Tepoztlán stay. So was much of the research for *Pedro Martinez*, though Lewis did go back to expand this with tape-recorded interviews, he curiously does not specify for how long. The India study was done from his home and Ford Foundation office in New

Delhi, with seven Indian students, as Lewis himself acknowledged, doing much of the field research. Aside from some observation of Blackfoot Indians in Canada, Texas farmers, and Cuban sugar plantation workers, Lewis spent almost no time in villages. His best work was all done in urban slums.

Lewis's dislike of Tepoztlán was evident. He found its peasantry neither open nor friendly and wrote that "love, tenderness, kindness, gener-

tried to generalize from these pictures of one community to a larger, global frame.

Understandably, Redfield in 1953 dismissed Lewis's charge that his perception of Tepoztlán was influenced by trying to prove a theory about urban influences on peasant society, saying he had not developed such thinking at the time he wrote his Tepoztlán study. Instead, he said, he had gone to Tepoztlán without any theoretical idea at all and had merely investigated what interested him. "I

Lewis's concern with "personal disharmony and unhappiness," Redfield went on, now made it possible to look at Tepoztlán with "somewhat stereoscopic vision." He was not impressed by the batteries of Rorschach and other psychological tests Lewis and his team subjected the villagers to, saying village life.

*is not something that is given one as out of a vending machine by putting in the appropriate coins of method and technique. There is no one ultimate and objective account of the human whole. Each account, if it preserves the human quality at all, is a created product in which the human qualities of the creator—the outside viewer and describer—are one element.*

*None of us can truly say that his way of work is necessarily the best way or that it either should or will prevail over all others. All advance in knowledge is a dialectic, a conversation.... Among the many and varied mental instruments for the understanding of little communities is to be included a controlled conversation, a dialectic of opposites, carried on within oneself.<sup>30</sup>*

Redfield argued that no one studying a village should be too concerned

osity, and joy appeared much less often than anger, hate, irritability, jealousy, fear, and envy.... There is a great deal of hostility...expressed in the form of malicious gossip, stealing, secretive destruction of property, ridicule, deprecation, envy, and sorcery...an oppressive atmosphere."<sup>29</sup> It is astonishing that Lewis eventually went on to apply his "culture of poverty" thesis to all the world's poorest workers and peasants including, in Mexico itself, at least the lower third of the rural and urban population."

One man's *Our Town* may be the next's *Peyton Place*; both contain certain phases of the complex truth that is small town America. Yet neither would be much help if one

saw the almost ritual meaningfulness of the Tepoztecan of his daily work," he said, "I saw the delight taken in preparations for the many festivals and the pleasure, solemn but deep, at their consummation. I saw the pride the people had in their little mountain-walled country, so deeply grown into their thoughts and feelings." Redfield said he was aware of his study's incompleteness. "I think I was saying, 'Look! Here is an aspect of peasant life you people up there may not have been thinking about.' I did not think of my book as a rounded study. Indeed, I expressly disclaimed it was. I thought of it as a statement of one phase of complex truth."



*The village of Tzintzuntzan.*



about the methods of the natural and behavioral sciences. "For," he concluded,

*understanding is increased and the needs of mankind are met by any and all honest descriptions, responsible to the facts and intellectually defensible. To see what is there with the perceptions that our own humanity allows, to render our report so as to preserve the significance of these perceptions while submitting them to the questions and tests of our fellows—that is our common duty, whatever the particular means we take to realize it. Understanding, and her apotheosis, wisdom, are the true gods within the temple; science is not, she is only a handmaiden and serves many others.*<sup>31</sup>

### The Contemporary Challenge

When I arrived for my first visit to Mexico in early April 1977, I had never heard of Robert Redfield, though I soon learned he is widely known and respected here. So is George Foster, who studied the Tarascan Indians and mestizos of Tzintzuntzan,<sup>32</sup> a village on Patzcuaro Lake in the central Mexican highlands, just down the road from a village called Huecorio, where I have been doing a short village study of my own. Foster's account of Mexican village life, while he is not as deep as Redfield or Lewis, is better balanced. He is less serious, has a good sense of humor, and is more fun to read. While he does not make us think, as Redfield does, or shock us, as Lewis does, Foster's rural Mexico is more relaxed and enjoyable.

Yet the books of Redfield and Foster are rarely to be found outside libraries today whereas glossy paperbacks of the Lewis books are displayed alongside the guidebooks at almost every bookstall in Mexico City. *The Children of Sanchez* is currently being made into a Hollywood film, starring Anthony Quinn. The shadow Lewis cast in Mexico is still enormous. And, I believe, by being so one-sided, distorts our perception of the Mexican poor.

Years ago I was greatly impressed by a passage in his introduction to *Five Families*: "This book has grown out of my conviction that anthropologists have a new function in the modern world: to serve as students and reporters of the great mass of peasants and urban dwellers of the underdeveloped countries who constitute almost 80 percent of the world's population."<sup>33</sup> I thought journalists should serve as reporters too, for if there was one big "story" of our times, the changes brought by population growth must be it.

