

authoritarian, socialist or developmental capitalist. Examination of such circumstances, in turn, can tell us a great deal about the disjunctive nature of modernization in what Beatriz Sarlo has qualified as the "peripheral modernity" experienced by Latin America.⁹

This essay looks at four periods in the development of muralism, beginning with the immediate aftermath of the Revolution (1920-24) and moving on to nationalist authoritarianism under President Plutarco Elías Calles and the Maximato (1924-34), then to socialism under President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), and finally to the reversal of Cárdenas' socialist programs and the institutionalization of capitalism under Presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46), Miguel Alemán (1946-52), and beyond.

General Alvaro Obregón came to power in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution—a revolution that launched the country's transition from what Laurence Whitehead has termed an "oligarchic" state to a "modernizing" one.¹⁰ The modernizing state, in this paradigm, favored the urban bourgeoisie (rather than oligarchic landed colonial families based on a semi-feudal agrarian economy); import-substitution industrialization that sought to diminish Mexico's dependence on foreign investment; state economic interventionism (instead of laissez-faire economic policies controlled by an elite few with no government regulation); and nationalism based on inclusion of the masses, at least symbolically (over the Eurocentrism of nineteenth-century nationalisms, which excluded those masses). Obregón astutely realized that reconstruction after the Revolution depended not simply on economic recovery from the devastating effects of civil war. Nor did it depend solely on building a strong, centralized state. It also required the comprehensive manipulation of symbols of Mexican identity on both cultural and political levels.

The Revolution ruptured entrenched oligarchic circuits of power to open new political opportunities for the middle class, but there was no art market to speak of in its aftermath—a sign of the weakness of the urban bourgeoisie during this period.¹¹ Indeed, the state was the primary source of artistic patronage, and Obregón took advantage of this situation to set up a state-run culture. One of his first moves in 1920 was to appoint the liberal lawyer-philosopher, José Vasconcelos, as Minister of Public Education. Vasconcelos proposed a cultural program in which the artist-intellectual was a "redeemer" and "prophet" for "the oppressed." "Art and knowledge must serve to improve the condition of the people," Vasconcelos exhorted, urging all Mexican intellectuals to "leave their ivory towers and seal a pact of alliance with the Revolution."¹² The cultural messianism of Vasconcelos' program was based on a concept of *mestizaje*, in which European culture would rescue the Indian from his "underdeveloped" ways.¹³ Vasconcelos hired the muralists to paint this ideology, and his project for Mexico's spiritual renewal through high culture affected mural production through 1923. Indeed, Vasconcelos toed the obregonista line in that he avoided any direct reference to the violence of the previous decade, and he made sure that his muralists did likewise. Thus, Orozco's *Maternity* at the National Preparatory School (the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, or Prepa) in Mexico

LOS TRES GRANDES

Ideologies and Styles

Alejandro Anreus

We believe that while our society is in a transitional stage between the destruction of an old order and the introduction of a new order, the creators of beauty must turn their work into clear ideological propaganda for the people, and make art, which at present is mere individualist masturbation, something of beauty, education and purpose for everyone.

—MANIFESTO OF THE SYNDICATE OF TECHNICAL WORKERS,
PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS, *EL MACHETE*, JUNE 1924

The Mexican Mural Renaissance was the end product of multiple historical forces: social and aesthetic, political and cultural, communal and individual. Without the Mexican Revolution and the patronage of President Alvaro Obregón's government, the mural movement as we know it would not have taken place, or at the very least would have been radically different. On December 9, 1923, the recently organized artists' union, Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors, wrote their manifesto as a response to the de la Huerta attempted coup against the Obregón government. An important early document of the Latin American avant-garde, the manifesto's principal author was David Alfaro Siqueiros, and its signers were the painters Xavier Guerrero, Fermín Revueltas, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Ramón Guadarrama, Germán Cueto, and Carlos Mérida. The manifesto was published in June 1924, in the official paper of the artists' union, *El Machete*. The manifesto's content is straightforward; it begins with a politically charged dedication:

To the Indian race humiliated for centuries; to soldiers made executioners by the praetorians; to workers and peasants beaten by the greed of the rich; to intellectuals uncorrupted by the bourgeoisie.¹

