

**SYLLABUS:** The Culture of Poverty in Mexico  
Dr. Emily Wakild  
Thursdays 3-5:30  
Tribble

**FALL 2008:** HIST 390D  
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Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist from the University of Illinois, studied Mexican people from about 1940 to 1970. Lewis spent many years first in rural Mexico and then he followed rural people as they left the countryside and came to inhabit impoverished areas of the city. In his studies, Lewis came up with a controversial thesis—that there was a “culture of poverty” that characterized poor people, mainly urban slum dwellers, which made it unable for people raised in poverty to escape it. Some of his works were banned in Mexico and the provoked considerable controversy among anthropologists, policymakers, and intellectuals. While many scholars have debated the utility, or lack thereof, of such a claim, Lewis’s volumes on the Mexican poor provide us with an enormous resource of primary description that can be used to understand the rural to urban transition. In addition to its theoretical implications, Lewis’s writing, including thirteen books and scores of articles, can be treated as primary sources documenting the human side of various rural and urban families. These intimate details about private life provide a deep repository for investigating changes in the lives of his subjects.

In this seminar, we will begin by reading some of Lewis’ better known works including *Tepoztlán*, *Five Families*, and *The Children of Sánchez*. The first third of the semester will be devoted to getting a handle on Lewis’s methods, ideas, and descriptions by reading and thoughtfully discussing his work. Students will then undergo the process of researching and writing an article length contribution of original historical scholarship. Each will choose a topic relating to either the controversial nature of Lewis’ thesis and its application both inside and outside Mexico or to the insights Lewis’s studies might provide into village or urban life in Mexico. Students will write abstracts, literature reviews, primary document analyses, and detailed outlines as they prepare the final paper. Because historical research is an ongoing process that requires multiple iterations of the same skills, students will turn in an initial draft to be reviewed by a peer and the professor. The final product will be a substantial revision of that draft, incorporating the suggestions and advice of the reviewers. Students wishing to further develop their research paper may choose to work towards honors in history.

### **Course Objectives:**

This course aims for students to:

1. Interrogate the work of Oscar Lewis as a platform for viewing twentieth-century Mexican history.
2. Contribute a work of original historical scholarship of substantial length to the historiography of Modern Mexico.

**Required Texts:**

Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*  
and *The Children of Sánchez: An Autobiography of a Mexican Family*  
Susan M. Rigdon, *The Culture Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* [**\*\***please note this book is out of print—see me if you cannot locate online]

Various articles, chapters, reviews, and documents found on the class Blackboard site and denoted in the syllabus with a **B** after the title.

**Recommended Supplemental Texts:**

William H. Beezley & Colin MacLachlan, *El Gran Pueblo: A History of Greater Mexico*  
Gilbert Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*  
Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, Fifth edition

**Assignments** (More information to follow):

Class Participation		10%
Paper Abstract and Short Bibliography (Oct. 2)	1-2 pages	10%
Literature Review (min. 5 books) (Oct. 16)	4-6 pages	10%
Primary Document Analysis (1-5 docs) (Oct. 23)	4-6 pages	10%
Thesis and Detailed Outline (Oct. 30)	1 page min.	10%
Draft and Draft Peer Review (Nov. 13, Nov. 20)	25-30 pages; 2 pages	10%
Final Paper (Dec. 4)	25-30 pages	40%

**Participation and Attendance:**

Dynamic, engaged participation and attendance are required in every class discussion. Participation includes active listening, asking questions about reading and lecture material, responding to the ideas of your classmates, taking notes, offering ideas and comments, completing reading assignments, engaging in intellectual debates, and considering alternative points of view. You must participate to succeed in this class.

Because of the nature of this research seminar, we will not meet as a class throughout the entire semester. This makes our initial class meetings extremely vital. You will be permitted one (1) excused absence from the scheduled class meetings without a grade penalty, although that absence will be frowned upon. Beyond the one absence, missed classes will severely reduce your overall course grade.

**Office Hours:**

I welcome visits to my office to discuss course material during the listed office hours. If you are unable to make it to my office during those hours, I am available a limited number of other hours by appointment. I much prefer in-person inquiries to email communication. I will not respond to emails that discuss absences, missed work, or grades. Appropriate uses of email include appointment scheduling and assignment clarification.

**Drafts and Grade Disputes:**

I am willing to look over paper drafts if I receive your draft (by email or hardcopy) at least 48 hours before the assignment is due. Please feel free to also take your essays to the writing center for additional assistance. I also welcome discussions about comments on graded papers, particularly if you have a mind towards improvement. Such conversations will often help you improve on future assignments. In the very rare cases where a student wishes to dispute the grade he or she earned, I require a written statement of at least one page outlining the specific reasons for reconsidering the grade earned.

**Late Work Policy:**

Without prior approval, late papers are assessed a penalty of one letter grade per day late (an A- would become a B-, or a C+ would become a D+, and so on). Penalties start once papers are collected at the beginning of class—meaning if you walk in to class five minutes late, your paper will lose one full letter grade.

**Special Needs:**

If you have a disability that may require an accommodation for taking this course, please contact the Learning Assistance Center (758-5929) within the first two weeks of the semester. Additionally, please meet with me as soon as possible.

**Academic Honesty:**

Plagiarism, or representing another person's ideas as your own, will not be tolerated regardless of circumstances. It will result in a failing course grade and possible disciplinary action. For questions about plagiarism and suggestions on how to avoid it, visit the library's guide at

<http://zsr.wfu.edu/research/guides/plagiarism.html>

**Emergencies:**

In the case of a natural disaster or pandemic crisis that prevents classes from meeting students should continue to follow the reading outlined on the syllabus and continue working on paper assignments. If the university closes during exam periods (midterm or final) those exams will be done at home and sent back to the professor. Participation will be graded on classes that did meet.

**Seminar Schedule:**

Week 1: Culture and Method

(Aug 28) Readings: Ginsburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes" **B**

Geertz, "Toward a Theory of Culture" **B**

Lewis, Culture of Poverty in *Society* 1998 **B**

Week 2: Rural Beginnings: Applying the Method to Tepoztlán

(Sep 4) Readings: Redfield, *Tepoztlán* **B**

Lewis, *Tepoztlán* **B**

Week 3: Families and Mobility

(Sep 11) Readings: Introduction and Two Families from *Five Families*

Lewis, Culture of Poverty (3 articles) **B**

Wilkie, An Index of Poverty, from *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change since 1910* **B**

Braceros Documents **B**

Week 4: Children of Sánchez and Controversy

(Sep 18) Readings: *Children of Sánchez* complete

Patrick Oster, "Fayuqueros" **B**

*Children of Sánchez* Reviews **B**

Week 5: Cross-Cultural Applications: Lewis beyond Mexico

(Sep 23) Readings: Carmen Teresa Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia, Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies*, chapter on Culture of Poverty **B**

Oscar Lewis, intro to *A Study of Slum Culture: Backgrounds for La Vida* **B**

Lewis, "Mexico and India" **B**

Daniel P. Moynihan, intro to *On Understanding Poverty* **B**

Week 6: A Cultural Façade?: One Author's Assessment

(Oct 2) Readings: Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, complete

Darnell, Review of *Culture Façade* **B**

Paper Topic Abstract with Short Bibliography due (3-5 primary sources; 8-10 secondary)

Week 7: (Oct 9) Independent research and writing in consultation with professor

Week 8: (Oct 16) Literature Review Due

Week 9: (Oct 23) Primary Document Analysis Due

Week 10: (Oct 30) Thesis and Detailed Outline Due

Week 11: (Nov 6) Independent research and writing

Week 12: (Nov 13) **Full Draft of Paper Due**

Week 13: (Nov 20) Peer Reviews of Paper due

Week 14: THANKSGIVING

Week 15: (Dec 4) Final Paper Due

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Subject:  
Author: Wake Forest  
Keywords:  
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