Almost from the first, once I undertook village studies myself, I was bothered by the gloominess of Lewis's viewpoint. As I remarked with some surprise in a book of village portraits, once I had actually gone to live with villagers and worked side by side with them in the fields, I lost my preconceived notion of "Afro-Asian villages as dreary collections of huts, flies, grim fatalistic inhabitants, misery and no fun; none of the settings were sad at all; they were cheerful and possessed of an intensity of life beyond all my expectations."<sup>34</sup> In retrospect, I realize at least some of those expectations were formed from reading Oscar Lewis.

Anyone writing about poor people can ask himself, "Do these people lead a good life or a bad one?" Lewis reported the life of the poor as he saw it, even if he seems to have ended up magnifying the nastier aspects of this life. He may have focused too closely on the family. Individual and family life the world over tends to have strong elements of the tragic; man is essentially alone and it is a short way to the grave. But social life, in villages or anywhere else, is much more of a comedy and it goes on forever.

Chekhov's peasants, for example, can be coarse, drunken, and brutal but others possess a "quietness of soul," a sense of joy in nature, a feeling for the land and their native village that ring so true I recall many of the real life peasants I have known

over the past 20 years. Above all, Chekhov's stories are endowed with a moral certainty, a clear vision of good and evil, that we do not find in the Lewis books. Lewis's characters seem to share a common sense of moral ambiguity and spiritual emptiness. While such may be true of many modern city dwellers, the great strength of the peasants I have observed, even those uprooted in cities, is their moral fiber and deep religious faith.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second part of this Report will examine Redfield's concept of "the peasant view of the good life" Lewis's hypothesis of "the culture of poverty," as the intellectual horizons of the two men reached beyond Tepoztlán and Mexico to the global stage.<sup>35</sup>

(February 1978)

## NOTES

1. A journalist specializing in reporting villages has four roles: (1) the village participant in work, drink, and other activity; (2) the creative writer, drawing a narrative from stenographically recorded dialogue; (3) the reporter (a craftsman, rather like a shoemaker) who must keep up to date on current events and write very short articles summing up what has been learned in relation to these events. The anonymous essays I do for *The Economist* of London usually run 600-800 words as compared to a typical village narrative which may go 200 pages of typescript or more; (4) the critical analyst who must think what it all means and whether generalized conceptions can be drawn from his work (rather like the anthropologist does). Each role greatly affects, temporarily, one's own life style.
2. Richard Critchfield, "How Lonely Sits the City," *Papers* (New York: Alicia Patterson Fund, 1971).
3. Richard Critchfield, "Sketches of the Green Revolution," *Papers* (New York: Alicia Patterson Fund, 1970), condensation in *The Golden Bowl Be Broken; Peasant Life in Four Cultures* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 98-213.
4. Richard Critchfield, "Riders Together," *Papers* (New York: Alicia Patterson Fund, 1970), condensation in *The Golden Bowl Be Broken*, pp. 45-98.
5. Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán—a Mexican Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930).
6. See Anton Chekhov, *The Steppe and Peasants*, perhaps the two best stories of nineteenth-century Russian village life.
7. Robert Redfield, introduction to Horace Miner's *St. Denis, a French Canadian Parish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939) and Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).
8. Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village—Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951).
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 428-429.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 429. Additional Lewis quotes on pages and are from *Tepoztlán Restudied*, "Summary and Conclusions," pp. 427-448.
11. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community, Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 134.
12. Redfield, introduction to *St. Denis*.
13. Robert Redfield, *A Village That Chose Progress; Chan Kom Revisited* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). This was Redfield's restudy of the village described in his major work, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941).
14. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 435.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 435. The concept of "cultural primitivism" comes from Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, in their *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935), p. 7.
16. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 445.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 447.
18. Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India: Studies in a Delhi Village* (with Victor Barnouw) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958).
19. Oscar Lewis, *Five Families; Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959).
20. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez; Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1963); Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martinez; A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York: Random House, 1964); and Oscar Lewis, *La Vida; A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966).
21. For years, I have prefaced my own village studies by noting, "As will be self-evident I owe a debt of gratitude to the late Oscar Lewis and his technique of portraying the daily life of ordinary people by drawing upon detailed observation, interviews and recorded conversation." (*The Golden Bowl Be Broken*, p. 4).
- 4). I have, however, only followed the technique Lewis used in *Five Families*, which I consider his best work, where dialogue was noted down stenographically as it flowed naturally. Every reporter knows how easy it is to "lead" people during interviews, whether autobiographical, or whether a tape recorder is used. Lewis tried to check this with his Rashomon-like technique of having several family members relate their stories. As I observed earlier, Lewis's later books are powerful as a new kind of literary art, but not science.
22. Tepoztlán village first appears with the fictional name, "Azteca," in *Five Families*, p. 24, as "a Mexican highland village which I call Azteca, about 60 miles south of Mexico City." In *Tepoztlán Restudied*, Lewis also puts its location as about 60 miles south of Mexico City, although Redfield in his *Tepoztlán* puts the distance at 50 miles, a more accurate figure.
23. Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez*, p. v, *Five Families*, p. xi; *Pedro Martinez*, p. x. This cloak of anonymity continues to be preserved. In a letter I received from Ruth M. Lewis, the author's widow, dated March 23, 1977, Mrs. Lewis wrote, "I am very sorry to disappoint you but it will be impossible for me to help you contact the children of Sanchez, for obvious ethical and professional reasons. The village of Tepoztlán is, of course, available to one and all." Mrs. Lewis did obligingly give me the names of an elderly couple in the village "who were never our informants whom I would need to protect." Mrs. Lewis did not appear to realize that the same week she wrote both the original subject of "Sanchez" and his daughter "Consuelo" had identified themselves in the Mexico City press in protests concerning the filming of *The Children of Sanchez* by a Hollywood studio.