The document proceeds to reject “salon” and easel painting, bourgeois approval, the picturesque and the American Kewpie doll—all signs of a commercial and imperialist culture. The conclusion issues an unequivocal call to arms:

We appeal to common soldiers who, unaware of what is happening or deceived by their traitorous officers, are about to shed the blood of their brothers of race and class. Remember that the bourgeoisie will use the self-same weapons with which the Revolution guaranteed your brother's land and livelihood to now seize them.²

A brilliant piece of propaganda, the manifesto still jolts a first-time reader with its clarity and force. It espoused a revolutionary aesthetic for public art, through the mural or the print. More important, however, it defined the role of the politically responsible artist.

Three of the manifesto's signers—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—would achieve national and international prominence unparalleled among Latin American artists of their generation. Christened *los tres grandes*—The Big Three—by admirers and foes, the three artists' names, lives, and works would become part of Mexican cultural mythology. Yet these three artists held radically different views of art and politics, and as a result they rarely appeared together publicly.

One exception was in 1947, when the three together, in a congenial mood, were memorialized in a photograph (figure 2.1). The occasion was the creation by Miguel Alemán, then President of Mexico, of a National Commission of Mural Painting, consisting of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros. This representation of the trinity of Mexican mural painting is, however, a fiction. In reality, the three artists were separated by profound ideological and stylistic differences. In his memoirs, Siqueiros writes of the artists' encounter prior to the taking of the photograph:

I believe that we waited for him (Rivera) for more than an hour. When he arrived he told us: “I am late because I have been thinking what we should propose to the gentleman . . . My proposal is the following.” He took paper, a pencil and started to draw. It took him more than a half hour to accomplish his task. When he was finished, he told us, pointing with his finger: “This here is the section for film and theatre. Here would be Fine Arts. Here, Dance, etc. and the whole thing would be called ‘The City of Art’ . . . But we should represent the culinary art of Mexico; in these small rectangles there will be as many places to eat as there are states in the Republic” . . . Orozco came close to Diego and told him: “You are no fool, but the president of the republic is going to believe you are the biggest *pendejo* that ever existed. Not a single Mexican will come to this; there, English will be spoken and you are always imagining things for tourists.” [Rivera replied:] “I am tired of the tourist thing being blamed on me. And what do you live off, you old *hijo de la chingada*, if not from the tourists.”³

In life, *los tres grandes* feuded constantly, yet at Orozco's funeral both Rivera and Siqueiros paid homage to the older artist. Likewise, upon Rivera's death, Siqueiros con-



FIGURE 2.1

Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera (left to right) at the time of the creation of the National Mural Commission (1947). Courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Mexico City.

tinued the tradition of praising a colleague against whom he had spoken. All three painters wrote or dictated autobiographies or memoirs, each feeling strongly that in their own words they could set the record straight. But each man's records were colored by myth, distortion, and even outright lying. Orozco wrote his *Autobiografía* in 1945; it is a mere 112 pages long and concludes in 1936, when he arrived in Guadalajara to commence his great cycle of murals at the Hospicio Cabañas. He omits his early radical politics and his affair with Alma Reed. Rivera dictated his *Confesiones de Diego Rivera* shortly before his death in 1957 to the Spanish journalist Luis Suárez. The book was published posthumously in 1962. Just over 200 pages long, Rivera's confessions are a picaresque romp, with the muralist making light of his onetime association with Leon Trotsky and emphasizing his love of beautiful women such as Mexican actresses María Felix and Silvia Pinal. Siqueiros' memoirs, *Me llamaban el coronelazo*, were published in 1977 (by his widow), almost four years after his death, from a manuscript partly written by the artist and partly dictated to the journalist Julio Scherer García. It is a chronological memoir some 603 pages long, organized into twenty-seven chapters. A well-written and at times humorous account, it heroicizes its subject from his childhood to his last imprisonment (from 1960 to 1964), as a macho revolutionary.



FIGURE 2.1

Siqueiros, Orozco, and Rivera (left to right) at the time of the creation of the National Mural Commission (1947). Courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Mexico City.

