EVERYDAY HELL

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LA VIDA: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York. By Oscar Lewis. 669 pp. New York: Random House. $10.

By MICHAEL HARRINGTON

"LA VIDA" is unquestionably one of the most important books published in the United States this year. It is a shattering account of three generations of the Rios family in the slums of San Juan and the Puerto Rican enclaves of New York. Much of it is told in the tape-recorded words of the subjects themselves. The book is in large part, as Oscar Lewis says, "a picture of family disruption, violence, brutality, cheapness of life, lack of love, lack of education, lack of medical facilities—in short, a picture of incredible deprivation the effects of which cannot be wiped out in a single generation. This Zolaesque reality emerges from a Puerto Rican society in which the island average income per person rose from $120 to $740 between 1940 and 1963.

The casual, matter- of-fact descriptions of social hell that abound in "La Vida" are sometimes so appalling that the middle-class reader is in danger of being overwhelmed. How, exactly, does he assimilate to his experience the reminiscence of a crippled child who tells of having played the "game" of prostitution? But then three of the major characters in this book actually worked at the profession for a period, and one mother entertains her children by singing "dirty" songs. More conventionally, yet still not quite what the middle-class reader is used to, the five central figures of "La Vida" have already had a total of 20 marriages (17 of them consensual unions, 3 of them legal) and they are clearly not done yet.

Nevertheless, in a probing introduction Lewis argues that there are in these lower depths certain strengths. There is a fortitude and resilience in the Rios family, and its members are capable of great kindness despite the brutality of their circumstances. "Money and material possessions," he writes, "although important, do not motivate their major decisions. Their deepest need is for love, and their life is a relentless search for it." In analyzing this coexistence of the pathological and the healthy, Lewis gives considerable precision to a term that he originated: the "culture of poverty." And he provides some important theoretical insights of considerable relevance to some of the political debates going on in America today.

Essentially what Lewis does is to incorporate two of the most popular oversimplifications about the poor into a complex idea. On the one hand, there is the belief that the impoverished have been spared the corruptions of affluence and are therefore a potential source of social regeneration. The extreme version of this thesis is the idealization by Frantz Fanon (author of "The Wretched of the Earth") of the "people of the shanty towns" as the creative and revolutionary force of the second half of the century. In American terms, the Black Power ideologists are making a similar claim for the victimized inhabitants of the Negro ghetto. And on the other hand, there is the view that poverty holds only degradation. The compassionate partisans of this view believe that they must help the passive and defeated poor who cannot help themselves, while the reactionaries believe that the slum dwellers "got that way" because they wanted to and lacked Goldwaterite virtues of thrift and enterprise.

Lewis's definition of the culture of poverty reveals the half-truths and large falsehoods behind these contradictory myths. Those who dwell in this subculture do not "belong" to any of the institutions of the larger society. Unemployment and underemployment make them marginal in the labor market; they do not join political parties; they spend rather than save, and pay more for inferior merchandise since they do not have access to cheap credit and don't shop in supermarkets; and so on. Now there are, and have been, poor people who did "belong." There are primitive and utterly impoverished tribes which nevertheless possess an integrated and self-sufficient culture. And various American immigrant groups, most notably the Eastern European Jews, came to this country with intact traditions that protected them from the extreme social and spiritual consequences of being poor.

MR. HARRINGTON is the author of "The Other America" and "The Accidental Century."

Thus, Lewis's culture of poverty is a very specific and unique phenomenon. It occurs in societies in which the cash economy and rapid change subvert the old ways and a group is left behind without either money or even a hungry solidarity.

People inhabiting the culture of poverty, then, are "out of it," and their life is the experience of a disintegration. This is the profoundly negative side of being poor (Gunnar Myrdal was thinking along these lines when he said that the underclass of the affluent society is a "non-revolutionary proletariat"), and it will disappoint all the romantic expectations from Fanon to Black Power and back. And yet, as Lewis emphasizes, the very absence of regular institutions within the culture of poverty forces the people to create their own associations and values, in order to survive. The *(Continued on Page 92)*

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problem is, the middle-class visitor from the Mars of the larger society will often not recognize this social ingenuity, even when he comes face to face with it.

For example, the marriage patterns — or more precisely, the endless succession of consensual unions — in the Rios family will strike most readers as chaotic. Yet the men, without jobs, income or property to pass on to their offspring, see no point in getting involved in legal entanglements. And the women fear being tied to men who are often immature and unreliable—and by refusing to give the fathers of their children the legal status of husbands, they maintain a stronger claim on the children if the couple separates. From the point of view of the slum there is a very real logic here; it is barely apparent, though to the outsider who has never had to cope with the kinds of problems which confront the Rios family every day.

It is from this vantage point that Lewis can see the neighborhood gang as a "considerable advance" over the more ravaging despairs and *anomie* that can be found in the culture of poverty. One remembers the fearful case in point that Kenneth Clark has described: in Harlem in the 1950's when the police succeeded in breaking up the violent gangs, that moment was the start of the narcotics plague. The comfortable white could not understand that the gangs were a social invention as well as a police problem. Their destruction created a vacuum that was partly filled by heroin.

In any case, Lewis is quite right to understand the culture of poverty as a dialectic of strength and weakness in which the desperate need to survive simultaneously brutalizes and provokes a certain dignity into life. If these people are not a fount of revolutionary purity, neither are they an inert mass to be manipulated, "social-engineered" or nightsticked for their own good. For when political and social hope penetrates down into the culture of poverty, as happened with the Southern Negro during the last decade, the latent nobility surfaces, and, if it cannot transform modern society, it still makes a disproportionate contribution to social change and the common goood.

I have, to be sure, some questions and reservations about aspects of Lewis's discussion. I think that the number of Americans who live in the culture of poverty, and are poor, is greater than his estimate; I would not refer to the bureaucratic, collectivist system of Communism as "socialism"; I do not think that there is a "social-work solution" to poverty in America any more than in the Third World. But I have concentrated on my agreements with Lewis (which far outweigh the disagreements anyway) because I think "La Vida" is one more brilliant demonstration of the validity and profundity of the method Lewis has pioneered: the meticulous description, and tape-recorded self-depiction, of the daily life of a single yet archetypical family of the poor.

And finally, for all of the great interest of Lewis's introduction, the emotional force of "La Vida" comes, of course, from the Rios family itself. The poor, I have long felt, needed a novelist more than a statistician—and Lewis has proved once again that perhaps they are their own best novelists. The Rios family makes the dialectical concept of the culture of poverty unbearably real; the world which they describe is intolerable and their reminiscences should move a stone to tears. Yet they have not been overwhelmed; they have a capacity to act on their own behalf that demands liberation, not *noblesse oblige*.