Mrs. Lewis also observed:

*I was in Mexico last month after an absence of four years and found it quite changed. The standard of living, but especially the mode of dress and use of leisure, have become quite Americanized and middle-class. In the Sanchez family, the grandchildren dress better, eat better, have more schooling than their parents. I would have to be there longer*

to see if the changes go deeper. Other than the use of birth control (after having five or six children), I suspect that values and behavior are pretty much the same. The village, too, has this puzzling mixture of change and continuity, and it takes a lot of patient digging to sort them out.

Mrs. Lewis, who worked closely with her husband in his field research and the preparation of his manuscripts—she prepared a long, detailed guide for observing and reporting behavior of families for the original Tepoztlán study, for instance—disappointingly did not disclose the requested names of any Mexican or American anthropologists associated with them in the Mexican studies who might have been more forthcoming. The reluctance of the Lewises to submit their work to what Redfield called “submitting...perceptions...to the questions and tests of our fellows,” considerably weakens their claim to have portrayed representative behavior among the Mexican poor. Redfield himself and a good many anthropologists studying villages did not choose to conceal the identities of their subjects. Sometimes in village studies the practice of anonymity can be carried to absurdity, as in *A Village Economy: Land and People of Huecorio* by Michael Belshaw, an economist (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), in which the author gave his subjects fictional names while describing them in sketches that made their identities unmistakable and, in many cases, providing photographs of them. Within days of staying in this village myself, I knew who was who.

The notion that an author is “protecting” poor people from local political or police authorities by not giving their names in village studies is rarely valid because these authorities are usually the first to know about the work in progress and the identities of the subjects anyway. Indeed, the only ones who seem to be affected by the practice are readers and the author’s co-professionals. Journalists almost never engage in giving anonymity even though the impact of what they write is much more immediate and can be much more damaging. Nor do most people seek anonymity. In 1971-72, I applied the methods tried out in village studies in a series of portraits for *The Washington Star* on American life styles.

These were long, detailed, and intimate. Yet, given the option, only two of the twelve subjects, both single women, chose to be fictionalized. Indeed, as each study moved along, the urban Americans responded just like the villagers had; they began to take the work very seriously, wanted their stories to be as honest and fair as I could make them, and wanted to be identified by name, though we did use drawings rather than photographs. George M. Foster in his *Empire’s Children*, said of the villagers of Tzintzuntzan he studied, “an account is much more living and human if real persons take part, talk, and act.... Weighing the pros and cons, I finally decided to use real names whenever possible, and fictitious names only when subject matter made it seem desirable. In *Tepoztlán*, Redfield also used real names.

24. Carolina Maria de Jesus, *Child of the Dark* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1960, original title, *Quarto de Despejo*).

25. Lewis, *Tepoztlán Restudied*, p. 295.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 428-429, and Pedro Martinez, p. xxxiii.

27. Redfield, quoted on back cover, paperback reprint of *Tepoztlán Restudied*, University of Illinois Press, 1961.

28. These lectures appeared in book form, *The Little Community*, two years later and provide, pp. 133-138, the quotes from Redfield, pages 7 to 8, unless otherwise identified. As early as March 1952, however, in a guest lecture on the evolution of civilization at Cornell University, Redfield had criticized Lewis for “taking his own values” to Tepoztlán. He said anthropologists should not become so objective as to “not have humanity” and quoted the *New Yorker* magazine that libraries, not individual books, should present every point of view. See, final pages of Redfield’s *The Primitive World and its Transformations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953).

29. Lewis, *Tepoztlán Restudied*, pp. 292-295.

30. Redfield, *The Little Community*, p. 148.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

32. George Foster, *Empire’s Children: The People of Tzintzuntzan* (Mexico: Imprenta Nuevo Mundo, 1948). Ralph L. Beals in *Chevan: A Sierra Tarascan Village* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Institute of Social Anthropology, 1946) provides interesting confirmation of Foster’s findings on Tarascan Indian culture, plus a good deal on Mexican village witchcraft, which has startling resemblances to that of rural Egypt.

33. Lewis, *Five Families*, p. 15.

34. Critchfield, *The Golden Bowl Be Broken*, p. 4.

35. I went into village studies eight years ago after the experience of four years in Vietnam and a year covering the White House, disillusioned and troubled. The villagers I have since met, to put it simply, have restored my faith in man.