This chapter will explore the ideologies and styles in the works of *los tres grandes*, focusing on the representation of the Mexican Revolution and of Marxism. By “style” I mean what Meyer Schapiro, in 1962, called a system of forms whose qualities and meaningful expressions make visible both the personality of the artist and outlook of a group.

OROZCO

In 1910 the Mexican Revolution began and spread to all levels of Mexican society. As Orozco recalled it, “I did not take any part whatsoever in the revolution, nothing bad happened to me and I was not in any kind of danger. For me the revolution was the most happy and diverting of carnivals. . . . I was never concerned with the cause of the Indians, never threw a bomb, or was executed by firing squad three times. . . .”⁴

Orozco’s cavalier humor transforms both the ideals and the brutality of the revolution into apolitical frivolity to hide his disillusionment with both the conflict itself and its aftermath. His only recorded political affiliation was with the anarcho-syndicalist organization Casa del Obrero Mundial. Its agenda was urban, pro-worker, secularist, and decidedly anti-peasant. The origins of anarcho-syndicalism can be traced to 1869 in the ideas of both Mikhail Bakunin and Eugene Hins, who theorized that the trade union movement and workers’ councils were weapons of class struggle that would bring about the libertarian society of the future. This anti-authoritarian revolutionary position would find many followers in the labor movements of Mexico, South America, and Cuba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Orozco’s association with the Casa came through the painter Dr. Atl.⁵ When the Casa took the side of Venustiano Carranza and Obregón during the struggle against the forces of Villa and Zapata in 1915, Dr. Atl enlisted Orozco to join; Orozco became the political cartoonist of the Casa’s newspaper *La Vanguardia*, and as such he traveled throughout the countryside with its Red Battalions, who fought against the forces of Zapata and Villa.

Orozco’s virulent anti-clericalism may date from this period, when he both participated in church lootings and burnings with fellow anarchists and witnessed the religious piety—for him a manifestation of superstition—of Zapata’s and Villa’s followers.⁶ The Casa’s heyday lasted from about 1915 to 1921, when its members transformed themselves from a revolutionary movement into an independent labor union, the Confederación General de Trabajadores. Orozco’s activism in the Casa was over by 1919–20,⁷ when the Casa’s politics shifted. As a labor union, the organization had a subordinated relation to the state.

Despite the brevity of Orozco’s experience with anarchism, it left a profound mark on him: his skepticism about all authority, his tragic view of the poor and the exploited, and his sarcasm about the betrayal of revolutionary ideals are all rooted in anarchism. By the spring of 1927, the Confederación General de Trabajadores—which had clashed

with President Calles over his pro-US policies—was disempowered by the government, persecuted, and replaced by the less radical Confederación Obrera Mexicana, under the leadership of Luis Morones.⁸ Orozco would have felt keenly the persecution and repression of his one-time anarcho-syndicalist comrades. From 1922 through 1927 he flirted with the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). During this period the PCM was close politically to the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors, of which Orozco was a founding member. Nevertheless, the artist's anarchist sensibility—his libertarian notions of free individual action and hopes for the abolition of formal government—did not fit the Party, with its centralized structure and disciplined membership. According to the artist's FBI file, he "was never a [p]arty member, he attended meetings and occasionally gave financial aid."⁹

Orozco's panel *Revolutionary Trinity* (figure 2.2), part of his first monumental works at *San Ildefonso* (1923–26), exemplifies powerfully this ideological moment and the artist's developing style. On the first of the three floors of this cycle, Orozco is in transition, experimenting and deciding. *Revolutionary Trinity* evokes the Holy Trinity of Christianity, but replaces an image essential to Mexican Catholic culture with a new secular image of the Mexican Revolution. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are replaced by a peasant at lower left, a soldier in the center, and a worker at lower right. Both the peasant and worker are on their knees, the peasant praying with hands clasped and covering his face. The worker, who has lost both hands, looks angrily over his right shoulder at the towering figure of the soldier, who hovers or floats above the other two, a physical analog of the Holy Ghost's ethereal hovering. The soldier is all brute physical strength: with powerful hands, arms, and shoulders he holds a rifle, ready for battle. But he cannot see; a red flag covers his head, obscuring his face. This is the trinity of a damaged revolution, in which the peasant escapes through prayer, the worker is physically broken, and the soldier's vision and conscience are blocked by the red flag, which stands for the revolution itself. These austere, block-like figures resemble neoclassical shapes infused with expressionist emotion, conveyed in the bold reds, browns, grays, and blues of the palette. The figures, squeezed together in a triangular composition, are contained by the fiery red background and the charcoal gray ground on which they kneel—a tight and uncomfortable visual structure in which the soldier, peasant, and worker are condemned to their proximity with no escape possible.

The art historian Justino Fernández argued in his monograph of 1942, *Forma e Idea*, that the mural panels on the first floor, including *Revolutionary Trinity*, represent "the ideals." Yet these images suggest the opposite of ideals. *The Strike* depicts the haloed and floating head of Christ above three paralyzed peasants holding a limp red flag; in *The Trench* (figure 2.3) a crucifixion scene is transformed into one with three peasant figures, one dead, one struggling, one weeping; and *Destruction of the Old Order* shows two peasants with bullet cartridges around their waists, looking back at what has been destroyed, rather than forward to what will be constructed. Thus, Orozco's first



FIGURE 2.2

José Clemente Orozco. *Revolutionary Trinity*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso (formerly Escuela Nacional Preparatoria), Mexico City (1923–26). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.



FIGURE 2.2

José Clemente Orozco. *Revolutionary Trinity*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso (formerly Escuela Nacional Preparatoria), Mexico City (1923–26). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.

mural program visually displays his ideology as a *via negativa*, a perpetually critical stance that embraces no simplistic possibilities and bluntly depicts the Revolution's unfulfilled promise, its corruption and failure.

Orozco's murals at Dartmouth (1932–34), the last cycle he painted in the United States, give evidence of a shift and growth in his style. By this time, the artist had completely abandoned any belief in direct political agency. The anarcho-syndicalism of his youth gave way to an anarchist individualism, in which the only possibility of liberation lies in personal rebellion. Orozco's palette expanded to bright yellows, deep greens, and purples; his drawing abandoned the forced geometry of the New School murals in favor of a clear delineation that is nevertheless expressionistic. His composition acquired a rhythm that unites all the panels into a sequence. The content, as fiercely anti-technological as it is anti-imperialist, derives its strength from the apocalyptic disgust expressed in the destructive themes of most of the panels of his murals over the years. For Orozco, agency is possible only in painting itself; it resists the world and



FIGURE 2.3

José Clemente Orozco. *The Trench*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso (formerly Escuela Nacional Preparatoria), Mexico City (1923–26). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.



FIGURE 2.4

José Clemente Orozco. *The Carnival of Ideologies*, Palacio de Gobierno, Guadalajara (1937–39).

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FIGURE 2.3

José Clemente Orozco. *The Trench*, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso (formerly Escuela Nacional Preparatoria), Mexico City (1923–26). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.

questions its propaganda, and it creates a language that critiques political reality yet escapes the restraints of conventionally understood politics.

In November 1935, as Orozco was about to begin his mural cycle in Guadalajara, he became a founding member of the Unión de Pintores y Escultores de Jalisco. At this time he was active in the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR, founded in 1933), representing it at the American Artists' Congress in New York in 1936. These years of anti-fascist Popular Front activities transformed Orozco's ideology temporarily into that of a fellow traveler, a typical reaction at a time when fascism was conquering Europe and Asia.

In late 1937 Orozco began the fresco panel *The Carnival of Ideologies* (figure 2.4) on the right side of the stairwell at the Governor's Palace in Guadalajara. The central panel depicts a gigantic Father Hidalgo starting the revolution with a torch,¹⁰ beneath which the masses have gone out of control; below seventeen red flags, humans are massacred. On the other side of the stairwell is *The Ghosts of Religion in Alliance with Militarism* (also



FIGURE 2.4

José Clemente Orozco. *The Carnival of Ideologies*, Palacio de Gobierno, Guadalajara (1937–39).

© 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.



FIGURE 2.5

Diego Rivera. *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City (1935). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.



FIGURE 2.4

José Clemente Orozco. *The Carnival of Ideologies*, Palacio de Gobierno, Guadalajara (1937–39).
 © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.

titled *The Sinister Forces*), where a faceless mass of people, all wearing bishop's miters, carry heavy crosses. A soldier, this time in a general's cap, again is covered by a red flag. Only his hand, holding a sword, is visible. Snakes lead this heap of dark forms toward the central panel. There, revolution, born out of the need for freedom and justice, has deteriorated into a chaos assailed by clericalism and militarism. The anticlericalism, which for Orozco typifies the urban elite, shows their real distance from the peasantry. His dim view of official religiosity is premised on his conviction that modernity and its progress are secular. Yet in his work the formal religiosity of the church and idiosyn-

cratic spirituality remain separate and distinct: the first is portrayed as oppressive and backward; the second, as libertarian and possibly enlightening.

In this mural, the Mexican state for Orozco is at once a national power and a corrupt entity. This is his view of the Mexican Revolution in the late 1930s. *The Carnival of Ideologies* is doubly significant in this view. In it the artist looks for answers in ideologies outside or beyond the Mexican Revolution, such as communism and fascism; he encounters not answers but a farce. In this carnival or circus Marx appears as a muscular dwarf at the bottom of a pyramid of buffoons. Above him, grotesque figures climb and fall on each other, juggle and exchange hammers, sickles, swastikas, and crosses. Among them, Hitler is recognizable, screaming and gesturing from a balcony at right, off-center below, Mussolini puffs out his chest, grinning, a hammer in one hand and a trowel in the other. Above them all is Stalin, mustachioed and dour, holding an enormous sickle and hammer. Behind him a masked military figure squeezes the Bolshevik's arm and whispers into his ear. In Orozco's mind, leftist and rightist ideologies and symbols are interchangeable—dogmatic clowns putting on a spectacle to entertain, dupe, and massacre the masses.¹¹

Large areas of the works in this cycle are blacks and reds that shift from fiery to bloody; yellow, white, and grays in the three panels offset this oppressive darkness. The drawing is agitated but avoids caricature. It is a baroque expressionism, where pyramidal compositions are destabilized by the overall painterly application of the pigments. Style crystallizes the content; history is a delirious chaos in which truculent demagogues lead the people to slaughter. In the Governor's Palace, Orozco returned to his earlier, iconoclastic anarchist politics, forgiving no one, ridiculing all—Christians, communists, and fascists. His anarchist individualism rejected institutional religion as well as mass movements organized into political parties; in each of them a power structure manipulates and oppresses the populace. His *via negativa* critiques and dismantles history so that its ruin is clearly visible. Only after acknowledging the rubble, he suggests, can humanity move beyond it.

Orozco developed this vision further in the Hospicio Cabañas murals: in this cycle, forms become bolder, colors cooler, and the compositions more abstract. The sweeping narrative includes history from pre-Conquest to the 1930s, so that Philip II and Cervantes share the stage, pre-Conquest religions and Catholicism are intertwined in their brutality, and both Cortés and the Franciscans destroy the past and build a problematic future. The one glimmer of hope in this dystopic imagery is the dome, where *Man on Fire* ascends in apocalyptic enlightenment.

How could Orozco get away with representing such bruising and parodic visions on public walls? By choosing to work in a capital in the more marginal provinces instead of Mexico City?¹² Or by avoiding publicity (unlike Rivera and Siqueiros)? Or did his seemingly apolitical persona protect him from censorship by his patrons? Undoubtedly the government of Jalisco, during the Cárdenas presidency, was stable and secure enough to tolerate the artist's visual critiques. These factors may all have played a role, as may

have Orozco's symbolic/expressionistic style, which both avoided Rivera's didacticism and refused Siqueiros' mythic figuration of social realism. His message ignores the "revolutionary nationalism" of the Mexican State, proposing instead a turbulent vision of rebellion.

Ultimately, Orozco's ideology placed him in a position of independence. As an anarchist he could have no place in organized party politics; he therefore chose a solitary solidarity. That choice informed his vision of history and of the human condition as a process of constant struggle against betrayal and corruption, where sacrifice is never-ending and redemption is at best a distant promise.

RIVERA

Rivera returned to Mexico from his studies in Europe in July 1921, and that year traveled in Yucatán to acquaint himself with the daily life and crafts of the region. By early 1922, he had begun work on his first mural, the encaustic *Creation* in the Anfiteatro Bolívar at San Ildefonso. Stylistically this mural synthesizes Rivera's earlier experiments with post-impressionism and cubism and his studies of Renaissance mural painting. Conceptually it reflects Vasconcelos' intellectual agenda, for it depicts symbolically the fusion of the indigenous, Judeo-Christian, and Hellenistic traditions in a new and cosmic race. In the autumn of 1922, Rivera—along with Siqueiros, Orozco, and others—founded the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors. In December of that year, Rivera joined the Partido Comunista Mexicano (Mexican Communist Party, or PCM). From the beginning he was a critical member of the PCM, expressing his sympathies for the peasantry and an almost anarchist irreverence toward the Party's hierarchy and structure.

In 1925 Rivera met the Marxist author and activist Bertram Wolfe. Their friendship and influence on each other would last until the late 1940s, when Wolfe started moving ideologically right. Following Wolfe's advice, Rivera resigned from the PCM in 1925, stating that he would serve the communist cause better through his art than through Party activism. In 1926 he requested re-admission to the PCM, and was immediately reaccepted. In 1939, Bertram Wolfe published *Diego Rivera: His Life and Times*, the first biography of Rivera in the English language. Its tone was polemical, reflecting Rivera's personality as well as Wolfe's "Lovestonite" Marxism.¹³ All through the 1920s, Rivera participated in the significant Latin American leftwing organizations the Hands-Off Nicaragua Committee and the Liga Anti-Imperialista de las Américas. He was also involved in grassroots peasant organizations in Mexico and, unlike Orozco and Siqueiros, consistently expressed his sympathy with the Zapatista strain in the peasant movements. In September 1927, Rivera visited the Soviet Union for the first time, remaining there until June 1928 when he returned to Mexico. While in the USSR Rivera spoke out against proponents of academic Socialist Realism, defended Modernism, and became disillusioned with the Stalin regime.¹⁴ In 1930 the Calles government declared the PCM illegal.

During the 1920s to the 1930s Rivera produced what most scholars consider his most significant murals, at the Secretaría de Educación Pública (1923–28), Chapingo (1926–27), and Palacio Nacional (1929–30, 1935). These frescoes display his mature style with great clarity and force. A synthesis of cubist structure in composition, neoclassical clarity of line, and a bright palette that reflects both pre-Conquest and post-impressionist painting, Rivera's didactic narrative and epic breath make his style cohere.¹⁵ The Palacio Nacional stairway murals present a clear example, particularly in the central panel, which consists of five sections. Starting at the bottom with the fall of Tenochtitlán, Rivera builds a historical archaeology. The colonial world is built on the pre-Conquest one. Above the colonial section appear the liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century from Hidalgo through Juárez; those are superseded by the 1910–1920 Revolution. Recognizable lead actors in the history of Mexico intermingle with generic actors representing "the people." Tragic and gruesome events (massacres, the Inquisition, the depredations of dictators) are not central to the composition; they are another part of history. Rivera's vision of history evolves and ascends in a series of Hegelian layers, with progress inevitable. The nationalist revolution of the twentieth century improves upon the liberal revolution of the nineteenth and will in turn be perfected by the Marxist one of the future. This future is depicted in *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* (figure 2.5), where a pyramidal structure of four layers shows the roots of social evil, exploitation, and repression of the Mexican people even as they are in the midst of struggle. Above, Marx, like a new Moses, holds a text from the *Communist Manifesto* while pointing to the promised land of the future, where collective farms and factories co-exist in harmony with nature. Beside Marx a revolutionary trinity—the antithesis of Orozco's—consists of a worker, a soldier, and a peasant holding hands in solidarity as they all listen to Marx's message. Behind them are factories, and behind those a crusty material representation of the sun, the source of energy for the universe. At right, balancing the harmonious farms and factories on the left, is what looks like the Zocalo, with the cathedral going up in flames and workers clashing with the army. The four layers of the pyramid from the bottom show peasants and welders working in horrific conditions; Frida Kahlo and her sister Cristina teaching children to read; peasants awaiting execution; police repressing a strike; the reactionary trinity of Mexico—church, army, and state—and their allies, high society and corrupt journalism. Opposite sides of this panel depict Marxist union laborers mocking doctrines being preached in a classroom, as well as an armed uprising. Rivera's stylistic clarity is welded to his revolutionary vision. The polemical tone of this panel could have been acceptable only in the Mexico of President Cárdenas, with its left-wing nationalist and populist politics. Rivera maintains and explicates the optimistic vision of his politics in his clear drawing, sensuous forms, and bright colors. He is a pantheistic materialist, for whom humanity and the revolution function as cosmic substances in a concrete world. In Rivera's vision, utopia is inevitable.

On September 10, 1929, Rivera was expelled from the PCM for acts of disobedience



FIGURE 2.5

Diego Rivera. *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City (1935). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.

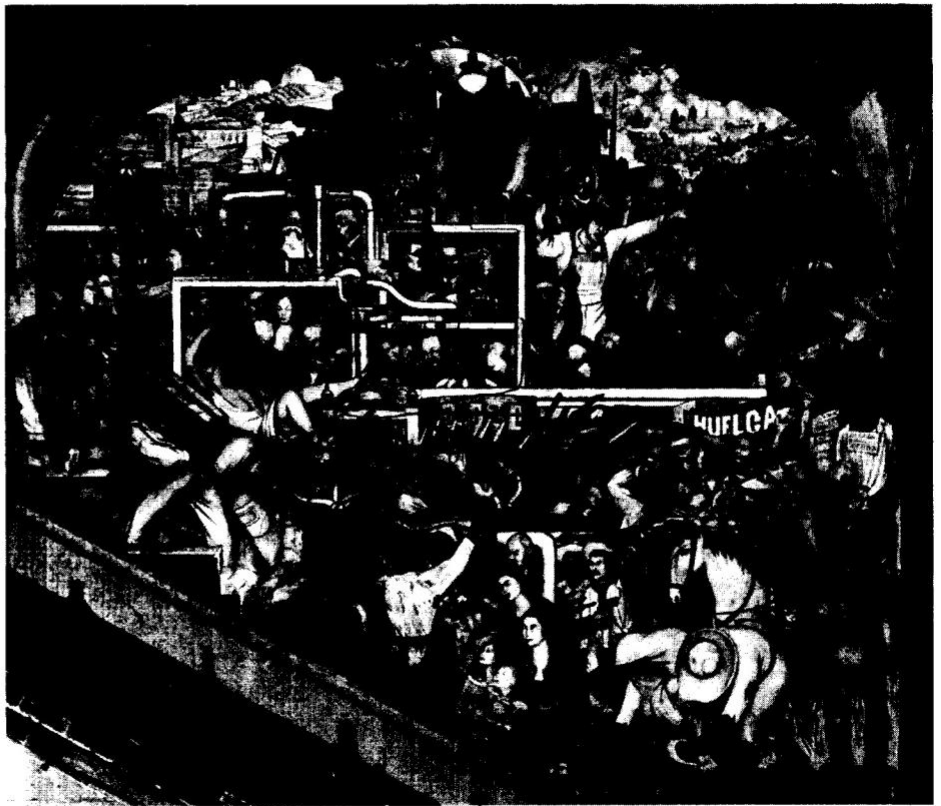


FIGURE 2.5

Diego Rivera. *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City (1935). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA.

and failure to follow its policies. From this time to 1941, when Rivera again petitioned for re-admission to the Party (he was re-admitted after his fifth request, in 1954), he evolved ideologically from Lovestone to Trotsky to Mao. He enriched his artistic production by deviating from Stalinism and Soviet officialdom, so that his heretical Marxist period paralleled his most innovative murals.

Rivera in his last years, however, came to exemplify artistic and political decadence. He returned to the PCM, and in 1955–56 he visited the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, just as his artistic production was becoming simplistic and sentimental. As David Craven has written: “From the period of the Second World War until his death at seventy-one in 1957, