

**Art, Revolution, and Social Reform: The Relationship between
Artistic Vision and Reality in the work of Diego Rivera**

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Introduction

In the years after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Diego Rivera created a political art which was revolutionary and Marxist in character, but which found its efficacy not in the language of revolution, but in its capacity to inspire workers to rally within the state, not against it, and direct their demands through democratic channels, namely through their support of the populist politician Lázaro Cárdenas. Rivera's explicitly political art had an authenticity which went beyond mere propaganda, and which spoke to the Mexican national consciousness. At a time in the twentieth century when the political art coming out of the USSR began trending toward the strictly propagandist form of socialist realism, Rivera received a great deal of criticism from Communists due to the fact that he insisted on creating art that infused elements of Mexican indigenous tradition, and a glorification of the powers of industry and production, in his Communist message. Although many Communists viewed Rivera as a traitor to the international movement, his art, and the artistic freedom which he and other artists enjoyed during this time, was exactly what allowed him to collaborate with the state in the post-revolutionary project of redefining *mexicanidad* (a nationalist prescript of shared identity among Mexican people) and reifying some of the aims of the Revolution.

Rivera's art reflects a state project which was democratic from the beginning, and which did not subordinate the democratic process or a more humanist art to the ultimate end of maintaining the party, nor did it demand the dissolution of the bourgeoisie by means of a 'true' proletarian revolution. It instead recognized the need to mediate power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in a democratic fashion. As noted by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,

the Marxist language of revolution was severely limiting. The legacy of Marx's original thought persisted through the mid-twentieth century into the time of their writing, the 1980s; in Mexico, although the Revolution of 1910 had the effect of cracking open the Mexican sense of class consciousness and mandating that the elite redefine *mexicanidad*, the real work did not end with the Revolution. In Mexico, unlike in the USSR, the Revolution did not necessitate a dissolution of the bourgeoisie and the creation of a dictatorship of the proletariat and, as a result, the post-revolutionary administrations did not call for art which was completely subordinated to the goals of maintaining that revolutionary value. As a result, Rivera's freedom to create his own brand of 'epic modernism,' as opposed to being forced into operating within the bounds of socialist realism, allowed him to make a free art which looked to more than just revolutionary politics; an analysis of Rivera's art demonstrates the way that, precisely because of his ability to collaborate with the state and create art for art's sake, not limited by a need to praise the leader cult or pretend that the bourgeoisie had been eradicated within Mexico, was part of what made these reforms possible, creating something much more like a dictatorship of the proletariat than what was present in the USSR at that time.

From 1920 to 1940, Mexico existed in a state of heightened change as the country attempted to redefine itself in the wake of the Revolution of 1910. Both state policy and the artistic movements of the time worked synergistically to redefine *mexicanidad* in a public, visible campaign to re-shape the collective consciousness of the citizenry. The Revolution of 1910 influenced the policy of the succeeding Mexican administrations, particularly those of Álvaro Obregón and Lázaro Cárdenas. It also served as a font of inspiration for the artists of the 1920s and 30s. On the other hand, there was a continuity both in the government's campaign of reeducation and the evolution of the artistic themes during this time, known as the Revolution in

Art, and, though this continuity with the preceding decades of the Porfiriato did not undermine the radical aims of the Revolution, many of the projects which took on new life in 1920 had already begun before 1910. Porfirio Díaz in the late nineteenth century made great strides in modernizing the Mexican state through a strictly positivist, technological, quasi-imperialist ethic of civilizing and industrializing the countryside, consolidating isolated haciendas into one large market, encouraging foreign industries to invest capital in the country, and creating a new labor class. His *paz porfiriano*, however, only endured for so long before both his oppressive strike breaking and complete subordination of indigenous Mexico to a European ideal led to the outbreak of revolutionary war.

When José Vasconcelos, Álvaro Obregón, and the new Mexican administration took up that mantle of state formation once again, they too implemented a program of educating the countryside and modernizing the nation, but their program had been stamped indelibly with the aspirations of the Revolution of 1910. The Revolution emboldened *campesinos* (peasants and rural laborers), *obreros* (urban laborers), *indios* (Mexican indigenous peoples), and artists, many of whom, like Diego Rivera, adopted the moniker of ‘proletarian artist’ as a way of indicating their allegiance to the working class.¹ Artists of the 1920s engaged with this period of flux in different ways, adapting their work with a pre-Colombian aesthetic and attempting to capture the spirit of a deliberately modernizing Mexico.² They considered themselves to be part of this change, and Rivera in particular took upon himself the identity of someone who was actively working to galvanize the spirit of the proletariat and prompt them to organize as a class, with the

¹ David Siqueiros, et al., “Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores, y Escritores,” originally published as a broadside in Mexico City, 1922. Published again in *El Machete*, no. 7 (Barcelona, June 1924).

² Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, *The Social and the Real* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 44.

ultimate intent of overthrowing the bourgeoisie.³ Eventually, many of these artists, particularly Diego Rivera and other prominent muralists, were drawn to a more explicitly populist message.⁴ Rivera himself was an avowed communist, and he infused his murals with both an epic scope and a Marxist historical bent toward understanding all of Latin American history, and human history in general. His work captured the incredible energy and productive power exhibited in his epoch to which he added a hopeful, almost utopic vision for the future, adding to that a sense of urgency, sympathy, and pathos for the viewer who, upon looking at one of Rivera's murals, would find themselves suddenly thrust into an ongoing, epic clash of class struggle.⁵ In the twilight of this period of great change just prior to a more conservative resurgence, Rivera established a brief friendship with Leon Trotsky which affirmed his embodiment of the role of revolutionary artist.⁶ They met in a time when Mexico's administration represented, in some ways, a better example of a dictatorship of the proletariat than did the U.S.S.R., and art around the world was suffering from the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. Trotsky and Rivera looked back on the relationship between art and the state and defiantly proclaimed that art should remain both revolutionary, in a Communist sense, and free.⁷ This cry was the last echo of an era of tremendous reform, cultural change, and the partial realization of a Communist dream in Mexico; none of these changes would have been possible without the work of both the artists from this time, and the state.

The art of the 1920s and 30s coincided with a rise in the prominence of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), excepting the interruption of the *maximato* from 1929 to 1935, but

³ Siqueiros, et al., "Manifiesto del Sindicato."

⁴ Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 71.

⁵ David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 121.

⁶ Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 234.

⁷ André Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky. "Manifiesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*. Ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

initially, however, it was the agrarian Revolution carried out in 1910 which had the most profound impact on defining *mexicanidad*. The Revolution established a break with the Porfiriato and set out many progressive reforms, whereas the Porfiriato was marked by a privileging of foreign capital investment, glorification of the European, and a disregard for the indigenous Mexican culture.⁸ Starting in 1920, José Vasconcelos worked actively to counteract the lasting effects of the years under Díaz. He began a reeducation campaign which would teach literacy to rural communities all across Mexico.⁹ Vasconcelos also made it a point to encourage the creation and shape the content of murals, including Rivera's first major project, *La Creación*.¹⁰ The murals that he sponsored had a distinct pre-Colombian aesthetic and, in the case of Rivera's work, a somewhat vague appeal to Greek archetypes of virtue and science.¹¹ These themes show a direct connection to both the symbolist art movements which came before and Vasconcelos's aims for the mural movement. This movement established Rivera's close relationship with the postrevolutionary Mexican government, as well his infusion of pre-Colombian references and *indio* forms in his murals, a key part of what made Rivera's art compatible with the goals of the state, and what gave him his privileged position.

Though Rivera would go on to take his position and transform it by focusing on awakening a class-consciousness within Mexico, initially, there was no such populist element to this project. Vasconcelos wished to transform a Hellenic aesthetic into a pre-Colombian indigenous one.¹² Not long after, in 1925, he published his essay *La Raza Cósmica* which

⁸ Jacqueline Barnitz and Patrick Frank, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 17.

⁹ Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁰ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 52.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² José Vasconcelos, "La Raza Cósmica," Sacramento State, 1925, <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art111/readings/vasconcelos%20cosmic%20race.pdf>. 406.

inverted traditional notions of caste and race to situate Mexico as being on the verge of creating a new, spiritually and culturally superior race through *Mestizaje* (the mixing of creole and indigenous peoples in order to create a new, blended race which was distinctly Mexican, but possessed the best of both the indigenous and the European elements of Mexico).¹³ The Revolution of 1910 spurred a cultural reaction against Porfirian positivism and the subordination of indigenous identity, and Vasconcelos channeled that into his own desire to create an understanding of *mexicanidad* which would prove Mexico the victor over the more technologically capable United States.¹⁴ Rivera played a significant part in this project, which afforded him the opportunity to create art which faced the public and which galvanized *indios*, *obreros*, and *campesinos* around a common identity; these factors helped position him even more solidly as an influential artist working for the state.

Vasconcelos's cultural aims came on the back of the positivist Porfiriato, which had left many Mexican elites feeling culturally destitute, yearning for a redefinition of *mexicanidad* and a deliberate repudiation of the blatant imperialist practices encouraged by Díaz and carried out by U.S. and European investors. Díaz had taken a largely peasant agrarian economy that was almost feudal in its organization, made up of isolated, self-sustaining haciendas which were holdovers of Spanish imperialism, and he transformed that economy by inviting foreign investment, concentrating capital, and creating an industrial reserve army.¹⁵ Beginning in the 1870s and continuing on right up to 1910, Díaz oversaw a massive program of railway construction which went along with rapid urbanization.¹⁶ As he attempted to modernize the country, though, he also sowed the seeds of his own undoing. His highly prescriptive form of rule could not survive the

¹³ José Vasconcelos, "La Raza Cósmica," 406.

¹⁴ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 48.

¹⁵ Adolfo Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

mobilization of the peasant, working and middle classes, which suddenly acquired a class consciousness and a belief in their own ability to organize.¹⁷ The railway workers formed unions in the 1880s and 90s which persisted through the Revolution. Largely, the aims of the Revolution of 1910 focused on agrarian land reform, but the spirit of the revolution was one of an awakening class consciousness and a willingness on the part of Mexican *campesinos* and *obreros* and *indios* to make demands of the government rather than engage in isolated rebellions and uprisings, as they had been doing for centuries.¹⁸ The very project of modernization which broke up the feudal structure of the hacienda system also created the means of organization which brought on the Revolution of 1910, and which forced Obregón and his administration to be more accountable to the interests of the changing classes.

After the Revolution, when artists like Rivera attempted to make sense of modernity like the symbolists had before them, their efforts were changed demonstrably by the effects of the agrarian revolution and, as the 1920s went on, artists began rallying around Marxist thought and engaging with the struggle of the proletariat. When the Revolution had first ended, Vasconcelos's instructions spurred artists like Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco to create work which addressed what Vasconcelos had synthesized from the Revolution. They created art which addressed, firstly a veneration of indigenous culture and what Vasconcelos thought would be the 'fifth race,' which was his inversion of the traditional notions of caste that posited any amount of racial 'mixing' as a negative impurity.¹⁹ Vasconcelos instead extolled the virtue in a blending of creole and indigenous races through *Mestizaje* and the formation of a new, entirely modern, Mexican race.²⁰ Vasconcelos also set out a campaign to educate rural populations and Obregón's

¹⁷ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 35

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

campaign to redistribute land. These efforts bore a striking similarity to the modernizing projects of the Porfiriato, in the sense that they were prescriptive and designed to modernize the *indio*.

In time, however, this initial populist sentiment caused many artists to gravitate to the Mexican Communist Party. A significant portion of the art of this era began taking on a populist political character, addressing in some way the plight of the working class.²¹ Rivera notably declared himself a 'proletarian artist,' and he, alongside Siqueiros and others, signed a manifesto creating the *Sindicato de Obreros, Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*.²² Rivera applied a Marxist framework to the history of Mexico, and he incorporated that framework into the murals that he painted. Other artists, like founding member of the Stridentist movement Manuel Maples Arce, began to incorporate this populist strain into their work as well.²³ At the beginning of the 1920s artists like Rivera attempted to capture *mexicanidad* through a somewhat derivative redefinition of Hellenic aesthetics, and Stridentists attempted to capture modernity through an irreverent focus on the energy of the present moment.²⁴ By the end of the decade, it seemed that art could not be discussed without in some way assessing its virtue through whether or not it had a Marxist, revolutionary character, even if some artists embraced this mode more than others.²⁵ Rivera was then poised to create a Marxist revolutionary brand of art which would capitalize on that cultural moment and make the best use of his position as an establishment artist.

Class consciousness began to inform Rivera's understanding of modernity more as the decade went on, and, by the time of the late 20s to mid-1930s, Rivera began creating the murals which were most representative of his understanding of the epic conflict of class struggle and his

²¹ Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Garde* 71.

²² Siqueiros, "Manifiesto del Sindicato."

²³ Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Garde*, 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

vision for the future of the proletariat, what David Craven referred to as his “epic modernism.”²⁶ Rivera’s murals at Chapingo, the National Palace, and the Detroit Arts Institute exemplified his interpretation of the struggle humanity underwent, and was still undergoing, in order to harness the natural resources of the world. Rivera drew from pre-Colombian aesthetics, and even myths and religions, indicating that he was not purely materialist in his thinking.²⁷ He was, however, a Marxist, and a modernist. He used cubist techniques of perspective as well as montage to create an effect of epic energy and scope, painting scenes which depicted the history of class struggle as a dynamic, ongoing process, one which invited the viewer to locate themselves within the fray.²⁸

For instance, the Detroit Industry Murals featured 19 different stages of production blended together in a montage which, far from a documentary representation of the creation of an automobile, depicted a stylized, epic conception of the relationship between workers and the manufacturing project.²⁹ Rivera examined the relationship between the individual and the mechanical process of production at every step, exploring the soul of the worker.³⁰ In this way, his work took on the character of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, encouraging the audience to reflect on their role in the present moment while viewing the spectacle.³¹ The urgency with which Rivera imbued his murals, combined with his willingness to create art which inspired peoples’ sense of epic struggle and personal alienation, allowed Rivera to inspire people to both look to the future of proletarian revolution, but also question what it was that they could do in the present moment to affect change.

²⁶ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 122.

²⁷ Linda B. Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1999), 67.

²⁸ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 121.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 142.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

Rivera's murals took on a different life in the United States than they did in Mexico, particularly with regard to their Marxist character. When Rivera was beginning his murals in the National Palace, for instance, he was contributing to a nationalist, public movement which previous administrations had already encouraged, which already had momentum behind it.³² Under the *maximato*, the reign of President Calles and subsequent puppet presidents, Rivera was still able to start and eventually finish his National Palace murals.³³ Calles had outlawed Communism in Mexico by 1929, and Rivera was no longer a member of the Communist party due to the shifting of the winds in the Comintern and the push for socialist realism,³⁴ but Rivera was still able to freely paint his own vision during these years, although from 1931 to 1934 he found more success painting in the United States. What he painted manifested his personal sense of awe at the positive potential of capitalism, a monumental depiction of the worker and his struggle with alienation in a capitalist society.³⁵ He couched this Marxist sentiment in a belief in *Mestizaje*, along with a belief in interdependency of the people and the land, and a reverence for indigenous myth.³⁶

Rivera's vision was his own, but it had a revolutionary character derived from Mexico's historical experience. Many intellectuals in the United States were able to accept his vision in the United States by reading it uncritically as a paean to capitalism.³⁷ Many labor organizers, on the other hand, used his murals to inspire people to join unions, particularly those who were not literate.³⁸ In Mexico, that same vision, reprinted in publications like *El Machete*, helped to nurture a populist groundswell which, when combined with the powerful charisma and savvy of

³² David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 112.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life*, 230.

³⁵ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 140.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Helen Delpar. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 70.

³⁸ Reuben Álvarez, *The Age of Steel* (Ford Fund, 1978). In *Making the Modern*, author Terry Smith, 235.

President Cárdenas, ushered in an unprecedented, and unrepeated decade of reform, in the 1930s.³⁹ Although Mexico did not have a planned economy, the proletariat had a clear means of asserting their demands to Cárdenas through a democratic process.⁴⁰ The Cardenista unions which would later form a kind of centralized hegemony in their own right and strengthen the power of the PRI were, at this time, truly working for the people.⁴¹ Rivera's vision was multifaceted and entirely his own, and his ability to freely paint art in his own 'epic modernist' style allowed him to capture a wide range of human emotion and experience, and to interact with both Mexican and North American people in an authentic, humanist way which reached beyond mere propaganda; in the U.S. his call for collectivization did not take hold, but in Mexico, when combined with the political intelligence of Cárdenas, this art helped transform the political landscape of Mexico for a time.

Rivera's embodiment of a fuller, more holistic art which did not hamstring itself for the sake of a political end captivated Leon Trotsky, who sought asylum in Mexico in 1937. Trotsky had been continually embattled with the oppressive, overly centralized, totalitarian Soviet bureaucracy, headed by Stalin.⁴² The latter was attempting to destroy the legacy of the former and paint him as a traitor to the U.S.S.R.⁴³ Trotsky despised much of what Stalin had done to Russia. Although he admired the constitution of 1936 and believed that the U.S.S.R. had become the most progressive nation in the world with its planned economy, Trotsky believed that the bureaucratic structure and the Terror, of which he had personally been a victim, were inexcusable.⁴⁴ His vendetta was not entirely personal. He held strong to the notion that Stalin's

³⁹ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Bertrand M. Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Patenaude, *Trotsky*, 43.

work was an affront to the very notion of truth itself.⁴⁵ Trotsky also predicted that Stalin's centralization of the bureaucracy would potentially create a new possessive class.⁴⁶ He did not believe that, in its current iteration, it was a form of 'state capitalism,' a phrase that he regarded as a contradiction in terms.⁴⁷ He did consider, however, the fact that Stalin's chief bureaucrats would be willing to overthrow him for the sake of compromising the planned economy and gaining ownership of capital interests.⁴⁸ At this moment in time, Trotsky considered Stalin to be a traitor to the aims of the October Revolution, and he envisioned a second proletarian revolution to overthrow him.

While Trotsky was captivated by the idea of a second Revolution in Russia, he was also captivated by Mexico, in large part due to the various administrations' willingness to sponsor Diego Rivera's art. The democratic process in Mexico, Rivera's art, Cárdenas's charisma allowed for the rendering of something in reality which approached Rivera's artistic vision of collectivization, and which was also reminiscent of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Trotsky attributed this success in large part to the relationship between the artist and the state, in particular the freedom of the artist.⁴⁹ At a time when art was languishing under the pall of fascism on one side and totalitarianism on the other, Trotsky, Rivera, and André Breton drafted a manifesto calling for total artistic freedom.⁵⁰ In it, they exalted the interior world of the artist, and made the claim that, even if art could be explicitly political in nature, the guiding principle of art should be that it is representative of the artist's vision and their own subjective experience of the world.⁵¹ This notion came directly from Trotsky and Rivera's shared rejection of socialist

⁴⁵ Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in our Epoch," *Partisan Review* 5, no. 3 (August 1938).

⁴⁶ Isaac Deutscher. *The Prophet Outcast* (New York: Random House, 1965), 308.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁴⁹ Breton, Rivera, Trotsky, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," 117.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵¹ Breton, Rivera, Trotsky, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," 117.

realism, as well as Breton's emphasis on the interiority of the artist.⁵² In Trotsky's mind, all art was revolutionary, and even explicitly Marxist art like Rivera's carried a second layer of provocation in the way that it spoke to Rivera's own personal experience of alienation in a capitalist economy.⁵³ Robbing the artist of their freedom robbed them, in turn, of their ability to truthfully represent their experience, and only through truth and nuanced representation of the human experience would any member of the proletariat be able to see, represented in art like Rivera's murals, a manifestation of their own alienation, a real representation of their experience of the relationship between material economy and the cultural superstructure. Art, therefore, needed to be more than just explicitly revolutionary, and Trotsky, Rivera, and Breton all admired art in a humanist sense, beyond its propagandistic mode.

In Mexico, Trotsky saw a functioning democratic process which had allowed for the creation of sweeping reforms, called for by the proletariat, inspired by great art, and partially implemented by the populist Cardenista administration. The Revolution of 1910, carried out for the sake of agrarian land reform, cracked open the Mexican political landscape and mandated that the government hold itself accountable to the demands and culture of its constituents. Many of the modernizing projects which had begun during the Porfiriato took on a different character after 1920. Vasconcelos and Obregón had their own prescriptive project of educating indigenous and rural people. They enlisted artists and commissioned them to make a public art which would allow the people of Mexico to see themselves represented in the new government. This project took on a life of its own, with Rivera and others like Siqueiros and Orozco leading the charge into a more political art. Rivera's work in particular, public by nature and captivately epic in the way that it interacted with the people of Mexico, captured the spirit of the time. Not only did

⁵² J.H. Matthews, *André Breton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 6.

⁵³ *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*. Ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 8.

he help to capture Mexico as it was in the 1920s, however, he also helped inspire what it would become in the 30s.

Rivera's description and prescription of the Marxist strain in Mexican culture was a result of his own personal evolution as an artist, the project of formulating his 'epic modernism,' held in tandem with his relationship with the state. Rivera took what was initially a project of redefining *mexicanidad* and *Mestizaje* and transformed that nationalist project, infusing the Mexican national consciousness with a class-consciousness. As he and other artists began to recognize that a Marxist historical lens could help them explain their present moment, the general conversation around art in Mexico shifted as more artists began to view the articulation of class struggle as an integral component of understanding and discussing modern Mexico. This Revolution in Art created the cultural circumstances which would lead to both the development of Diego Rivera's 'epic modernist' style, and also the concurrent rise to power, in the mid-1930s, of Lázaro Cárdenas. The art that Rivera created at this time had a distinctly Marxist character, but Rivera was also willing to eschew the limitations of a strict materialist understanding of the role of political art, and to instead create an art which maintained that infusion of *Mestizaje*, pre-Colombian religious iconography, and *mexicanidad*. As a result of this willingness on Rivera's part, he maintained his position as a state-sponsored artist, a direct result of the Mexican government's willingness to both cooperate with him and give him autonomy in the creative process. The influence of Rivera's art grew, therefore, specifically because he was created a Marxist art which did not call for the immediate dissolution of the bourgeoisie, and which was compatible with the concomitant rise to power of Cárdenas, and his ability to wield political influence and embolden the unions, within the cultural milieu created by the Revolution of 1910 and then shaped by Rivera and the other artists of his time, to issue forth dramatic agrarian and

labor reforms. These dramatic changes came about as a part of the democratic process after the Revolution of 1910 itself, and Rivera's art helped facilitate them with his 'epic modernist' art, art which may have pointed toward a future proletarian revolution and subsequent utopia, but which also spoke in a grand, inspiring way to the present moment, and called people to rally behind Cárdenas and make democratic changes within the state, not counter to the state.

Revolution in Art and the Proletarian Artist

In the years immediately following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Rivera participated in a public campaign designed to re-form the Mexican national consciousness around *indigenismo*, a conservative measure which, while not Marxist in any sense, did establish the relationship between Rivera, the government, and the project of creating a public art which would allow Rivera to independently create his own Marxist, populist public art. In some ways, this public art project was a symptom, rather than a cause, of the need to form a different popular culture in Mexico, a necessity made apparent Revolution of 1910. The new administration had a vested interest in considering the needs and culture of the people of Mexico because President Alvaro Obregón and his secretary of education José Vasconcelos needed to stabilize the country and prevent the turnover of another administration. It was this conservative project of national. Vasconcelos was responding to the Revolution of 1910. He himself had no Marxist inclinations, but he made effort to establish a popular, public art and to create a new Mexican national identity through folk *indigenismo* (using the pre-Colombian folk traditions of Mexico as a symbolic framework to galvanize the country around one identity) and *Mestizaje* (the creation of a new race which was distinctly mexican). Vasconcelos's nationalist project was divorced from Marxism, but it reflected the influence of the Mexican Revolution, which forced his hand in terms of considering the needs of the people, and the combination of these two factors, Vasconcelos's elevation of the public artist and the cultural shift of the Revolution of 1910, eventually gave Rivera and other artists the medium by which they would develop their own populist spur.

Although it was the Revolution of 1910 itself which initially redefined the relationship of the Mexican government to the people of Mexico and allowed for a change in the Mexican national identity, it was the artistic and educational programs which began immediately afterward which led to the reforms of the 1930s. Rivera's relationship with the state in the wake of the Revolution, and the state's willingness to allow for the creation of a free art, which led to the reforms of the 1930s. Rivera began creating murals under the auspices of Vasconcelos who, as a nationalist, wished to create a stronger sense of Mexican unity and identity. The challenge to Mexican gave Rivera the opportunity to, in a public platform, reconstruct the national identity and redefine *mexicanidad*. The turmoil and violence of the Revolution spurred Vasconcelos on to establish a new public art. Rivera's relationship with Vasconcelos established the close relationship between Rivera and the state, the channels that both established the government's interest in the popular classes and allowed Rivera's public art to re-form the national consciousness; this process, which began as a redefinition of *mexicanidad* around indigenous iconography and the creation of a new racial identity, eventually allowed Rivera to stoke the fires of populist politics later on.

Before Rivera was able to take his relationship with the Mexican government and infuse it with his own 'epic modernism' and Marxist thought, José Vasconcelos had very different plans for public art. Vasconcelos wished to legitimize the power of the new government, but, in order to do so, he needed to create a fairer representation of *indios*, *campesinos*, and *obreros* than had the Porfirian government before him. His vision was nationalist, not Marxist, for he did not put much stock into the productive technological capabilities of Mexico. In fact, he built his theory of the cosmic race in large part around a notion of Mexican 'spiritual' superiority so that Mexico could win out against the United States in spite of this technological deficiency. In some ways

Vasconcelos was more concerned with legitimizing the *mestizo* elite with his cultural campaign and re-educating the *indio* population, whose culture he held up as an example of Mexico's rich history but whose people he considered to be a shameful stumbling block for the sake of modernization.⁵⁴ His campaign of public art, however, laid the groundwork for the relationship between state and artist that would allow Diego Rivera to develop his public art.

For both Obregón and the artists who would establish a new iconography of *mexicanidad*, the Mexican Revolution played an integral part in the making of their new national myth, but this process began even before the Revolution had broken out. The Mexican Revolution came about as a reaction against the reign of Porfirio Díaz. The *Porfiriato*, or long period of rule by Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), came to symbolize the legacy of Spanish colonialism in Mexico, particularly the pervasive foreign interests controlling Mexican natural resources and a blatant endorsement of the caste system. At the turn of the century, even before the Revolution, symbolist art marked a rejection of the late nineteenth century positivist values of the *porfiriato*.⁵⁵ The symbolist framework drew upon Spanish traditions and styles which, for instance, Rivera incorporated into his *modernista* paintings, particularly those that he painted between 1907 and 1913.⁵⁶ Even then, artists like Rivera, including Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl) and Saturnino Herrán were already attempting to capture pre-Colombian modes in their art. Herrán painted *El Rebozo* using as reference the archaeological digs he had taken part of while working with the Archaeological Inspection Department in 1910.⁵⁷ Dr. Atl, likewise, had attempted to start a mural movement similar to that of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco in 1910, based on the similar monumental art movement he had seen in Italy, but the outbreak of the Revolution kept him from being able to

⁵⁴ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 46.

⁵⁵ Barnitz and Frank, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America*, 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

do so.⁵⁸ Vasconcelos took an existing trend within modern Mexican art, that of the symbolist reaction to Porfirio Díaz, and he expanded on those motifs of pre-Colombian iconography and glorification of folk tradition for the sake of promoting the creation of *mexicanidad*.

The symbolist revolution in art occurred just before the actual outbreak of the Revolution of 1910, and Vasconcelos seemed to favor an amplification of this aesthetic and cultural Revolution over and above agrarian reform or class-consciousness. Vasconcelos and Obregón were attempting to legitimize Mexico's history with an appeal to pre-Colombian civilizations, and to redefine *mestizaje* as a favorable trend toward the creation of a new people, not the 'weakening' of a race through impurity. Artists working for Vasconcelos created visual representations of *indigenismo* for the sake of "Mexicanizing" the Indian.⁵⁹ This gesture towards the ancient past would later become a central component of the political art in the post-revolutionary period, particularly under Obregón, Calles, and Gil, and *indigenismo* carried forward in Rivera's art as well.⁶⁰ In that sense, the populist spur added onto this artistic movement by the events of the Revolution. As noted by Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, "the promotion of folk culture as a component of social homogenization was not a contradiction, but rather part of the disciplinary logic of modernizing nationalism."⁶¹ The populist, class-conscious strain of thought which became part of the project of public art in Mexico was originally nowhere in Vasconcelos's paradigm, supplanted instead by his desire to reframe *mexicanidad*.

It would be too simple, however, to say that the Revolution was a failure, or that its goals of populist labor reform were absurd, or never came to fruition, for the Revolution left a giant impact around which the national conversation needed to be shaped. President Obregón and his

⁵⁸ Barnitz and Frank, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America*, 45.

⁵⁹ Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 45.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

minister of education José Vasconcelos set to work framing it properly in the national consciousness. Obregón and Vasconcelos enacted an ambitious plan for public education which incorporated the art of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco. Their plan built on the project which many artists had already undertaken before the Revolution even started, and, in fact, the plan shared striking similarities with the modernizing project undertaken by Porfirio Díaz. As noted by Alan Knight in his article “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?” some non-Marxist scholars of the revolution considered even Cárdenas’s administration to be a continuation of the project of Obregón and Vasconcelos, which was in turn only a continuation of the Porfiriato, stressing “continuity over rupture.”⁶² Given that Vasconcelos’s campaign focused on a redefinition of *mexicanidad* and it was the artists themselves who eventually infused elements of class-consciousness and populism, there is some merit to the notion that they were simply picking up where Díaz left off. Originally not overtly nationalistic, these murals, painted between 1921 and 1924, “reflected José Vasconcelos’s Hellenic-universalist philosophy and objectives for a publicly visible art program as a complement to his new centralized national education policy.”⁶³ Vasconcelos wished to create a new understanding of *mexicanidad*, but it was one that built on the Greek archetypes of symbolist art which came before, and it was designed around a need to legitimize the *indio* and show that they could be just as noble as the European ancients.

Although part of the program that Vasconcelos set out seemed designed to serve the elite, socially, the goal of centralized, national education reflected the desire to create new national programs for the sake of serving all of Mexico’s people. These efforts led to the creation of real, far-reaching programs which changed the accessibility of both art and education, and they served the dual purpose of legitimizing Obregón’s administration as fair and just, particularly to the still

⁶² Alan Knight. “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994): 76.

⁶³ Barnitz and Frank, *Twentieth Century*, 46.

restless *obreros*, *campesinos*, and *indios*, as noted by Folgarait.⁶⁴ The art itself, however, often still drew heavily on the symbolist archetypes, as well as European modes of expression. Rivera updated his allegories and symbols with indigenous faces and myths, but he still used a cubist framing, and the very idea of painting murals was a European one.⁶⁵ Vasconcelos and Obregón, therefore, were attempting to make good on the promises of the Revolution, and, although Vasconcelos himself did not champion a revolutionary or ‘proletarian’ art, he created the public art campaign which would eventually birth that movement.

While Vasconcelos’s desire to legitimize pre-Colombian iconography by attaching it to a Greek symbolic structure was not necessarily populist, it did reflect his desire to subvert the caste system given to Mexico by Spain, to turn the notion of race on its head, ideas which are most prominently on display in an essay of his from 1925. In *La Raza Cósmica*, Vasconcelos made reference to the classical civilizations of Europe, ancient Greece and Rome as parallels to the pre-Colombian civilizations, while interweaving an explicit condemnation of colonialism.⁶⁶ He suggested that the white civilizations of Europe had overreached, particularly the Anglo-Saxons, and Latin America had been in conflict with them since the conquistadors had first set foot in the New World.⁶⁷ He concluded his essay by suggesting that the cosmic race, a “fifth” race, in his conception, would be one that emerged in Latin America, stronger than all the others, created from the influence of the other four.⁶⁸ He also suggested a possible project in the Palace of Public Education in Mexico which would have represented the cosmic race.⁶⁹ In this bid for national self-determination, Vasconcelos was far more concerned with caste than he was with

⁶⁴ Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution*, 10.

⁶⁵ Barnitz and Frank, *Twentieth Century*, 45.

⁶⁶ José Vasconcelos, “La Raza Cósmica,” 405.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 406

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

class. His concerns were academic, and largely aristocratic. The desire to justify Mexican identity with an appeal to the parallel between classical civilizations of the old world and the pre-Colombian civilizations of the new was not a concept unique to Vasconcelos's theory of *la raza cósmica*. The argument in this, his most famous essay, and his focus on the Hellenistic paintings which he commissioned from Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, stressed, however, that in the post-revolutionary period, Vasconcelos was more concerned with redefining the aristocratic modes of caste than he was with restructuring class.

The relationship between the goals of the new Mexican administration, the art created by the 'Big Three' muralists, and the vision of *mexicanidad* which they were trying to create, all became more complicated by the emergence of a more political strain of art. On the back of Vasconcelos's and Obregon's campaign to educate peasants, workers, and *indios* and to enculturate them to a new understanding of caste, in 1923 many artists signed a declaration written by Siqueiros which denounced bourgeois art and lauded only art which was political. Here, he and his colleagues, like Rivera, declared themselves to be proletarian artists. In the "Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores, y Escritores," Siqueiros and his cosigners declared explicitly that they wished to "destroy bourgeois individualism," which they regarded as a parasitic growth attached to the real producers of wealth, the "indigenous races humiliated through the centuries."⁷⁰ Here, the proletarian artists condemned the bourgeoisie, commented upon the exploitation of both race and class, and also laid out their explicit goal to "socialize artistic expression" and make art which was beholden to the people, and designed to inspire them to political action.⁷¹ Although many of these artists would continue to paint murals for the state, they would also contribute to radical publications like *El Machete*, the self-

⁷⁰ Siqueiros, et al., "Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores, y Escritores."

⁷¹ Ibid.

proclaimed organ of the communist party and also the publisher of this manifesto. At this time, many Mexican artists saw it necessary to denounce intellectuals who were not committed to political art, declaring their art fraudulent and fundamentally un-Mexican.

