

# Inter-American Notes

RICHARD M. MORSE

Richard McGee Morse died April 17, 2001, at his home in Petionville, Haiti. He inspired many generations of Latin Americanist academics, above all by using his wit to demonstrate the difference between being serious and being solemn. He was also a true Americanist, a comparative historian of processes of urbanization, settlement and frontiers, language, politics and ideas in the Americas.

Morse always thought it improbable luck that he had turned out a Latin American historian. He was born June 26, 1922, and perhaps thanks to his father's commercial connections to Japan and his mother's literary taste, grew up subtly maladjusted to his straitlaced milieu of Greenwich, Connecticut. At Princeton he might have remained just the clever literary magazine editor, a precocious disciple of Allan Tate and R.P. Blackmur. But in 1940, blockaded from Europe, he traveled to Havana instead. That summer with the *pueblo* of Old Havana was his epiphany. It shaped his lifelong conviction that Latin Americans possess something that North Americans lack. Back at Princeton, he majored in Public and International Affairs, traveling to Chile and Mexico on Woodrow Wilson fellowships, studying Latin American history with Dana Munro and his preceptor Woodrow Borah, and studying literature with Américo Castro and Augusto Centeno. From Centeno he absorbed arguments of the Generation of 1898 that resonate with Tate's Southern Regionalism, arguments that nations and individuals must confront their deep traditions in order to become modern.

His discovery of Brazil was more deliberate but just as happy. After service in the Pacific Navy during World War II, Morse moved to Columbia University, where he studied history with Frank Tannenbaum and taught Western Civilization (1949-1958). A fact-finding visit to São Paulo in 1947-48 introduced him to the industrial city and to a set of young scholars who would become enduring friends: Florestan Fernandes, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Antonio Candido. His first book, *From Community to Metropolis: A Biography of São Paulo* (1958), loosely inspired by Lewis Mumford, was a study of how São Paulo had lost, recovered, and reworked its traditions in the course of metropolitan growth. It comprised his pioneering

essays on race relations ("The Negro in São Paulo" [1953]) and on the Modernist poets' recognition of their industrial city. He became one of the first Brazilianists. However, he made his reputation with an essay on the role of a moral center in Spanish American politics before and after independence, "Toward a Theory of Spanish American Government" (1954).

Following his marriage to the Haitian dancer, singer, and folklorist Emerante de Pradines in 1954, Morse again left the United States for the Caribbean. In 1958 he founded the University of Puerto Rico's Institute for Caribbean Studies. San Juan in the 1950s assembled a playful and serious interdisciplinary mix of Spanish exile poets, American social scientists, and Puerto Rican democratic populists and urban planners. It nurtured his hope that the social sciences and even policy research could thrive in dialogue with humanist insights and even bawdy limericks.

He returned to the United States to visit at Harvard (1960), chair the History Department at Stonybrook (1961), and settle at Yale University (1962-1978). During those years, his interests ranged widely across the history of the Americas. "The Heritage of Latin America" (1964) extended his speculations on political culture and mischievously bracketed the years from 1750 to 1920 as Latin America's intellectually "colonial" period. But most of his research focused on comparative urban processes in the Americas between 1750 and 1920. With Jorge Hardoy and others, he made his intellectual home the symposium on "the process of urbanization in America from its origins to the present day," which met, usually in conjunction with the International Congress of Americanists, from 1966 to 1986. Morse fought for simultaneous investigations of American cities at many levels, from policy research, to demographic and economic studies, to the questions he himself felt drawn to answer about historical and cultural identity. In satirical essays such as "The Strange Career of Latin American Studies" (1964) and "The Care and Grooming of Latin American Historians" (1970), he fought against the humorless arrogance and cultural blind spots of U.S. area studies, calling for "a reverse Peace Corps effect" in which Latin America might enlighten the United States.

The 1964 Brazilian coup and the bureaucratic-authoritarian dictatorships of the 1970s alienated him from social science research that feeds into projects of manipulating cities and economies. He moved from Yale to Stanford (1978-1984) and turned away from urban studies, toward historical sociology and intellectual history. His boldest attempt at a synthesis of comparative civilizations in the Americas, "Prospero's Mirror: A Study in New World Dialectic," disparaged Anglo American civilization and argued that Iberian traditions furnished a "moral option," a legitimate alternate route that the Americas could take into and beyond modernity. The manuscript was rejected by several university presses in the United States as unmannerly and tendentious. And indeed, like an Escher geometrical paradox, the lines of its symmetry never quite lie square. However, the Spanish translation, *El espejo de Próspero* (1982), catalyzed debates among Latin American intellectuals. They responded to it energetically with dozens of articles in journals of opinion and three books in Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay. A tamer, simpler and condensed version

of Morse's arguments is distributed across the essays of *New World Soundings* (1989), which stands as the best introduction to his ideas in English.

From 1984 to 1989, Morse served as Secretary of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center, trying once more to cross-fertilize the policy sciences and Latin American ideological countercurrents. When he retired in 1989, combined federal service in the U.S. Navy during World War II and at the Wilson Center had qualified the bohemian *enfant terrible* for the pension of a *funcionário público aposentado*. After retirement, he divided his time between Washington and Haiti, where he and Emy Morse established the library of the Institute for Caribbean and Latin American Studies.

Evaluations and a near-complete bibliography of his plays, stories, interviews, articles and books may be found in *Culture and Ideology in the Americas: Essays in Honor of Richard M. Morse*, a special issue of *Luso-Brazilian Review* 32:2 (Winter 1995). His last major work was a book-length essay on ideas, "The Multiverse of Latin American Identity, c.1920-c.1970," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. X (1995).

University of Chicago

DAIN BORGES

#### NEW PUBLICATIONS

*The Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* began publishing online August 2000. Part of The Johns Hopkins University Press's Project Muse, the *JCCH* and will be issued three times a year: Fall (August), Winter (December) and Spring (April). It is multi-disciplinary and covers the world from medieval to modern times. All submissions will be refereed with a projected turn-around time of no more than three months from submission until readers reports are forwarded to authors. Patricia W. Romero of Towson University is Editor. Antoinette Burton, History, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL, is General Book Review Editor. John Cinnamon, Anthropology, Miami University-Hamilton, Hamilton, OH is Book Review Editor for Anthropology/Sociology.

A sample copy of the journal may be found at <<http://muse.edu/journals/jcch/>>. Individual subscriptions are \$20.00 per year; institutional subscriptions are \$55.00. Both may be obtained directly through The Johns Hopkins University Press, Project Muse.

THE EDITORS