The purposes of this artistic project, explicitly class-oriented and political, did not match the purposes, necessarily, of Obregón and Vasconcelos's project. For President Calles, however, who wished to create a more political art which reflected favorably on the Revolution of 1910, this shift proved advantageous. In 1924, "Calles was especially anxious to see the Mexican Revolution—and by extension, his administration—represented in a favorable light."⁷² Some of the artists on retainer were more helpful than others. Orozco lampooned all sorts of conservative iconography, religion, and social injustice, to the effect that, during the Cristero rebellion, rebels destroyed many of his 1924 murals.⁷³ Calles, himself a conservative president, did not find that series particularly useful. Later, Orozco painted murals explicitly depicting the Revolution later, for instance in *La trinchera*, a tragic, somber depiction of nothing more than suffering and defeat.⁷⁴ Likewise, *La clase obrera* gave a similar portrayal of the working class, whom he wanted to show as still suffering. Rivera, on the other hand, did many murals in the Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo in those same years which took a more hopeful look at the Revolution, and at industry in general, for instance in *La tierra liberada por las fuerzas naturales controladas por el hombre*.⁷⁵ Although Orozco still painted in Mexico City, as did Siqueiros, Rivera's optimistic tone and more mythic style, which he carried over from his early murals, based in symbolism, made his murals well-suited to the goals of the state.

⁷² Barnitz and Frank, *Twentieth Century*, 49.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

While the murals which Rivera, Obregón, and Siqueiros created did elucidate some of the different conceptions of the Revolution and of the proletarian artist, the work that the artists did in *El Machete* complicated even further the notion of what it meant to create Marxist art. The prints “Fratricide” and “Judas Morones” were emblematic of what Orozco started creating after his departure from muralism in 1927 (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, appendix) Fratricide showed a rich capitalist bourgeois who was able to turn workers against each other, one man picking the pocket of honest workers and the other stabbing the first in the back.⁷⁶ The implication therein was that enemies of the true communist party existed to distract workers from their real oppressors, to turn them against each other. “Judas Morones,” on the other hand, carried a different message. Orozco depicted Luis Morones, a man with close ties to the CROM (*Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana*), a traitor to the working class, invoking the name of Judas as Siqueiros did in one of his prints.⁷⁷ The CROM was the conservative labor party of Mexico, and Morones, head of the CROM, along with President Calles would come up against Vicente Lombardo Toledano and the CTM, alongside President Cárdenas, in the mid-1930s. Lombardo Toledano was closely tied with the CROM in the early 1920s. The CROM held a great deal of political sway in the early 1920s and was able to resolve labor disputes, generally in favor of the more conservative administrations, particularly that of Calles.⁷⁸ Although Lombardo Toledano would later become the head of the CTM, Mexico’s most powerful labor union during the time of Cárdenas’s reforms, *El Machete* called him out repeatedly for abusing his position as labor leader and neglecting the proletariat. Siqueiros’s print, the lampooning of Lombardo Toledano, and Orozco’s print all carried the theme of the Judas, of the class traitor.

⁷⁶ John Lear. *Picturing the Proletariat*. (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017), 103.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

Surprisingly, however, Orozco did not identify himself as a political artist. Aside from never allying with the PCM (*Partido Comunista de Mexico*), he also asserted in 1925 that “No artist has, or ever has had, political convictions of any sort.”⁷⁹ In the mid-1920s, however, Orozco was regularly creating art for *El Machete* which carries these themes. The fact that he was engaging in this discourse while also blatantly denying that his art has any political connotations evinced the pervasive, inescapable nature of political language in this post-revolutionary period, along with Orozco’s cantankerous tendency to not want to be labeled. There was no doubt that, even if Orozco would like to eschew having his body of work broadly construed as belonging alongside that of the other artists of his time, he still had clearly engaged with the political messages of his fellow artists. He felt a need to put his art in political terms.

Similar references to class betrayal can be found in an article written not by Orozco but by a communist party loyalist in *El Machete*. Further corroborating the notion that these references to class betrayal give insight into the political nature of post-revolutionary Mexican art, *El Machete* also published articles which labeled Vicente Lombardo Toledano a traitor. Even though Lombardo Toledano would go on to head the CTM under Cárdenas and help usher in a wave of reforms, the general debate over who was and was not a true communist, or a true revolutionary, was a constant. Not only do they mention Lombardo Toledano by name, they also compare him to Morones.⁸⁰ The author of this article attacks Lombardo as a blowhard and a demagogue. Sarcastically, the author points out that Lombardo has made two amazing discoveries: “Firstly, that the “governments of revolution,” from Madero to Ortiz Rubio, have all been bourgeois governments; secondly, that the leaders of the Mexican revolution have done

⁷⁹ Lear, *Picturing*, 104.

⁸⁰ “Lombardo Toledano, tan Traidor como Morones.” *El Machete: Periódico Obrero y Campesino*. (September 10, 1931), 1.

more to enrich the national bourgeoisie...without proposing anything concrete”⁸¹ These accusations of Lombardo being a class traitor and the debate over who is properly representing the proletariat begins to become part of the greater conversation around both politics and art, in Mexico.

The author then levies this same accusation that Lombardo is hijacking communist rhetoric for the sake of reinforcing his own authority and position of power at Morones. The author asserts that the CROM and Morones both have profited from asserting that *Revista CROM* has the best interests of the working class at heart, that the magazine “still has in the labor force men who are capable of organizing and directing the proletarian struggle for their personal class interests.”⁸² The author then links the two, Lombardo and Morones, by claiming that the latter has profited alongside the former, and the former is an effete intellectual “who enjoys fame and honor and who, apparently, has not been stained by the gold of Judas that enriched Morones.”⁸³ The chief criticism levied by the writers of *El Machete*, here, seems to be that Lombardo and the members of *Revista CROM* both are taking what would be radicalizing sentiments and using them as bait to attract the attention of working people, while themselves pocketing the returns that they get for ostensibly being intermediaries between the workers and the state. In this way, they are themselves bourgeois. When Orozco uses the language of Judas, especially to target a figure like Morones, he is invariably playing a part in the political discourse of his time even when he wishes to avoid that label.

⁸¹ “Lombardo Toledano, tan Traidor como Morones.” [Primero, que los “gobiernos de la revolución,” desde el de Madero hasta el de Ortiz Rubio, han sido todos gobiernos burgueses; segundo, que los líderes de la revolución mexicana no han hecho más que enriquecerse al servicio de la burguesía nacional...sin proponer nada concreto..] (translation by author).

⁸² Ibid. [todavía tiene el laborismo hombres capaces de organizar y dirigir la lucha del proletariado por sus intereses de clase.] (translation by author).

⁸³ Ibid. [que goza fama de honrado y que, aparentemente, no se ha manchado con el oro de Judas que enriqueció a Morones.] (translation by author).

Orozco's suggestion that no artist ever had, nor ever would have any political convictions was not far from the truth, in the sense that each artist had a particular vision which he or she was trying to realize, in mural form, on canvas, or in print. It was also true, however, that art in this period began trending inexorably toward a politically suffused, class-conscious art. It would be absurd to suggest that Orozco's art was not political, nor Rivera's, nor that of Siqueiros, or Frida Kahlo, Dr. Atl, or Tina Modotti. The art that they created at the time was not revolutionary in nature since most of these artists, particularly Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, were working under the auspices of the government. Ironically, however, it would be Orozco and Siqueiros who, later on in the 1930s, would criticize Rivera for not being nearly political enough when he was still painting the fullness of his own vision and they had accepted the instructions handed down to them by the Comintern. All three artists started out lacking any kind of revolutionary character, but Communism became them, in different ways. Although later accused of being an establishment artist who had betrayed the idea of revolution, Rivera's willingness to continue working within the initial project of public art created in 1920 by Vasconcelos allowed Rivera to develop a powerful position, existing alongside but apart from the administration. What began as a redefinition of *mMestizaje* changed, as Rivera's own vision changed, into a powerful call for political action.

Orozco's statement that no art was truly political would prove erroneous as the years went on and art took on a decidedly more political character. The establishment of a public art created a relationship between the state and the artist which would later be influenced by many Mexican artists' own inclinations toward a Marxist understanding of history. It was the project established by Vasconcelos which opened up the possibility for the creation of a public art, but that project began to take on a life of its own with the interests of the artists themselves.

Vasconcelos simply wanted to redefine *mexicanidad*, creating a common, unified culture which rejected the Porfirian paternalism. This project in and of itself, however, was also elitist and paternalistic. His treatment of the *indios* evinced his veneration for pre-Colombian ideology and folklore. The way that he regarded the still extant, living *indio* populations as stumbling blocks in the process of modernization, however, indicated that Vasconcelos was trying to reform elite culture, reeducate the *indios*, and elevate Mexican national identity for the elite. At that time, the work that Rivera and other artists like Orozco created for Vasconcelos was, in fact, not an expressly populist art, and was, in that sense, not political. But the seeds of the Revolution of 1910 and its promises of land and labor reform were still present in the Mexican consciousness, and the freedom that Vasconcelos gave to his commissioned artists allowed what started as a campaign for redefining *mexicanidad* to evolve, over the course of Rivera's career, into a Marxist political art. It was the relationship between Rivera and the state combined with his freedom to evolve independently as an artist and develop the Marxist character of his work, both established through this project in the early 1920s; without the relationship established here between Rivera and the state, Rivera might have still been able to freely express his artistic interiority, but he would not have had nearly the same impact on the political consciousness of Mexico.

Competing Artistic Modes and the Move to Class Consciousness

What Vasconcelos's was attempting to do in the 1920s in the form of a reeducation campaign was similar to what Porfirio Díaz was attempting to do in the late nineteenth century with his positivist modernizing project. Díaz wished to modernize Mexico in a fashion which overwrote indigenous and *mestizo* Mexican culture in favor of worshipping what was European, inviting foreign investment, and focusing on technological development, a positivist, technocratic project which was directly at odds with that of Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos's articulation of the cosmic race was a deliberate reimagining of Mexican culture, a complete inversion of Díaz's tendency and a response to the call of the Mexican Revolution for a greater Mexican sovereignty and a notion of *mexicanidad* which praised what was Mexican, not what was foreign. Even still, however, his was an elite response which did not include any populist project. In that way, significant portions of the reeducation project and public art program which Vasconcelos produced were a sort of post-revolutionary echo of Díaz's positivist campaign. Vasconcelos wished to reeducate the peasant countryside and have them be lettered for the sake of greater national progress, and the purpose of his artistic program was much more a re-envisioning of *mexicanidad*, an effort to depict *indio* people in art and have them visually represented in their government, than it was a populist effort. Vasconcelos, like Porfirio Díaz, simply wished to maintain peace and order, and the legacy of Díaz's modernizing project lived on in this way even after the Mexican Revolution.

Although his work with Vasconcelos gave Rivera the opportunity to work closely with the Mexican government, an important part of Rivera's powerful cultural influence and ability

shape the culture of populism well into the 1930s, it was Rivera's own independent project of developing his 'epic modernist' style which truly gave his work a Marxist character.

Vasconcelos's project tasked Rivera with creating an art which resonated with the Mexican people, but then Rivera transformed that resonance into a call to action when he infused his art with Marxist influence. He and other artists simultaneously transformed the Mexican national conversation on art into one with a distinct class-consciousness. Rivera's and his fellow artists' discovery that a Marxist historical perspective helped to explain modernity, combined with their subsequent movement toward a class-conscious strain in art, set the stage for the development of Rivera's own 'epic modernism,' and infused Vasconcelos's concerns with *Mestizaje* and *mexicanidad* with the populist ideas from the Revolution that he had previously been neglecting.

In the wake of the Revolution of 1910, the project of nation-state formation and modernization gave rise to competing artistic currents seeking the essence of Modernism, movements which, over the course of the decade, gradually adopted more populist elements and class-conscious imagery. The project of modernization began long before the Revolution with the efforts of Porfirio Díaz, lasting from the 1870s through the year 1911 with only a brief interruption in power. Urbanization, accumulation of capital, and the establishment of railroads all informed the modernizing project of the Porfiriato, and modernization itself was not a Revolutionary concept. The break with the Porfiriato, however, changed the national culture by creating a populist slant that would come to define both the art and the reform projects of the ensuing decades. From the Porfiriato through the artistic revolution of the 1920s, evolutionary thinking on social progress, which was to be accomplished in discrete stages, informed the thinking of both the left and the right.

Artists in the 1920s began with an awareness of Modernism in vague terms, some inspired by technology and the city, others by archetypes and myths. These movements artists? gained more direction when they assimilated and helped to create the discourse of Marxist Revolution, with their imagery taking shape around ideas of class consciousness and social awareness. The revolutionary language which permeated this time helped point to the charged, socialist reforms and socialist art of the 1930s, but it was this preponderance of Revolutionary language increasingly distant from actual reforms which hamstrung the left and eventually led to a conservative resurgence in 1940. The project of reform could not escape the Marxist prescriptive models of Revolutionaries fighting against the state, and, therefore, could not evolve into a democratic process operating within the state. Along the way, however, it was this very prescriptivism that shaped the competing, multivariate artistic modes of the 1920s and which, by the end of the decade, created the unique vocabulary of Revolutionary art, defining Rivera's career and setting the tone for the 1930s.

Modernism, the nascent art of the 1920s, and the Revolution itself all began taking shape during the Porfiriato. Adolfo Gilly's treatment of the Porfiriato in *The Mexican Revolution* gives a comprehensive treatment of the time period and helps point toward the ways in which the Revolution of 1910 did change Mexican culture and inform the art of the 20s. Porfirio Díaz, a positivist, aimed to modernize Mexico by way of the advancement of technology and the accumulation of capital. Díaz had inherited a quasi-feudal economic system. After Mexico gained independence from Spain, the economy fell into disarray and was largely sustained by *caudillos*, many of whom were former military officers.⁸⁴ Unlike these *haciendas*, whose economic and political systems were largely the same, the Porfirian hacienda commodified the

⁸⁴ Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution*, 11.

labor force in a different way. Porfirian landowners broke up the *caudillismo* and bought large swaths of land not for the sake of developing that land, necessarily, but rather just for the sake of increasing foreign investment in the country; as a result, Díaz forced a significant portion of the Mexican labor population into a large industrial reserve army.⁸⁵ Díaz planned to transform the *hacienda* system into one marketplace, centralize capital and increase the means of production through industrialization, and then sell off this new surplus in international markets.⁸⁶ Díaz's project of modernization was different from that of Vasconcelos in the sense that he focused almost entirely on industrializing the nation with little regard for indigenous culture, but it was exactly this disregard which unwittingly caused him to create an organized proletariat.

Díaz's modernizing project resulted in the creation of a great many labor unions who lamented the fact that they were working for companies which plundered Mexico and then took resources away from the country. His plan required a great deal of foreign investment, particularly from the United States, who had already won a great deal of land from Mexico in 1848. For instance, the quickly established and extensive railway network which Díaz established across the country originally followed trade paths between Mexico City and Veracruz, the same ones that had existed under New Spain. Eventually, however, the Northern Mexican railroads grew increasingly integrated into the Southern U.S. railroads, and the Mexican economy "became subordinated to its North American counterpart."⁸⁷ This example typified the relationship between Mexico and the United States at that time. Díaz's desire to modernize a country which he considered backward caused him to create a relationship with foreign investors and a domestic proletarianization of the labor force which created the internal tensions that led to

⁸⁵ Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution*, 17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

the outbreak of revolution. Labor union organizations like the Society of Mexican Railwaymen and the Railway Societies of the Mexican Republic would eventually participate in the strikes that heralded the Revolution of 1910.⁸⁸ Diaz's project of modernization, therefore, even prior to the explicit awakening of a class consciousness, created an awareness of class, as well as birthing the revolution out of its systems of class exploitation.

Although the Revolution did change the dynamic between elite and popular forces in Mexico, the postrevolutionary project of modernization shared certain similarities with that of the Porfiriato. In some ways, the Revolution actually provided a direct continuity with the Porfiriato. Obregón and Vasconcelos were both concerned with Mexico's backwardness and with its relationship to the United States. The Mexican Revolution involved a resurrection of pre-Colombian modes and symbols which began to inform Vasconcelos's thoughts on *Mestizaje*.⁸⁹ Although he privileged folk traditions and the ancient pre-Colombian culture, Vasconcelos was also preoccupied with the goal of modernizing and "Mexicanizing" the Indian.⁹⁰ The muralists who worked on commission for Vasconcelos contributed to this project as well.⁹¹ Vasconcelos believed in progressive stages of development which placed an "aesthetic," humanist, introspective phase beyond that of the positivist Porfiriato.⁹² He admired the Athenaeum of Youth and believed that Mexico possessed a greater culture and spiritual richness than that of other more technologically developed countries, like the United States.⁹³ Likewise, Vasconcelos wished to educate the *mestizo* and Indian people of Mexico because he, like other elite intellectuals of the time, believed them to be stumbling blocks in the pursuit of modernization.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 35.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

Vasconcelos believed in a linear progression to the modern era, but, rather than he altered that conception in order to situate Mexico in a more favorable position with respect to the United States, believing that the Mexican spirit, culture, and literature placed Mexican culture above that of the more technologically advanced United States.

When the art of the 1920s began taking on a more Revolutionary character and language, this impetus came not from the state, but from the artists themselves and their interactions with Communism. *Creación*, for instance, along with other early pieces commissioned by Vasconcelos for the National Preparatory School in 1922, did not possess any of the focus on collectivization or Mexican industry which would dominate Rivera's later work. This mural drew heavily on old European modes and classical archetypes.⁹⁵ Its only direction came from Vasconcelos's wish to create an art which was educational, to the end of controlling public behavior and modeling what *Mestizaje* should have looked like.⁹⁶ As a result, the only direction to the piece consisted of Rivera's rendering Indian forms in an archetypal, Platonic way. It was only later, when Rivera and other artists formed the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos and began interacting with the Mexican Communist Party, particularly through publications like *El Machete*, that his and the others' art gained a greater class-consciousness and an eye toward collectivism. Rivera and Siqueiros championed this change more than did the ostensibly apolitical Orozco, but he also made a political overture with his piece *The Trench*.⁹⁷ The directionless and indistinct vision given by Vasconcelos left a vacuum which the Communist Party filled, and which captured the attention of the artists, who wished to create a project of modernization different from that which held under the Porfiriato. The language of

⁹⁵ Anreus, Linden, Weinberg, *The Social and the Real*, 52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

collectivization and Revolution prescribed, in a Marxist historical sense, an understanding of the stage that they were occupying and the utopian stage which was yet to come.

Alongside the muralists, the Stridentists were also developing their own understanding of a Modern Mexico, built on the back of Manuel Maples Arce's manifesto *Actual No. 1*.

Stridentists initially focused on technology, progress, and the modern city, and did not address social and racial divides.⁹⁸ This focus came directly from the document which spawned all of Stridentism as a movement: *Actual No. 1* Arce published his broadsheet publically, pasting it all over the walls of Mexico City and calling for the creation of a new art form which rejected the past, even rejected the future, and focused entirely on the unique nature of the present moment.⁹⁹ Arce wished to put Mexican art in conversation with European art, particularly the Italian Futurist and Spanish Ultraist modes, which he believed would capture the present moment in an optimistic, energized way.¹⁰⁰ Although European artists at the time had been traumatized by the Great War, Arce received no such trauma, and he retained the original Futurist and Dadaist irreverence, denouncement of the academy, and desire for the creation of an art form which reflected the energy and possibility of the modern.¹⁰¹ Stridentism was not initially nationalist in any sense.¹⁰² Arce was concerned with the individual and the present, so he also did not believe that race would factor into his more universalist cultural aesthetic, "a psychological unity which blurs all boundaries."¹⁰³ In its original conception, Stridentism eschewed any notion of a historical progression in stages, deliberately denied race and class, and did not look to a utopic future; as such, it was decidedly not Revolutionary in the Marxist sense.

⁹⁸ Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary*, 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 41.

The encounter between Stridentism and muralism changed the Stridentist course and introduced a class consciousness to this artistic movement. Arce and Siqueiros had already encountered each other by the time of his publishing *Actual No. 1*, and Arce disagreed strongly with Siqueiros in terms of his vision for what the modern and revolutionary art of the 1920s should be. Siqueiros placed history on a progression and he, like many of the Post-War avant-garde artists in Europe, wished to capture classicism and revitalize it with new, modern “values” and pre-Colombian aesthetic.¹⁰⁴ In his essay “Tres llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación americana,” Siqueiros deliberately looked to the future of art in Mexico and anticipated a movement where a subject’s race and local identity would be the cornerstone of meaning in an artist’s work.¹⁰⁵ In many ways, it was as if they were trying to position themselves as directly opposite to each other. When Arce spoke at the unveiling of Rivera’s mural *Creación*, however, he seemed to have a slight change of heart. Rivera himself was deeply disappointed in the mural, which he thought was “too abstract and allegorical, the style too imitative.”¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Siqueiros found it to be disappointing. Arce disagreed, and he, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek fashion, adopted Rivera’s mural into his own Stridentist school.¹⁰⁷ Aside from his irreverent desire to simply be a contrarian, Arce also frequently adapted his aesthetic demands for the sake of reaching a wider audience or bridging his work with that of another artist.¹⁰⁸ Eventually, by the time of the creation of the ¡30-30! offshoot of Stridentism in 1928, the Stridentist philosophy had gained, on top of its general distrust of the academy and the bourgeois, a class-conscious desire to engage in a project of

¹⁰⁴ Flores, *Mexico’s Revolutionary*, 39.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

teaching Indian and working class people how to paint and sculpt.¹⁰⁹ The encounter which Arce had with muralism was emblematic of the way in which various disparate art forms began to coalesce around a Marxist framework, a Revolutionary language and schema which both gave purpose to the current time and anticipated the future. Even Arce's radical philosophy was not immune to that pull.

In his treatment of the Avant-Garde artforms and modernism in general, Fausto Ramírez asserts that the soul of modernity can be found in the expression "all that is solid melts into air," adapted from Marx's writing and the title of Marshall Berman's text.¹¹⁰ He affirms the connection between the Avant-Garde and the modern, recognizing that the modern project is an economic and cultural one which recognizes itself as a unique moment in history, and which sees the old modes evaporating but attempts to capture something new.¹¹¹ He also recognized, however, that the Mexican art of the vanguard began rooting itself in Revolutionary discourse for the sake of differentiating itself from other modern projects. Ramírez identifies the break as primarily occurring between the symbolist art of the *fin de siècle* Mexico. The symbolist art was, in essence, an archetypical form designed to transcend the physical and natural in order to access human experience through symbols and Platonic ideals.¹¹² It was this exact kind of art whose virtues Siqueiros extolled in "Tres llamamientos," albeit with added elements of race and class consciousness. Many other artists, however, particularly those who were members of the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, rejected the decadence of symbolist art.¹¹³ Whereas many

¹⁰⁹ Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Fausto Ramírez, *Modernización y Modernismo en el Arte Mexicano* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008), 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 421.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 422.

European artists were recovering from the trauma of the Great War, Revolutionary artists were energized and inspired by the postrevolutionary period.

For symbolism, Stridentism, and muralism, the energy and novelty of the modern Mexican world took, at first, an unfocused form, and then gradually gained greater cohesiveness with the inclusion of a Marxist revolutionary framework. Mary Kay Vaughan corroborates this trend further in *The Eagle and the Virgin*. Vaughan recognizes that the postrevolutionary moment involved a campaign, a “nationalist movement celebrating the culture of Mexico’s mestizo and indigenous peoples and recasting national history as a popular struggle against invasion, subjugation, and want.”¹¹⁴ The postrevolutionary government sought to embolden a people which it viewed as having been exploited by the previous system, but also viewed those same people as backward, just as the Porfiriato did before it. Vaughan notes that the process of national formation involves an interaction of elite and popular cultures rather than a simple top-down imposition of a symbolic framework.¹¹⁵ She recognizes that, for instance, the Porfirian government had a plan for education and “behavioral transformation” as well which focused on hygiene, medicine, science, and industry, but neglected racial and class distinctions.¹¹⁶ The modern project of the 1920s, therefore, retained its continuity with the Porfiriato. The break, again, occurs when artists like Rivera begin to incorporate Communist understandings of a proletarian revolt into their imagery. The murals which Rivera creates in Chapingo from 1923 to 1928 see him throwing off the yoke of Italian muralism to create this more class-conscious art, as noted in Desmond Rochfort’s essay “The Sickle, The Serpent, and the Soil.”¹¹⁷ Likewise, Helen Delpar’s analysis of nationalism in Mexican art asserts that the muralists do not share exactly the

¹¹⁴ Mary Kay Vaughan *The Eagle and the Virgin*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

same artistic vision and were not “adherents of a single school or movement,”¹¹⁸ but artists like Rivera did, in the latter half of the 1920s, subscribe to a Marxist historical progression of history and a utopic vision of the future.¹¹⁹ Vaughan contextualizes both the imperial interests which dominate Mexico in the nineteenth century, and the new relationship between the elite, the worker, and imperial interests in the postrevolutionary period, demonstrating further the conditions which allow artists in the 1920s to converge on a Marxist Revolutionary discourse in art.

The vacuum created by Vasconcelos’s project of state formation, the desire of artists to separate themselves from previous forms of modernity, and the conversations that these artists have with each other lead many of them to come to see their present moment and their future in terms of Marxist history. This trend in the Mexican Avant Garde and muralism of the 20s contributed to the socially charged, reformist push of the 1930s, but it also limited the power of leftist thought in Mexico. The flocking of artists to a Revolutionary discourse and a vision of proletarian revolution and collectivization indicates the limitations of that very leftist discourse. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, elaborate on this concept. Looking back on the mid-twentieth century in the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and other states, Laclau and Mouffe have the retrospective advantage of seeing the Revolutionary rhetoric disappear only to soon be replaced by neoliberalism in the 80s, as the elite begins to take power back from the people.¹²⁰ Mexico has undergone a similar transition by the time of the 1940s. Laclau and Mouffe argue that Marxist conceptions of the Revolution with

¹¹⁸ Helen Delpar and Stephanie J. Smith, “Mexican Culture, 1920-1945.” Forthcoming, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹²⁰ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. (New York: Verso, 1985), 5.

a capital “r,” universal History, a philosophy which explains human experience in a progression of stages, what they refer to as “Classical Marxist” ideas are restrictive and fundamentally flawed, in that they prevent the creation of a leftist vocabulary which allows for sustained dissidence and reform operating within the state.¹²¹ They suggest that, if a leftist movement is to survive, it must create a “radical and plural democracy” which encourages leftism within a political process rather than in terms of Revolution.¹²² Combined with an understanding of the project of Mexican Modernization and the effects of the Revolution of 1910, this theory helps to explain why it is that the disparate art movements of the 1920s find Marxism as a guiding light which pointed to the thirties, but also why Cardenas, after enacting so many reforms, must cede the presidency to a far more conservative president, with no other president ever matching Cardenas’s platform.

The art of the 1920s takes on a revolutionary character as a means of acquiring a Marxist framework for the sake of explaining the current moment, and this revolutionary character goes on to inform the art of the 1930s. This process, however, occurs independently from the state’s project of modernization and, while the two share an uneasy compatibility for a time, they are eventually irreconcilable. Communism is outlawed in Mexico from 1925 to 1935, and, although the revolutionary character of Rivera’s muralism, as well as that of Siqueiros and Orozco, informs Mexico’s culture and the policies of the Cardenas administration, these two aspects of the Mexican Revolution in Art are ultimately unsustainable. Still, during the 20s and 30s, Rivera and others generated a new modernism by way of trying to inspire people to collectivism, and the Communist character of their art informs the identity of the nascent postrevolutionary Mexican nation.

¹²¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 5.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 176.

By the end of the 1920s, Rivera's privileged relationship with the state and his deeply held Marxist convictions, developed independently by him and by the other artists who had begun to trend with him, poised Rivera to be able to walk the line of advocating Revolution while still involving himself with the democratic process. He carried forward the spirit of the Revolution of 1910 by painting inspiring Marxist murals, but the strength of his Revolutionary language is that it is infused with the project that Vasconcelos had started. Although he believed in the inevitability of the proletariat controlling the means of production and he adopted this revolutionary, leftist framework for formulating his own murals and conversing about art with his colleagues, Rivera combined that Marxist character with a willingness to continue painting art which served the ends of the state. In that way, he was not hindered by the idea of a 'true' revolution, for he did not think that he needed to throw off *mexicanidad* and *Mestizaje* as elements of his muralism. Rivera did not feel the need to throw off the yoke of Vasconcelos's project, which did bear striking similarities to the modernizing project of the Porfiriato; rather, he took the pre-Colombian imagery, symbols of *mexicanidad* and mythologizing of Mexican history, and infused this nationalist myth with Marxism. Rivera's political art was, in this way, not socialist realist, but rather 'epic modernist.' Through his development of 'epic modernism,' an infusion of Marxism and *mexicanidad*, Rivera transformed Vasconcelos's effort to create a nationalist culture which resonated with the Mexican people into a clarion call to *obreros* and *campesinos*, urging them to organize; simultaneously, he managed to create an art which was of the ruling class and which reified the power of the state, but which also called for the proletariat to hold the bourgeoisie accountable.

Rivera's Epic Modernism and the *Detroit Industry Murals*

Rivera's willingness to be an establishment artist, creating murals at the beck and call of the Mexican government, did not endear him to the international organization of the Communist party by the time of the late 1920s, and, even though he was still claiming to create a Marxist revolutionary art, his brand of 'epic modernism' caused him to come under fire from both communists and capitalists alike. Still, it was precisely this style which allowed him to create art which actually helped to create the reforms that the Communists desired, while avoiding the perils of totalitarianism which the capitalists were so afraid of. Rivera created art which captured the present moment in a humanist way, addressing multiple elements of human experience, and not shying away from the elements of his work which were not revolutionary in character. The eternal, spiritual, and archetypal elements of Rivera's interpretation of the present moment, the struggle between exploitation of the land versus exploitation of people, and the possible branching paths of the future which, in some cases, were generalized into the extreme into simple forms of good and evil, were all tools that Rivera used to construct his epic narrative. While they were not themselves revolutionary, they were precisely what allowed Rivera success with the revolutionary aims of his art. Rivera had a talent for grand visions, and, through his 'epic modernism,' Rivera created a body of work which took on different characters in different parts of the world, but which, in Mexico, blended with the Revolutionary culture and the state project of public art to help nurture a populist groundswell which resulted in the enactment of real reforms.

The period leading up to this era of reform under Cárdenas, however, was markedly different. From 1929 to 1935, through a confluence of factors relating to the changing Mexican presidential administration, Calles's control of Mexico by proxy in the years of the *maximato*, and the eventual radical changes under Cárdenas, Rivera developed a transnational, Pan-American vision of industry, technology, and collectivization which attained fuller expression in Mexico than it did in the United States. Rivera's art by this point had an undeniably Marxist character, like the art of many of his contemporaries. Unlike other politically conscious art of the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, Rivera remained innovative in his style, and developed his own form of 'epic modernism' which was both socially oriented and not limited by the restrictions of Socialist Realism. Rivera's works in this period, particularly his murals in the chapel at Chapingo, in the National Palace, and in Detroit, provided the most comprehensive integration of all the elements of his vision, including his conception of history as a class struggle, his love of technology, his appreciation for the epic, his admiration for indigenous religious symbols and the construction of eternal, a-historical myth, and his aspirations for the future of humanity. Rivera embodied, in this time, his role as a 'proletarian artist,' in his view laboring like a member of the proletariat while also consolidating and articulating a vision for the role of the worker. His embodiment alone, however, was not enough to carry the manifestation of that vision into reality. Rivera's 'epic modernism' was what carried his revolutionary message, but it was his collaboration with the Mexican government which made those reforms real.

During this time, Rivera painted in both the United States and Mexico, and though his art was highly consistent in message and construction, and it inspired leftists in both countries, it was the actual political administration of Cárdenas in combination with Rivera's cultural push

which brought about the incredible reforms in Mexico. The different treatment of Rivera's murals in the United States and in Mexico demonstrates the difficult role of the artist in a Marxist conception, and speaks to the possibility that Mexico's class-consciousness and greater amenability to revolution against the state made Mexicans more receptive to Rivera's message, as well as the necessity of having a strong political advocate like Cárdenas to mediate power and make these reforms real.

The aesthetic mode which would allow Rivera to bring about the best realization of his vision of modernity and collectivization first starts taking shape in his murals in Chapingo. At the time of his painting the Chapingo murals (Fig. 3, appendix), Rivera's conception of modernity and history is almost entirely unique in the landscape of Latin American art in that he conceives of history in an epic, sweeping fashion and also challenges the notion that history is driven either by great leaders or by inescapable forces which move and shape humanity.¹²³ In his 1924-26 murals at Chapingo, particularly in the case of the murals that he painted in the chapel, Rivera establishes a relationship between humanity and the natural resources of the Earth which draws upon both an indigenous mythological framework and the aspirations of Zapata to redistribute land to the peasants. His inscription above the murals reads, "Here we teach to exploit the land and not the men," a saying taken directly from Zapata which expresses a mastery of a land, but also a reclamation of the land by the people.¹²⁴

Murals as an artistic medium are more directly tied to their environment than many others, as they become permanent fixtures of architecture and transform and build upon the function and history of that building; in the case of Chapingo, this building was once a *reducción*, a kind of commune established by the Jesuits modeled after the pre-Colombian

¹²³ David Craven. *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*, 102.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104. [Aquí se enseña a explotar la tierra y no a los hombres]. (translated by author).

ejido.¹²⁵ Rivera, here, is in one sense updating the old notions of historical development, including both natural and social dialectic explanations for the progress of humanity in his visualization of history, and in his myth-making of the present moment. He presents this contradiction through the “classically sensual” forms of the female goddesses, who are in possession of various natural resources, like electricity, and the more dynamic forms at their feet, who represent the people of Mexico, even perhaps the people viewing the mural, all of which takes on a particular pre-Colombian, Mayan aesthetic.¹²⁶ At once, Rivera creates a painting which is reminiscent of the Greek treatment of the *polis*, while also addressing the contemporary dialectic of social struggle, where “evolution and revolution are seen here as mutually determining.”¹²⁷ In his modern conception of both the present moment and the history of class struggle, Rivera blends a reverence for indigenous myths, and the feminization of Mexico itself as a provider for her people, which he communicates with a pre-Colombian aesthetic. He also cracks open that static conception of history, however, and asserts that human beings play an active role in harnessing the natural resources which are provided to them.

Three years later, in 1929, Rivera departs from the pre-Colombian aesthetic but amplifies his ‘epic modern’ conception of history in the National Palace Murals. His “History of Mexico” (Fig. 4, appendix) is designed to capture the entire history of Mexico from the conquest up to 1929, and Rivera makes full use of montage to create an overwhelming spectacle for the viewer. The main wall of the mural spans roughly five hundred years of history, from the arrival of Cortez to the present day. In it, Rivera presents all of the figures, both recognizable and unnamed, leaders and common people, in the same plane, without overtly highlighting anyone,

¹²⁵ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 105.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

creating a “post-heroic” landscape which emphasizes popular struggle over the triumphs of individuals.¹²⁸ Rivera attempts to present the role of the *indio* in a balanced way, neither idealizing them nor condemning them, showing Aztec warriors fighting the Spanish and Tlaxcalan people aiding the conquistadors.¹²⁹

In the combination of all of these elements, David Craven sees a modern take on the epic which is closely related to Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre. Rivera’s “History of Mexico” is epic in the traditional literary sense, involving a conflict of immense scale, with a sweeping story, and some struggle which is “of interest to the gods.”¹³⁰ Rivera’s murals are a history of Mexico’s epic class conflict, dealing with the multi-ethnic, multi-century struggle of class, and self-determination apart from Europe, as well as the conflict of opposing forces as this struggle continues to play out in the present day.¹³¹ Rivera constructs a nonlinear, all-encompassing, eternal conception of Mexican history which presents itself all at once to the viewer, and demands that a spectator attempt to place themselves within this narrative. With regard to the epic ‘question’ which is of interest to the Gods, “the question posed is nothing less than the ultimate course of human history, with Mexico being the particular place where this development is concretely known.”¹³² Rivera firmly asserts that the epic subjects here, the heroes of the epic tale, are a collective of actors; in so doing, he expands the cultural role of the epic from focusing on great individuals to instead focusing on the effort of masses of people. In Craven’s conception, Rivera’s art is epic and modern in the sense of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, a modern reimagining of the epic story on stage. Rivera accomplishes this feat by situating the

¹²⁸ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 114.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 122.

action in one enormous montage and calling upon the spectator to see how they can participate in this conflict in their own lives.

Rivera's notion of epic modernism is evident in his Detroit Murals, but these murals also raise questions about whether or not Rivera is truly a Marxist. Critics of Rivera, particularly the Communist Party at the time, denounced him as not giving a harsh enough treatment of capitalism, almost to the point of being pro capitalist, and emphasized that the murals should be given a conservative, uncharitable reading.¹³³ Rivera, on the other hand, would have avowed a socialist reading of his works.¹³⁴ Part of the conflict inherent in what Rivera is trying to accomplish lies in Rivera's belief in the "positive potential" of capitalism,¹³⁵ a concept which is fully compatible with Rivera's Marxism, but not "a common claim of 1930s orthodox Marxism."¹³⁶ Rivera's murals could be read as unapologetically pro-capitalist. For instance, painting during the already strenuous early years of the Great Depression, Rivera chose to focus on the incredible possibilities in Detroit, the city's culture of technology and production. At a time when the Comintern was attempting to exalt the planned economy over capitalist ones, Rivera's more nuanced approach did not win him any favor.

The murals themselves demonstrate the interest that Rivera had in the worker, the machines, and in capturing the awesome power of production, all of which could have been interpreted as endorsements of capitalism. The North and South walls (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, appendix) emphasize Vasconcelos's concept of the four races, depicting American Indian, European, Asian, and *Indio* women who hold in their hands key components in both the

¹³³ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 134.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

construction of the automobile and the construction of Rivera's mural.¹³⁷ Nineteen different stages of production are visible on these walls, and Rivera employs a similar montage aesthetic to blend the activity together, eschewing a more documentary representation of how the cars would have been constructed in favor of, instead, capturing the "spirit" of the human and the machine.¹³⁸ Rivera creates an epic representation of the sheer scale of production, at every step of the way demonstrating the active role that people play in this enormous manufacturing endeavor.¹³⁹ In his emphasis on the components of production, the actual materials themselves, and how they function in art, Rivera's *Industry Murals* are thoroughly modern, and representative of his 'alternative modernism,' which is epic in scope and explicitly designed to place the spectator within the narrative.

As compared with Socialist Realist art, however, he makes no explicit Marxist appeals on behalf of communism. This ambiguity is perhaps most evident in the mural on the west wall (Fig. 7, appendix). Here, Rivera includes a monochromatic frieze where all rivers are shown as one, and the dock workers at the River Rouge Plant face off with the rubber harvesters of Edsel Ford's 'Fordlandia,' his rubber plantation in the Amazon.¹⁴⁰ Fordlandia was Henry Ford's attempt to create a thriving community ex-nihilo in the Amazon jungle,¹⁴¹ an effort which Rivera cites as an example of the interconnectedness of the North and the South, but which he does not overtly condemn in any way for the way that it exploited the Amazonian workers. Below this frieze, Rivera himself, backgrounded by hydraulic machinery, is counterpoised to a similar tall, vertical image featuring an amalgamation of Henry Ford and Thomas Edison.¹⁴² Depending on

¹³⁷ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 142.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 140.

¹⁴¹ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Picador MacMillan, 2010), 3.

¹⁴² Ibid., 141.

the interpretation of the viewer, Rivera could be commenting on the interdependency of the worker and the owner of the means of production, or suggesting that the two are on an equal plane, and one will come to fulfill the role of the other; in this moment of history, the two of them are reflected.

Linda Bank Downs offers a critique of Rivera's "Industry Murals" which both supports Rivera's socialist understanding of his work and also modifies it somewhat. On the one hand, Downs recognizes that Valentiner has hired Rivera explicitly because of their shared philosophy on the popularizing of art and the fact that art comes from the common person.¹⁴³ She describes Rivera's process in creating the frescoes, a process which underscores Rivera's own claim that he and his assistants are laborers, 'proletarian artists' like the people that he paints. The process of creating the fresco in some sense recreates the assembly line, and the scope of this epic project requires a great deal of labor and preparation. In Rivera's *buon fresco* technique which he takes, here, from his time in Italy, he "[requires] teams of contractors and assistants to prepare the walls, make the plaster, grind the pigments, and enlarge and transfer images onto the walls."¹⁴⁴ Three different grades of plaster make the fresco, applied in five coats, and the first coat requires marble and slaked lime, similar to the limestone used to make the Art Institute itself or the limestone depicted in the mural.¹⁴⁵ The components of the fresco are made in huge vats in the museum's basement, heated elements of lime and cement mixed together and then beaten with baseball bats as it cools.¹⁴⁶

Down's characterizes Rivera's assistants, Clifford Wight, Lord Hastings, Arthur Niendorf, and Andres Hernando Sanchez Flores as an eclectic bunch—Wight a trained sculpture,

¹⁴³ Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals*, 23.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

Lord Hastings an aristocrat married to the daughter of Marchesa Cassati, Niendorf a Texan who came initially to Hollywood to be a song writer, and Sanchez Florez a Mexican sugar cane worker and chemist who worked in the Detroit factories and also mixed pigments for Rivera—but she also clarifies that they worked many long hours nonetheless. She notes that one assistant, Ernest Halberstadt, worked until he wore holes in his shoes, and he recalled in an interview that making plaster was “essentially a laborer’s construction.”¹⁴⁷ She notes also that, to his credit, Rivera himself would often work 12 to 14 hours contiguously on his paintings, moving deliberately, not quickly.¹⁴⁸ In Downs’s conception, Rivera is a proletarian artist in the sense that he labored for the creation of his murals, which required an effort mimicking that of an actual assembly line in terms of division of labor.

Downs offers a reading of the murals themselves, however, which deemphasizes the Marxist aspects and instead emphasizes Rivera’s proclivities toward Mayan religious symbolism. Downs recognizes that Rivera’s principle aim is to depict the culture of Detroit, which he believes is synonymous with its geological history and its technology.¹⁴⁹ Rather than link the Detroit Industry Murals to those of the National Palace, however, Downs draws the greatest comparisons between these and the ones that Rivera completed in Chapingo. Downs draws attention to the frieze on the west wall (Fig. 7, appendix), which contains imagery of a half-skull and a half-face, a dualism of life and death found in nearly all faiths, but represented in that specific way in ancient indigenous Mexican cultures, dating back to Tlatilco sculpture from 1000 to 5000 B.C.E.¹⁵⁰ On the North and west, she notes that the towering women proffering lime,

¹⁴⁷ Linda Bank Downs, *Detroit Industry*, 53.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

sandstone, and coal are reminiscent not only of Rivera's previous figures which he painted in Chapingo, but also of the Chac Mool sculptures.¹⁵¹

The Chac Mool sculptures figure in the ancient Aztec tradition as sculptures of warriors who bring hearts as offerings to the gods, whereas in Rivera's murals they are goddesses who sacrifice material for the energy and engine of production.¹⁵² Although every panel includes Rivera's emphasis on the relationship between technology and the worker, Downs emphasizes the way in which Rivera's ideology cannot be boiled down to simple Marxism, that he also has a clear admiration for pre-Colombian iconography and religion.¹⁵³ Taken in context with Rivera's belief in the positive potential of capitalism, this emphasis on a kind of eternal, a-historical conception of humanity implies that his murals, which already are not Social Realist in nature, may not convey their Marxist message at all.

Downs's assertions about Rivera's love of pre-Colombian iconography are corroborated in an essay that Rivera himself wrote praising Frida Kahlo's retablos; in the essay, however, he interweaves Marxist thought with his reflections on the indigenous myth. Rivera uses the beginning of the essay as an entrée into discussing the competing artistic modes of the Spanish and Indigenous in Mexico.¹⁵⁴ He praises the indigenous art created by Indians whom Spanish priests had sent to learn painting in Italy, saying that although they learned the trade, they "were not influenced by the pompous rhetoric of overblown art that Baroque underlings of Michelangelo and Raphael were using at that time."¹⁵⁵ He praises their subversion of Catholic "temples" as well, recognizing that indigenous people would often worship the Sun and Moon

¹⁵¹ Linda Bank Downs, *Detroit Industry*, 93.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵⁴ Diego Rivera, "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art," in *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 177.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 178

depicted in churches rather than worship Christ.¹⁵⁶ These comments are reminiscent of ones which he makes in a letter which he wrote in support of the Zapatistas during the Revolution of 1910, wherein he, writing from Spain, lauds Zapata and claims that there is no divine law which should prevent peasant people from reclaiming their land.¹⁵⁷ Rivera's love of indigenous art and religion is interwoven with his admiration for their subversion of the "domination, laws, [and] decrees" of both the Spanish, and the succeeding "post-feudalist sub-bourgeoisie of the former colony."¹⁵⁸ While in his Detroit murals Rivera clearly includes indigenous religious iconography, these icons are linked to his conception of both *mexicanidad* and Marxism; his refusal to adhere to a strict materialist understanding of Marxism, history, or modernity is a part of his ideology, as noted by Downs, but this part is not incompatible with his understanding of Marxism.

Downs's critiques of the "Industry Murals" help elucidate a more complete understanding of the Detroit murals and also call into question how Rivera's message was being received, but the critiques of Siqueiros and Orozco, at this time, instead evince their own competing political agendas. In *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernisms 1910-1950*, Matthew Affron asserts that modernism and *mexicanidad* cannot be separated, and that as much as Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera have defined a large part of the Mexican modernist landscape in the 1920s, their reach goes far beyond Mexico, including an extensive influence on the United States.¹⁵⁹ When Rivera came to the United States, he wanted to take his project of articulating a "distinct Mexican consciousness—or *mexicanidad*," and expand that to a more universal

¹⁵⁶ Rivera, "Frida Kahlo," 180.

¹⁵⁷ David Craven, *Diego Rivera* 23.

¹⁵⁸ Rivera, "Frida Kahlo," 180.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Affron, "Modern Art and Mexico, 1910-1950." In *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernisms 1910-1950*, edited by Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, et al. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2017, 2.

exaltation of the Americas, broadly writ.¹⁶⁰ As in Mexico, Rivera chose to create murals, which take on the character of their environment and adapt the meaning of the architecture to which they are affixed.¹⁶¹ Siqueiros and Orozco critiqued Rivera's murals, however, for their lack of a Social Realist aesthetic.

As Anna Indych-López notes in her essay on Mexican muralism in the United States, muralism's arrival in the U.S. during the devastating economic stagnation of the Great Depression and the spread of fascism in Europe called for a redefinition of the "social functions of art."¹⁶² Rivera adapted his subject matter to focus even more than he had in his Chapingo murals or the National Palace Murals on technology. Although he infused elements of *mexicanidad* into what he was creating, the nature of his private, not public patronage, and the degree to which he was impressed by the River Rouge Plant, along with his belief that the United States possessed a more positivist culture and greater manufacturing capabilities caused Rivera to focus even more than he would normally on the technological processes.¹⁶³ Orozco and Siqueiros, however, were united in their critique of Rivera.¹⁶⁴ They both critiqued Rivera's art as facile and catering to the establishment, especially because it had been accepted as a kind of state-sponsored art in Mexico and then transformed into what they thought was simply a vacuous icon of the leftist movement.¹⁶⁵ They thought that his art was devoid of any political meaning, and they wished to heed the Soviet demands for "legibility and stylistic cohesion."¹⁶⁶ In spite of their critiques of Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco themselves still created art which was more

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶¹ Affron, "Modern Art," 4.

¹⁶² Anna Indych-López, "Mexican Muralism in the United States in the Early 1930s." In *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernisms 1910-1950*, edited by Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, et al. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2017, 339.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 340.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 341.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Modern and experimental in style and which was not strictly Social Realist. Rivera's art was even farther afield; he was not an avowed futurist in ideology, but he continued to make use of montage, and also included his ever-present Cubist framework.¹⁶⁷ Rivera's Modern inventiveness and "nontraditional compositional structures" made it such that he "emphatically rejected the compositional legibility of didactic Socialist Realism."¹⁶⁸ Rivera was the target of a great deal of criticism which essentially relied on the claim that he was not a true leftist, bolstered by the infusion of ideas which Linda Bank Downs identifies in her analysis of the "Industry Murals."

The combination of Rivera's treatment of the positive potential of capitalist development and his inclusion of Mayan and Aztec religious iconography in the "Industry Murals" could have caused his Marxist message to be lost in all of the noise, but perhaps the strongest refutation of that interpretation of his murals came in the form of the newspaper articles written about Rivera's work. Rivera's murals received a great deal of press coverage from both regular publications and leftist magazines, and the overwhelming consensus of many publications seemed to be that he had inspired progressive labor movements. In San Francisco, Rivera managed to do this without offending bourgeois sensibilities. Initially, many people were hostile to Rivera. In a United Press interview, one prominent painter in San Francisco, Maynard Dixon, stated that "The stock exchange could look the world over without finding a man more inappropriate for the party than Rivera. He is a professed Communist and has publicly caricatured American financial institutions."¹⁶⁹ Rivera's reputation had preceded him, and

¹⁶⁷ Indyk-López, "Mexican Muralism," 341.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Maynard Dixon, United Press International. In *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, author Bertram Wolf, 285. September 23, 1930.

simply his prior association with the Communist party was enough to deter some of the San Francisco intellectuals.

Caught between a rock and a hard place in 1929, Rivera had compromised too much for the Communist Party, and he had been too didactic for the citizens of San Francisco. The workers appeared to favor him, though.¹⁷⁰ By the time he had completed the stock exchange and San Francisco Art Institute murals, the *San Francisco News* opined that “his influence has been sane and healthy...his own work is in the great tradition of painting,” and they went on to laud the way that his public art had renewed interest in the arts in general.¹⁷¹ While Rivera managed to leave the feathers of his patrons relatively unruffled in San Francisco, interviews with labor leaders in Detroit show that their reactions to the “Industry Murals” were very favorable. One leader in the United Auto Workers’ Union, Reuben Álvarez, illustrated the way that they inspired people to organize, saying, “When we organized the union at Ford, we used to bring delegations down to see the murals. Those who lacked words brought people down here to sign them on.”¹⁷² As noted by Downs, the “Industry Murals” also provided a great deal of controversy when the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Evening Times* ran articles saying, respectively, that the murals caricatured the baby Jesus, and that the mural was stirring racial and class tensions in the city.¹⁷³ Finally, in the wake of the creation of the Detroit “Industry Murals,” when Rivera attempted to finish his commission for John D. Rockefeller in New York, he encountered opposition there, as well, for his desire to include a portrait of Lenin among his murals at Rockefeller Center. The *New York World Telegram* reported that it was “likely to provoke the greatest sensation of

¹⁷⁰ Reuben Álvarez, *The Age of Steel*, 235.

¹⁷¹ Editorial, *San Francisco News*. In *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 287. May 9, 1931.

¹⁷² Reuben Álvarez, *The Age of Steel*, 235.

¹⁷³ Downs, *The Detroit Industry Murals*, 174.

[Rivera's] career."¹⁷⁴ Although Rivera's murals could have been seen as possibly pro capitalist or even simply not explicitly Marxist, the reaction of the public speaks to a keen awareness of Rivera's political messages.

Rivera's 'epic modernism' blends a variety of ideologies and styles which communicate, together, the totality of his vision. In the Detroit "Industry Murals," Rivera extols a collaboration between the North and the South, emphasizes that the culture of the city and of Michigan can be found in the development of technology, and praises the land and natural resources of the region in a way that recalls the Mayan and Aztec myths that Rivera made reference to in his chapel murals at Chapingo. The "Industry Murals" are in many ways the truest expression of Rivera's vision and, all along the way, even accounting for his fascination with technology and the actual methods of production, the most overwhelming element of the "industry murals" is the sheer number of subjects which Rivera manages to include on the walls of the Detroit Art Institute. He manages to capture the soul of production, the soul of collectivization, by every step of the way attaching the mechanized processes to the subjects who were carrying them out. This is, in Craven's view, Rivera's 'epic modernism,' provided in the sheer scope of his work and also the explicit call for the viewer to see him or herself represented in the piece, and question his or her own political actions and role in the class struggle still at play. There is no doubt, then, that Rivera's own reading of the west wall and his visage reflected in that of Ford's, or Thomas Edison's, points to a future when the proletariat controls the means of production.

With all of that in mind, there is still a disconnection between Rivera's vision and the political mark that he left on the United States. In *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, Helen Delpar helps to unpack some of the reasons for the hostility that Rivera received, and

¹⁷⁴ "Rivera Paints Scenes of Communist Activity and John D. Jr. Foots Bill." New York World-Telegram. 24 April, 1933.

helps also to explain what seems at first glance to be an inherent contradiction in lauding Mexican artists while also running Rivera out on a rail for being a Marxist. Delpar identifies 1929-1935 as the apogee of U.S. interest in the Mexican aesthetic.¹⁷⁵ In the early twentieth century, both countries were terribly ignorant of the cultural products of the other. Mexico's curriculum mostly emphasized Spanish and French authors, with very few people venturing into the likes of Thoreau or Mark Twain.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, many citizens of the United States were biased by their notions of racial theory, racial superiority, and general disdain for Mexican culture.¹⁷⁷ There were, of course, exceptions to these rules, but it was not until the U.S. experienced a growth in their power in the global stage, a rising nationalism, and a greater interest in the affairs of their own hemisphere that there arose a greater interest in interacting with Mexico.¹⁷⁸

Tellingly, however, the zenith of U.S. interest in Mexico coincided with a particular period in Mexico's history. Prior to 1929, the U.S. had sent political emissaries to Mexico with the express purpose of determining how likely it was that the postrevolutionary government would fulfill the aims of the Revolution of 1910.¹⁷⁹ Delpar notes that, "by the late 1920s, it seemed less likely than ever that Mexico's revolutionary regime was bent on radical change."¹⁸⁰ These were the years of the *maximato*, when Plutarco Elías Calles retained a powerful control over the Presidency from 1928 through 1935, the same years during which the communist party was banned in Mexico, and none of the presidential administrations during this time seemed amenable to the "redistributive features of [the Mexican constitution]."¹⁸¹ Some prominent U.S. scholars of Mexico at the time,, like Waldo Frank and Stuart Chase, held the view that Mexico

¹⁷⁵ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue*, vii.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

was a charming peasant land where people were happier than your average urban New Yorker because of their connection to their work and connection to the earth. These intellectuals advocated that industrial societies would do well to emulate this primitiveness.¹⁸² Essentially, U.S. audiences at the time did not take seriously the Marxist elements of Rivera's work and the work of his contemporaries. Many members of the literati in the United States did not see the Marxist messages in Rivera's work until 1934, when he attempted to paint the Rockefeller Mural.

This somewhat willful ignorance of the class-based critique of Rivera's work comes through in another realm of scholarship within the United States, particularly in the interaction of U.S. social scientists with the ideas of José Vasconcelos, Manuel Gamio, and Moisés Sáenz. In *Backroads Pragmatists*, Ruben Flores provides a comprehensive treatment of the ways in which Mexican thought on race influenced the U.S. civil rights movement. Flores notes that Mexico's own theory of the melting pot was integral to the history of democracy in the United States.¹⁸³ The process of modernization, industrialization, and the rapid growth of rural to urban migration created ethnic conflict and entirely new communities which simply had not existed prior to that time in the United States, just as they had in Mexico; likewise, in the 1930s the pressures of the Great Depression only exacerbated these tensions.¹⁸⁴ American social theorists studied Mexican governmental policy closely, as well as the broad-sweeping programs that the Mexican government implemented. They studied the "administrative structure" of the federal government, the campaign for rural schools in Mexico for the express aim of gaining a model for how U.S.

¹⁸² Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue*, 70.

¹⁸³ Ruben Flores. *Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) 1.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2

schools could be integrated, and they also modeled their theoretical understanding off of Mexico's own research on social theory.¹⁸⁵

Most important of all, the existence of the Mexican "experiment" allowed American social scientists like George I. Sánchez to study this project while it was already underway. The theoretical legacy of pragmatists like John Dewey caused many social theorists in the 1930s, and in generations after, to both question the possibility of putting theory into practice, and the possibility that nationalism ignored the identity of local communities and made it difficult to educate them.¹⁸⁶ Sánchez traveled to Mexico and saw Rivera's murals, like *La maestro rural* at the *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, and he became inspired by the concept of *Mestizaje* as well as their concerted effort to bring literacy to the rural areas of Mexico.¹⁸⁷ Sánchez began thinking of *Mestizaje* not as a biological reality already established by sexual relations between members of different ethnic groups, as was the prevailing U.S. opinion of "miscegenation," but rather as a social and cultural process which could be capable of uniting people.¹⁸⁸ These concepts would influence Sánchez, and he would bring them back to the United States, shaping the U.S. discussions of segregation. Sánchez was, in particular, inspired by Mexico's massive project of state involvement, rather than a reliance on "private philanthropy."¹⁸⁹ Even in the midst of FDR's reforms, Sánchez was drawn to the more centralized, forceful approach to reform in Mexico. In spite of all of these factors, however, the project of land redistribution in Mexico made very little impression on Sánchez and, indeed, FDR's own reforms during the Great

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁶ Flores, *Backroads Pragmatists*, 6.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

Depression had more to do with revitalizing agriculture through incentive rather than redistribution, and were far less radical than the reforms proposed in Mexico.

Rivera's vision, therefore, took on a radically different character in the United States versus in Mexico, and this difference points to the difference made by a competent, charismatic political advocate present in the Mexican administration. When Rivera returned to Mexico in 1935 after his time in the United States and finished the National Palace Murals, Calles's hold on the presidency was ending, and this charismatic advocate came to Mexico in the form of Lazaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas came to power in 1935, at the height of the global Depression, and he began instituting his "Six-Year Plan."¹⁹⁰ Among the changes which he wrought in Mexico were the reduction of the country's dependence on foreign markets, an establishment of land grants given to rural laborers, enforcement of a minimum wage law passed in 1933, and a favoring of the development of Mexican enterprises rather than those of foreign corporations.¹⁹¹ Rather than be satiated by these reforms, the working classes rallied even more intensely, and began to demand more. As a result, Cárdenas even felt the need to join the *Confederación General de Obreros y Campesinos de Mexico*.¹⁹²

A political arms race ensued wherein Cárdenas and Calles vied for political power. Cárdenas supported the right of workers to strike and even went as far as to threaten the owners of production with an appropriation of their factories if they did not listen to the demands of the strikers.¹⁹³ Calles, backed by Luis Morones, the more conservative CROM labor party, and the more affluent sectors of Mexico demanded that Cárdenas shut these strikes down. Cárdenas refused, and his supporters rallied once again, calling Calles a traitor to the Revolution. The

¹⁹⁰ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 117.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 118.

sweeping reforms which Cárdenas instituted, accompanied by the literal rioting in the street of tens of thousands of Mexican people workers and peasants, differed radically from what it was that FDR was implementing in the United States. It was in these conditions that Rivera finished the National Palace murals, depicting those very same riots on the walls of the National Palace, establishing Rivera, in Craven's thinking, as much more than simply "an armchair populist, as is sometimes erroneously assumed about Rivera."¹⁹⁴

Rivera's vision had a completely different kind of power depending on whether he was painting in Mexico or in the United States. As articulated by Craven and Delpar, Rivera's epic modernism was not solely political in its aims. Rivera included an emphasis on technology, indigenous culture, and the possibilities inherent in capitalism which the communist party, for instance, as well as Orozco and Siqueiros, denounced as facile. On the other hand, his murals in the United States did inspire many to action, including some Marxists. The culture of Revolution, however, was not fresh in the U.S. imaginary, and there was no leader like Cárdenas to galvanize the working class in the same way that he did in Mexico. Rivera played a significant part in creating the culture which made the sweeping reforms of Cárdenas's administration possible, but it was only Cárdenas's ability to mediate relationships of power, rally his constituency, and outmaneuver Calles in his political game that allowed that culture to bring about sweeping change. Rivera's vision fused Marxism with a sense for Mexican history and harnessed the power of nationalism. It did not take root in the United States because the nationalistic references did not resonate and the state was too strong already to be challenged. When these factors did take root in Mexico, Mexico exploded, and the dramatic changes of the period between 1935 and 1940 heralded a conservative resurgence right after.

¹⁹⁴ David Craven, *Diego Rivera*, 119.

The strength of Rivera's murals as Marxist art, and Rivera as a proletarian artist, lay in the exact characteristics which caused him to receive such heavy criticism from Communists. Although his message was decidedly Marxist in character, his willingness to create art which did not subordinate religious themes to revolutionary ones, and which did not explicitly criticize capitalism, made his art compatible with private patrons in the United States, until Rockefeller, and compatible with public patrons in Mexico. While it had overtly political elements, Rivera's art was art for art's sake, so it was compatible with different cultural milieus. He was under fire from U.S. capitalists and from Communists in the U.S. and in Mexico, but even though he did not tow the party line and it was possible to read into his work a more facile endorsement of capitalism, it was this exact multidimensionality of his 'epic modernism' which allowed him to create art that inspired so many people in Mexico. It took on different characters depending on the environment he was in because he was creating a populist art, but he was also creating art for art's sake, in which he did not feel the need to explicitly denounce the bourgeoisie, capitalism, or the state. In Mexico, where other populist factors were already brewing, this willingness to create a more humanist art that was not stripped of all extra meaning for the sake of pointing toward revolution helped to encourage the culture that gave rise to the sweeping reforms of the 1930s.

What it is to create Free Revolutionary Art

There was a certain irony to the harsh criticisms levied against Rivera by Communists in the 1930s for his willingness to maintain and even further develop his ‘epic modernism,’ since the very characteristics which separated his work from that of the socialist realists was also what made his work so influential. In the eyes of Trotsky, Rivera’s ‘epic modernism’ was what he, Rivera, and Breton would later term a ‘Free Revolutionary Art.’¹⁹⁵ Trotsky saw Rivera’s capacity to produce free art and collaborate with the state in pursuit of democratic reform as both a testament to Rivera’s vision and strong sense of what it meant to be a proletarian artist, as well as a testament to Mexico’s commitment to enacting those reforms and giving space for the creation of a free art. Rivera painted murals which was both had an ulterior political motive and also was simply art for art’s sake, representing part of the human experience. Trotsky viewed these elements as one in the same, for, through making real his interior vision, Rivera was speaking to a collective experience of alienation within capitalist society. Art did not need to have an overtly political character to be revolutionary, therefore, because even though he used religious symbolism and the iconography of *mexicanidad* which made Rivera’s art so appealing to the state, it was exactly this choice which allowed his art to resonate fully with the Mexican people. Rivera’s artistic decisions in the 1930s helped to create a change in Mexico which was more reminiscent of a dictatorship of the proletariat, during the brief but dramatic period of reform under Cárdenas, than was the USSR at the exact same time.

¹⁹⁵ Breton, Rivera, Trotsky, “Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art.”

Rivera's relationship with Trotsky and, to a lesser extent, André Breton, provides powerful insight into the question of the role of the artist in producing revolutionary art, and the relationship between artists and the state. Rivera meets Trotsky at a time when the Comintern has cast both of them out of the Communist party, and the two exiles bond over a more humanist, as opposed to a propagandist understanding of art. The socialist realist art promoted by Stalin, in an effort to maintain the aura of his own cult of leadership only served to warp the truth and contribute to Stalin's campaign of terror, whereas the interaction of Rivera's epic modernism with Cárdenas's political savvy produced a political environment where Mexican workers themselves, through the CTM, were able to influence the reforms that they wanted to see carried out. Seen through Trotsky's eyes, Rivera's art takes on a different character, and it becomes clear the ways that a revolutionary artist, in concert with an amenable administration, can help to bring about a real redistribution of resources in favor of the proletariat.

In order to better understand Trotsky's and Rivera's relationship, as well as the relationship between art, revolution, and the state, it would serve to establish a cursory primer on the circumstances which brought Trotsky to Mexico. By 1937, Trotsky had already spent time in a number of other countries besides Mexico, after having been exiled by Stalin. In Trotsky's own optimistic conception, Stalin had exiled him and begun to systematically deconstruct his legacy because he was afraid that, in the aftermath of the coming second World War, Trotsky would lead the Fourth International in a series of proletarian uprisings and eventually take back the U.S.S.R. from Stalin, in order to usher in a new age.¹⁹⁶ There was no doubt that Trotsky had become Stalin's primary political enemy, and the image of all opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy.

¹⁹⁶ Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, 9.

While he was without a country, members of the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky, who were skeptical about Roosevelt letting Trotsky into the country, reached out to Diego Rivera to see if he might petition Cárdenas to grant Trotsky asylum.¹⁹⁷ Members of the Committee were likewise skeptical about Cárdenas as well, but they underestimated his commitment to aiding political refugees. After Cárdenas made it clear that Trotsky would not be arriving in secret, that they would herald his arrival and welcome him openly, Mexican Communists deescalated their threats of assassination to ones of more general opposition.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the Communist parties around the world followed the instructions handed down to them by the Comintern, and, after Trotsky's arrival, Mexican Communists were "relentless in their efforts to compromise Trotsky's asylum" through personal attack.¹⁹⁹ Trotsky arrived in Mexico already under scrutiny and considerable threat, and it was only Cárdenas's hard line, coaxed out of him by Rivera's careful leaning on their trusted relationship, that allowed Trotsky some measure of safety in the country.

Beset on all sides, Trotsky found himself once again boarding an armored train, though this time not as War Commissar during the October Revolution, but rather as an exile, disputing constantly the information coming out of Moscow which transformed Trotsky into an enemy of both the U.S.S.R. and Communism itself. Trotsky lived with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in Kahlo's childhood home, which they referred to as the *casa azul*.²⁰⁰ There, he and his team labored incessantly to correct the verdicts of the Moscow trials, which pilloried Trotsky in absentia. The Moscow trials were bloody, and they "foreshadowed further purges to come."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, 17.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

One of them occurred in August of 1936 and resulted in the death of 16 people accused of being Trotskyites, another in January of 1937, just as Trotsky was arriving in Mexico.²⁰² Many of these ‘defendants’ were convenient fall men for the lasting consequences of the horribly taxing five year plan, whose incredible pace had resulted in railway disasters, coal mine explosions, and other failures which Stalin blamed on Trotskyite saboteurs.²⁰³

Mexican Communists demonstrated against Trotsky in order to try to provoke him. Head of the Mexican Communist party Hernán Laborde organized in the city center of Coyoacán, the Plaza de Santo Domingo, where he shouted, “Down with Trotsky who is living in the home of the capitalist painter Rivera!”²⁰⁴ Rivera, already denounced by the party, very quickly became implicated with Trotsky. Trotsky worked incessantly to differentiate the goals of communism from the goals of the Stalinist bureaucracy while simultaneously attempting to reinstate his legacy. He and Jean van Heijenoort, who had accompanied Trotsky from France and headed his staff, generated a slew of press releases which they translated into English and Spanish, and then disseminated to the Mexican and U.S. press.²⁰⁵ Westerners, not only Western communists but also liberals in the United States, were skeptical of Trotsky’s position. They questioned why, for instance, the second trial’s evidence consisted only of the enthusiastic admissions of guilt of the 17 defendants.²⁰⁶ Trotsky was not at all surprised; having lost his own children to the purges,²⁰⁷ he knew that the defendants had been subjected to the highest degree of psychological torture and threats to their families, if not outright physical torture as well. U.S. critics continued to dog Trotsky, with writers at *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, two liberal magazines, defending

²⁰² Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, 32.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 30.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 34.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 43.

Stalin and arguing that it would be strange for him to jeopardize the new anti-fascist strategy of the Popular Front with these diversions if the accusations against Trotsky were not true.²⁰⁸ *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty invoked the old adage that all of the proceedings in the U.S.S.R. were simply part of the “Russian soul.”²⁰⁹ Trotsky vehemently contradicted Duranty, and, in an impassioned speech (read by Shachtman due to technical difficulties), he claimed that Duranty not only “lied” about the Russian soul, but about the human soul in general.²¹⁰ Trotsky was doing all that he could to repudiate the message coming from the Comintern, but Stalin’s agents in the U.S.S.R. and abroad were unremitting, and he found it increasingly difficult to differentiate the Communism associated with Stalin’s Soviet bloc and the Communist revolution which he had tried to bring about with the October Revolution.

Realizing that they would need outside assistance, Trotsky and his allies petitioned eminent pragmatist philosopher John Dewey to possibly come to Mexico and stage a fair trial with an international commission of inquiry. Trotsky wrote a letter to Dewey himself, as did Sidney Hook, a Marxist philosopher at New York University who had been spurned by the American Communist Party, and Dewey agreed to serve on the newly formed Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky.²¹¹ Trotsky and his team were able to contradict some of the blatant mistakes used as ‘evidence’ in the Moscow trials. For instance, some defendants claimed to have met with Trotsky at the Hotel Bristol in Copenhagen in 1932, a hotel which had burned down in 1917.²¹² Trotsky clarified, also, that these processes of investigation were also processes of torture, coercion, and terror.²¹³ Most importantly, however,

²⁰⁸ Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, 37.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 36.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 37.

²¹¹ Ibid., 39.

²¹² Ibid, 43.

²¹³ Ibid.

he and Dewey engaged on one particular question, that of whether or not it was possible to have a true dictatorship of the proletariat, which elucidated one of Trotsky's central philosophical tenets regarding Communism, and which informed much of his struggle during these years as well as his opinions on art, the state, and the artist.

Dewey challenged Trotsky, asking how a "dictatorship of the proletariat" would not always turn into a "dictatorship of the secretariat," essentially a dictatorship of the party elite.²¹⁴ Trotsky had himself been outspoken with his warnings about the "dangers of Bolshevik centralism."²¹⁵ Here, he differentiated Communism in general from Stalin's bureaucracy. In the early 1920s, for instance, he had contradicted Lenin's expressed aim of creating a tightly organized unit of professional revolutionaries who would lead the party.²¹⁶ Trotsky believed that the party structure would eclipse the revolutionary party itself and the needs of the Russian people, and would eventually consolidate behind a leader cult, a "dictatorship *over* the proletariat."²¹⁷ Trotsky not only anticipated this consolidation of power, but he also actively fought it. He praised the U.S.S.R. for its 1936 constitution, which he called "the most progressive in the world,"²¹⁸ but he had nothing but contempt for Stalin. While Trotsky did cite Russia's backwardness, a common self-effacement, as one contributing factor in the difficulty of establishing a true socialist state, he blamed Stalin over and above any intrinsic difficulty. Trotsky recognized the need for a politically established leader who could champion reform, someone who, for instance, might not have carried out the five year plan in the brutal fashion orchestrated by Stalin.

²¹⁴ Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*, 44.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

A democratic solution to the problem of Stalin's totalitarianism, however, was out of the question, so Trotsky addressed Stalin's leadership practices with an unprecedented Marxist idea: A second proletarian revolution. In his treatment of Trotsky after his exile, Isaac Deutscher illuminates Trotsky's perspective on Stalin and his bureaucracy. Both Trotsky and Stalin essentially saw the same problem in the party. Deutscher contends that Trotsky held the erroneous view that Stalin was attempting to transform the bureaucracy into a "new possessing class."²¹⁹ He believed that, considering the matter of inheritance for their children as well as the imbalanced structure of the Party, the most prominent bureaucrats would not find it sufficient to have simple trusts, but would wish instead to become shareholders in various sectors of industry.²²⁰ He also believed that this very problem had doomed Stalin, for none of his party elite would be able to accomplish what they sought without subverting his authority and altering the planned economy.²²¹ In actuality, however, Stalin was managing the acquisitive tendencies of the party elite through terror. The party elite was not able to consolidate power because they were constantly under threat; "just as he had 'liquidated' the kulaks, so Stalin was constantly 'liquidating' the embryo of the new bourgeoisie."²²² Trotsky saw in the current state of the U.S.S.R. that just like the bourgeoisie could create many forms of government, "monarchical and republican, constitutional and autocratic," so could a workers' state create an absolutist government or, potentially, as Trotsky saw it, a democratic one.²²³ Trotsky, therefore, called for a second proletarian revolution, one which would overthrow Stalin without "changing the

²¹⁹ Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 308.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

²²² *Ibid.*, 307.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 309.

existing property relations.”²²⁴ With the U.S.S.R. beholden to Stalin’s totalitarian rule, Trotsky saw no democratic way of reforming the bureaucracy without a second revolution.

Whereas Trotsky found in the USSR an impossibly entrenched bureaucracy which could only be overturned by a second proletarian revolution, in Mexico, he saw the efficacy of a populist campaign within a democratic system. Although Trotsky identified Stalin’s bureaucracy as a failure of the first revolution, it could be said, instead, that it was a failure of the democratic processes which followed, and an inability to establish a head of state who could manage the planned economy without resorting to terror. Trotsky himself repudiated the claim that it was the Russian ‘soul’ which permitted the ascendancy of Stalin’s totalitarian rule, and, likewise, Trotsky praised the U.S.S.R. as having the most progressive economic plan in the world. What he had been critiquing for over a decade was the consolidation of the Party and the creation of a leader-cult for the sake of maintaining power. Although he called for a second revolution, the language of revolution is, by itself, limiting, because the problem which Trotsky identified was institutional. In Mexico, on the other hand, Cárdenas was able to break through the *maximato* and, swiftly, albeit temporarily, enact a great deal of reforms before the PRI reestablished control of the country. He accomplished this in large part because of the charismatic way in which he rallied the unions as well as the rural poor and nationalistic middle classes and pitted them against the bourgeois classes. Trotsky believed in a dictatorship of the proletariat, not over the proletariat, and, although he knew that the Communist “doctrinaires” would contradict him, he modified his conception based on the more nuanced reality of totalitarianism.²²⁵ The tension inherent in Stalin’s totalitarian rule proved to Trotsky the importance of supplanting Stalin’s bureaucracy with a more democratic political apparatus, even if Trotsky conceived of this change

²²⁴ Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 309.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

only in terms of revolution. Cárdenas's administration demonstrates the possibility for tremendous social reform within a democratic process, carried out by an administration which was not challenged by revolution, and carried out with a still extant bourgeoisie.

This conception of the relationship between the state and the people opened Trotsky up to the possibilities in Mexico, particularly with regard to revolutionary art. Trotsky was harshly critical of the art being created in the Soviet Union. Whereas Stalin saw a revolutionary art as essentially pure propaganda, Trotsky viewed both the role of the state and revolutionary art itself differently than did Stalin. The art pushed into being by the Comintern was symptomatic, for Trotsky, of the same totalitarian illness which was asphyxiating Communism in the U.S.S.R. In Paul N. Siegel's conception, Trotsky had a more humanist understanding of art, and he believed that it did not compromise its revolutionary nature to have an artist express their interiority. Trotsky's capacity for literary criticism had won over the likes of T.S. Eliot.²²⁶ Trotsky appreciated the works of Tolstoy and other authors whose work came from "aristocratic soil."²²⁷ Both his humanist, rather than purely political interest in art and his disregard for socialist realism made Trotsky's perspective compatible with that of Rivera, and Trotsky began to see the potential of a free revolutionary art within a democratic system.

With regard to art in general, Trotsky was aware of the critique levied at Marxism that it did not allow for anything beyond a purely materialist understanding. He drew upon Italian Marxist Antonio Labriola's rebuttal of this claim by saying that this thinking addressed a kind of Marxist strawman, a gross oversimplification of the relationship between the material economy and the cultural superstructure.²²⁸ He was highly critical of strictly propagandist art, which he

²²⁶ Siegel, *Leon Trotsky*, 8.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

saw as simplifying a complicated reality.²²⁹ He believed, instead, that all art carried a revolutionary character because it naturally expressed an artist's experiences of alienation within a capitalist society. Furthermore, Trotsky believed that art should come from the artist and reflect the artist's interior world, and he appreciated great works of art and literature because he believed that humanity "is grand in the heroism of its struggles and noble in its potentiality."²³⁰ Trotsky's more nuanced understanding of art intentionally flew in the face of Stalin's socialist realism, and it reflected his humanist belief in the value of bourgeois culture, even as he called for a proletarian re-envisioning of that cultural landscape.

As Trotsky considered the relationship between artist, state, party leadership, and revolution, doing all that he could to repudiate Stalin's totalitarian bureaucracy while still nurturing his vision of a socialist future, no one presented a better embodiment of the revolutionary artist than did Diego Rivera. In an essay published in the *Partisan Review*, Trotsky both delineates his perspective on socialist realism and lauds Rivera's work as a powerful rejoinder to that genre which is so narrowly defined and stripped of individuality.²³¹ In "Art and Politics in our Epoch," Trotsky begins by deftly encapsulating in one sentence the relationship between revolution and an artist's own interiority, saying, "generally speaking, art is an expression of man's need for an harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him."²³² All art is revolutionary in character, but art itself speaks to concerns which are not strictly material, and which draw upon older forms of the superstructure and touch on other parts of human culture and experience. Trotsky then goes on to say that while the October revolution spurred an incredible bloom of

²²⁹ Siegel, *Leon Trotsky*, 22.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

²³¹ Trotsky, "Art and Politics in our Epoch," 3.

²³² *Ibid.*

modern Soviet art, Stalin's calcified bureaucracy has choked out real art in favor of Propaganda.²³³ In the totalitarian state, art and justice both exist to glorify the leader.²³⁴ Trotsky goes on to list multiple examples of artists supplicating themselves before Stalin. While Trotsky is an admirer of Tolstoy's work in general, he notes that Tolstoy's work praising Stalin's leadership at Tsaritsin is of little value, because these military exploits are overblown.²³⁵ Likewise, Trotsky gives a comprehensive evisceration of one cornerstone of the Stalinist myth, that of the "Practical Center," which asserts that Stalin was integral in the planning and carrying out of the October revolution when, in fact, "Stalin never belonged to the Military Revolutionary Committee."²³⁶ Soviet art, in praise of the glory of Stalin and the bureaucracy which he has created, is founded on this myth, among others. For instance, the headquarters of the "Center" depicted by Soviet artists is rendered in only so much vague detail "to avoid the embarrassing question of the address."²³⁷ Just as Trotsky is constantly repudiating the commentary coming from the Moscow show trials, here he denounces socialist realist art.

Trotsky's denunciation of socialist realism is also a clarification of the role of the revolutionary artist in relationship to the state, a role which Diego Rivera, in his view, typifies. Trotsky neatly sums up the hypocrisy of socialist realism by stating that it is a subversion of true socialism for the sake of worshipping the bureaucratic systems of control and the leader cult, and that the term 'realist' ought to only be used ironically, considering the fact that the aesthetic character of the art is lifted from "provincial daguerreotypes of the third quarter of the last century," and the subject matter of the art is entirely fictitious.²³⁸ By strictly controlling the

²³³ Trotsky, "Art and Politics in our Epoch," 4.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid, 5.

²³⁶ Ibid, 6.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Trotsky, "Art and Revolution," 7.

production of art by the artist, Stalin has destroyed all of its meaning and even rendered its revolutionary character moot. Trotsky asserts forcefully that, “In the field of painting, the October revolution has found her greatest interpreter not in the USSR, but in faraway Mexico, not among the official “friends,” but in the person of a so-called “enemy of the people” whom the Fourth International is proud to number in its ranks.”²³⁹ He gives a brief introduction to Rivera’s frescoes which indicates that he knows they have meaning beyond a purely materialist oversimplification, that they are an expression both of *mexicanidad* and a reestablishment of pre-Colombian myth.²⁴⁰ He goes on to say, however, that, “Without October, his power of creative penetration into the epic of work, oppression, and insurrection, would never have attained such breadth and profundity.”²⁴¹ Since Rivera’s artwork may be one of the truest expressions of the values of the October revolution, it owes a debt, therefore, to the revolution as its intellectual antecedent. Finally, Trotsky gives credit to Mexico itself, the “historical youth of a country which has not yet emerged from a state of struggle for national independence,” whose administration has given space for the creation of mural paintings like Rivera’s, the same ones which Rockefeller chafed at and covered with “decorative banalities.”²⁴² It is not just Rivera’s work, but also his relationship with his patrons and the freedom with which he can create, which allows him to represent the values of the October revolution so well, and this relationship between the artist and a powerful democratic leader helps to realize the true aims of Communism, in Trotsky’s view.

Maintaining that a proper revolutionary art comes from an artist’s own vision of the world not being limited to a particular propagandistic template, Trotsky, Rivera, and surrealist

²³⁹ Trotsky, “Art and Revolution,” 7.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., 8.

André Breton all agree that an artist should be entirely free to create what it is that brings into being their interiority. Trotsky understands that interiority to be an expression of the individual's struggle with alienation in a capitalist society, a position which is eminently compatible with Breton's surrealist rejection of present reality and Rivera's addition of the epic struggle to harness the natural world, and an individual's awe at their role in the massive collective project of production. In *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, these three, a revolutionary and two artists, write of the "subjective talents" necessary for the creation of artistic work, and the "spontaneous" creation of art, which is an individual process and a realization of the individual's conception of the world.²⁴³ This phrasing includes some of Breton's preoccupation with the personal transformation and subjectivity of the artist, but it combines well with Trotsky's own view of the role of art. They go on to assert that although an individual undertakes this process, it would be negligent to avoid considering the "intellectual conditions under which creative activity takes place."²⁴⁴ In that consideration of culture, there is also a consideration of the superstructure (the cultural hegemony created by the ruling class, all culture within a capitalist society), and the role that the artist plays in considering the world around them. They compound this claim with an assertion that the "revolutionary state has the right to defend itself against the counterattack of the bourgeoisie,"²⁴⁵ but that the perversion and degradation of the art, or the debasement and control of the artist, is not part of that schema. Rivera's ideas shine through here, when all three put forth that individuals should make explicitly revolutionary art for the sake of building a socialist regime, but that the process of intellectual creation should exist within the realm of an "anarchist" regime.²⁴⁶ The artist's role is then to confront the world around them, but to do so in

²⁴³ Breton, Rivera, Trotsky, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," 117.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

an unfettered way, and to realize a picture of the world which contributes some element of their own subjectivity, allowing a spectator to engage with the full range of human experience and have their own sense of alienation satisfied.

The interaction with Breton showed that Trotsky and Rivera, both banished by the Comintern from the socialist realist realm of the Communist party, were engaging with the broader modern landscape of the art world, and that they were considering the value of interiority which was not necessarily explicitly revolutionary in character. Although Breton traveled to Mexico explicitly for the sake of exploring revolution and art, his contribution to the *Manifesto* focused more on the subjectivity of the observer and the artist. Breton was himself heavily influenced by Gustave Moreau and Arthur Rimbaud, in the early years of his life.²⁴⁷ While he did not seriously consider the pantheon of Rimbaud's work, he became inspired by his life to a kind of "restlessness regarding the nature of poetry."²⁴⁸ This restlessness took on a further evolution when Breton met Jacques Vaché in 1916, for Vaché's general irreverence and specific disdain for both literature and poetry pushed Breton even more afield.²⁴⁹ Breton's encounter with Dadaism brought him to the penultimate stage of the development of his own iconoclastic style; in his magazine *Littérature* he had already been flirting with a new movement which, in 1924, he synthesized into the *Manifesto of Surrealism*.²⁵⁰ Breton outlines an art which deliberately rejects not just the current social structure, but all of reality. In the manifesto, "he makes an impassioned appeal to those impulses in a man which come from a predisposition to cast off the restrictions of the rational universe."²⁵¹ Surrealism is the opposite of socialist realism, in this way, and Trotsky

²⁴⁷ Matthews, *André Breton*, 3.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

would say that this desire is an expression of Breton's own alienation. Surrealist art, though not necessarily explicitly political in nature, is one of the purest rejoinders to the artistic guidelines laid out by the Comintern.

Trotsky's relationship with Rivera and the *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* shed light on how Rivera's own epic modernism fits into the schema of revolutionary art, and how it relates to both the Communist party and the aims of reformists and socialists alike. By the time of Trotsky's exile, the main period during which Rivera and Trotsky interacted, Rivera was no longer a member of the Communist party, but not of his own volition. From Bertram Wolfe's own personal account of the mid to late 1920s, Rivera had an active role in the Mexican Communist party. Wolfe even attempted to dissuade Rivera from taking so much of his time to appear on the committee, not only because his tremendous painting talent was wasted when he was in meetings and that he ought to specialize in his time, like a trade-union worker or a teacher.²⁵² Wolfe also pointed out that Rivera tended to lead the committee catastrophically astray with his grand visions and lack of mastery of details.²⁵³ He was an artist, not a politician or a theorist, and he would often construct a narrative for the committee that was coherent unto itself, while also "ignoring the economic and political realities of the land," such that Rivera "might as well [have been] laying plans for work in another country or on another planet."²⁵⁴ Rivera served the party in various ways, however, as an artist. He plied his influence with the Mexican administration in order to shield communists from official persecution, while also drafting documents for the party and lobbying some communists out of prison.²⁵⁵ Above all else, of course, he contributed that epic modernist vision for the purpose of stirring the hearts of

²⁵² Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life*, 228.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 229.

laborers and *campesinos*, who might have been reading, for instance, *El Machete* when they stumbled upon one of his murals in progress.²⁵⁶ Rivera had deep connections to the communist party, and he created his art with the Communists in mind, specifically.

In 1929, however, when the Comintern began pushing socialist realism as the only valid form of revolutionary art, the party expelled Rivera from its ranks. They turned on him, saying that he was nothing more than an “agrarian *Zapatista*,” that he had never been a true communist, and that he had become a bourgeois tool of the establishment.²⁵⁷ In the eyes of Trotsky, however, it was precisely Rivera’s *Zapatista* tendencies and his willingness to work within the Mexican administration which made him revolutionary. Rivera and Trotsky both fell victim to Stalin’s totalitarianism, the latter far, far more than the former. It was Trotsky’s work which brought to fruition the October revolution, and, in Rivera’s work, Trotsky saw a piece of what it was that he wanted to encourage in the U.S.S.R. Rivera’s work played a role in the establishment of a new culture which would allow Cárdenas to push his democratic reforms, even though the Comintern dubbed Rivera a simple ‘agrarian *Zapatista*.’ Rivera had fulfilled the aims of revolutionary art without sacrificing the interiority of the artist. Even if Cárdenas’s administration inevitably gave way to a more conservative, liberal economic policy, Trotsky saw in the relationship between Rivera and Cárdenas an outstanding example of the effective role of a proletarian artist in relation to the state. As a result, Rivera and Trotsky found kinship with each other for a time; Trotsky had an intuitive, integrative mind and a general humanist interest beyond his political leanings which allowed Rivera to connect with him.²⁵⁸ The two shared a common understanding of art and art’s purpose in the world.

²⁵⁶ Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life*, 229.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 230.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 234.

In so much as Rivera's goal was to inspire change and imbue the proletariat with a dynamic agency using his brand of epic modernism, this goal could only be realized through his interaction with a politician who could properly broker power between the classes in Mexico. Stalin, through totalitarianism, dealt with the problem of a lingering acquisitiveness in his party elite, the specter of a possible new 'possessive class,' by keeping the elite in a constant state of terror. Likewise, he arrested complete control of art and attempted to subordinate all artistic message to a propagandistic worship of the leader and the Soviet bloc as a whole. The tremendous irony of this endeavor is that, particularly in Trotsky's view, revolutionary art takes on a much fuller and more effective role in animating people and inspiring them to revolution when the artist is able to tap into the full range of emotional and spiritual alienation of the observer. While Stalin attempted to choke out any possibility of the resurgence of the bourgeoisie, Cárdenas, operating within the cultural framework created by The Mexican Revolution was able to both empower the proletariat and challenge the bourgeoisie. In Trotsky's own conception, therefore, much of his praise for Mexico and for Rivera indicates that there was in Mexico at that time a far better example of a dictatorship of the proletariat, rather than a dictatorship over the proletariat. Although later on the PRI consolidated into its own form of powerful bureaucracy, in that moment, Rivera participated in a historical moment which saw a great deal of democratic, labor reform which was close to what he and Trotsky had envisioned for the proletariat.

Trotsky saw that, in Mexico, a free art combined with the willingness of politicians to lobby on behalf of the people to create an environment where, unlike in the totalitarian USSR, a dictatorship of the proletariat could be perpetuated, briefly, through democratic means. Trotsky was unnecessarily attached, still, to the notion of a true revolution, believing that at some point in

the future there would need to be a second proletarian revolution for the sake of establishing something like what he saw in Mexico in the USSR; following the logic of Laclau and Mouffe, however, this fixation on revolution was a limitation of Trotsky's thinking. There would be no second proletarian revolution to come, and no true revolution would completely eliminate the power of the acquisitive class. Although wake of the Cárdenas Presidency led to a conservative resurgence and a calcification of the PRI as the ruling party, the time under Cárdenas brought Mexico as close to a dictatorship of the proletariat, not of the party, as was possible before the ruling classes became threatened and the pendulum swung back. It was not the presence of a 'true revolution' in Mexico and the dissolution of the bourgeoisie which allowed for the creation of this brief moment in time, the closest that any country had gotten by that point to fulfilling the goals of the October; rather, it was the democratic process and Cárdenas's willingness to mediate disputes of power with the bourgeoisie, not eliminate it, by galvanizing his base and taking advantage of the class-conscious culture generated by Rivera which allowed for the creation of this brief dictatorship of the proletariat. Rivera's ability to create freely an art which expressed his Marxist political vision through his own 'epic modernism,' combined with the willingness of Cárdenas to capitalize on the culture generated by the Revolution in Art, brought into reality the part of Rivera's vision which called for political change.

Conclusion

Diego Rivera's art was explicitly political. It had an aim, which was a call to collective action meant to inspire all people toward collectivization, toward a future where the proletariat would dictate to the state, and they would be the owners of the means of production. Part of his work would be incomplete, or in some sense tragic, if this aim had never been realized. Trotsky claimed that all art was revolutionary for the way that it characterized human anguish as? the alienation brought on by capitalism. Rivera took his own childhood love of machinery, only amplified with time and the chance to observe massive projects of production and giant machines, and he combined that with his interest in the human soul. He examined how individual people interacted with the grand forces in their lives, harnessing them every step of the way through history, and interacting in an interdependent way to shape the destiny of the human race. He repeatedly drew attention to the dynamic way that people shaped history through class struggle, and he situated individuals in that struggle through the spectacle of his art. Along the way, however, he was not afraid to move away from strict materialism for the sake of incorporating *mexicanidad* and addressing the whole of the human spirit. Rivera's was an art that explored the human element of an otherwise overlooked sector of society, and allowed people to see themselves in an epic struggle rather than assume that dynamic heroics and massive change were only reserved for the heroes of old. He envisioned a world where company bosses would come from their class, not the bourgeoisie, and where they would be able to secure their own interests.

Through a partnership with the state, particularly through partnership with Cárdenas, Rivera was able to bring some of his vision into the world. Obregón and Vasconcelos recognized

the importance of public art from the very beginning of their tenure as part of the new Mexican administration. They knew that, in order for them to establish credibility after the harrowing, chaotic years of the Revolution, they would need a Revolution in Art. Rivera's talent would have still allowed him to produce breathtaking art even if he did not have the Mexican administration on his side, but it was the combination of the two which brought a part of his vision into reality. Obregón and Vasconcelos encouraged Rivera to create a public art centered on the needs of the people. While Calles was more indifferent to the lofty aims of the Revolution and represented a more conservative administration, he, a far cry from Stalin, still tolerated the creation of art which was neither stripped of the human soul and subordinated to propagandistic interest, nor made for the express purpose of reinforcing the power of a leader-cult. Finally, Cárdenas's administration bucked the *maximato* and, by feeding into the power of the unions and also meeting their demands, he was able to enact a great deal of change in a short period of time. Meanwhile, the Soviet administration was so consumed by the Terror, and their art was so restricted and stripped of holistic meaning that they were unable to incorporate that form of democratic change into the planned economy. On the other hand, the United States, although in possession of a free art, had its own form of very different reform in mind with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The people of the United States were not stirred to march in the streets to the extent that the *obreros* did in Mexico City. Not only did Rivera's art need to be free from constraint, it was also aided by the more than a decade long relationship with different Mexican administrations, interrupted briefly by the *maximato*, which built the groundswell necessary for Cardenas's reforms.

At the end of Cárdenas's term, he appointed a conservative candidate to succeed him. His reforms were never repeated by any other Mexican administration, and the era of the Revolution

in Art was over. Though Rivera's vision of a fully collectivized Mexico and Trotsky's vision of a global uprising of the proletariat never took root, these prescriptsutopian dreams were limited by their need to frame progress in terms of revolution. Trotsky was so insistent on the idea that he even suggested a second proletarian revolution was necessary to free the U.S.S.R. from Stalin's grip. The Revolution of 1910, for instance, cracked open the Mexican national consciousness, but it was the work of artists and politicians over the next two decades which helped to redefine *mexicanidad*, and which ensured that this redefinition completed some of the aims of the revolution.

Even though the dynamics of power shifted dramatically after Cárdenas's presidency and this particular democratic reform was never repeated, it was the Revolution in Art and its role in changing the culture, combined with the effort of Cárdenas, one politician, to capitalize on that change, which made something even close to resembling what Rivera wanted to see. It was not through the existence of a true revolution or the dissolution of the bourgeoisie, but rather a democratic mediation of power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie executed by a competent populist, which allowed for the creation of a brief dictatorship of the proletariat. For Rivera's part, it was precisely his ability to see beyond the limitations of the language of revolution and to work with the state, creating art which expressed a wide range of human experiences of the modern and did not subordinate itself to a socialist realist understanding of what Marxist art should look like, which helped create the necessary cultural moment for Cárdenas to take advantage and enact his reforms. Rivera was at once prescribing and describing the present moment, observing the changes brought about by modernity, generating a mythic, epic understanding of the shared national identity, and imbuing that myth with a class consciousness which resonated with the Mexican people precisely because of his willingness to

create art for art's sake; through that, he both captured the present Mexican moment and helped to create it.

Appendix



Fig. 1. Orozco, José Clemente. *Fratricidas*, *El Machete*, September 4, 1924. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Found in *Picturing the Proletariat*, author John Lear, 103.

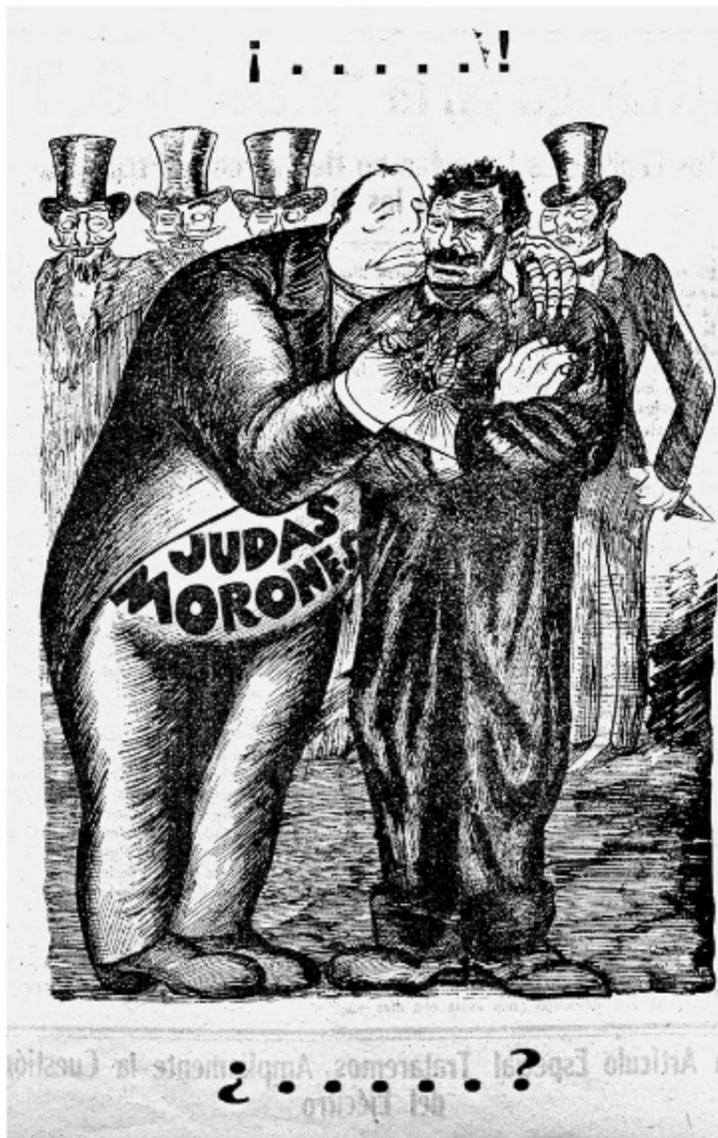


Fig. 2. Orozco, José Clemente. *Judas Morones*, September 4, 1924. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City. Found in *Picturing the Proletariat*, author John Lear, 105.

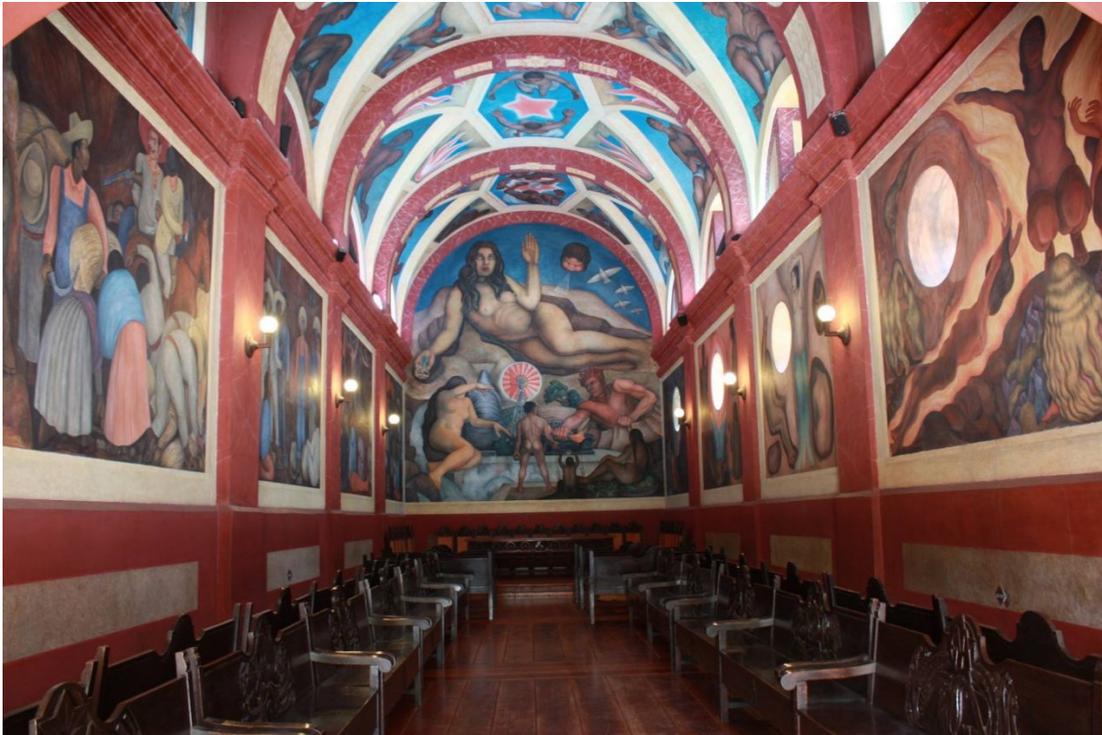


Fig. 3. Rivera, Diego. *Mural Capilla Riveriana de Chapingo*. 1926. Chapingo Chapel, Chapingo, Mexico.
<https://todotexcoco.com/la-capilla-riveriana-en-chapingo-presenta-danos-severos-e3TQwNTUyNQ.htm>



Fig. 4. Rivera, Diego. *History of Mexico*. 1935. National Palace, Mexico D.F., Mexico.
<https://www.mercatornet.com/features/view/the-history-of-mexico-an-ideological-masterpiece/20827>



Fig. 5. Rivera, Diego. *Murales Industriales de Detroit*. 1933. Detroit Arts Institute, Detroit, Michigan. <http://aboutplacejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Detroit-Industry-north-wall.jpg>

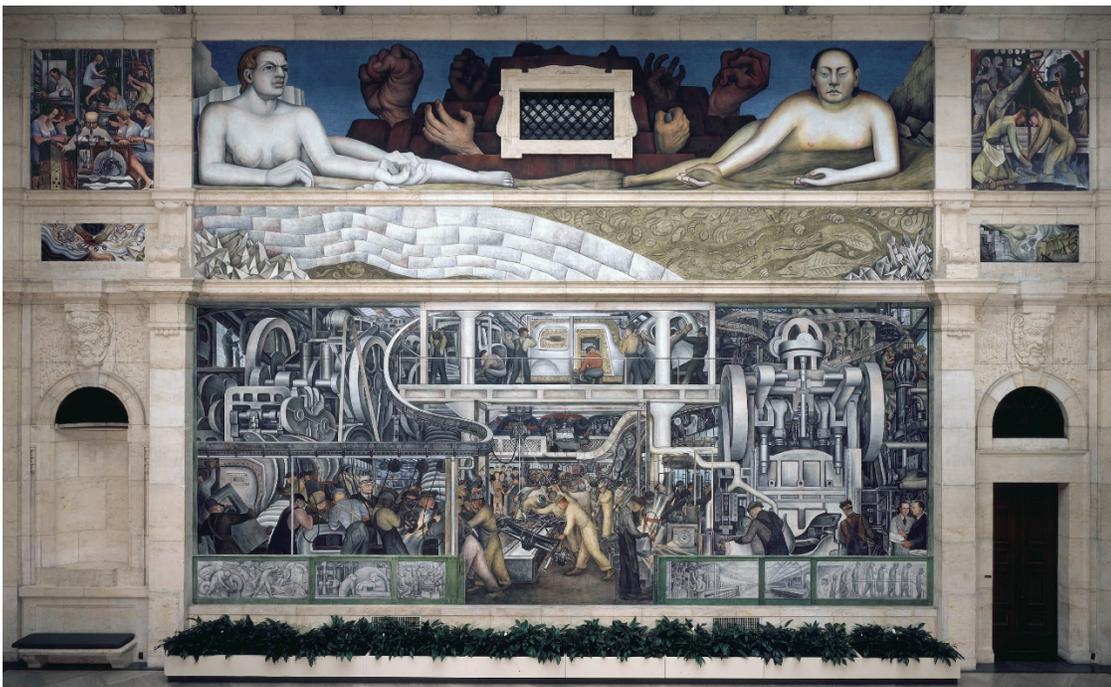


Fig. 6. Rivera, Diego. *Murales Industriales de Detroit*. 1933. Detroit Arts Institute, Detroit, Michigan. <http://aboutplacejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Detroit-Industry-south-wall.jpg>



Fig. 7. Rivera, Diego. *Murales Industriales de Detroit*. 1933. Detroit Arts Institute, Detroit, Michigan.
<https://www.bluffton.edu/homepages/facstaff/sullivanm/michigan/detroit/riveramurals/2484.jpg>

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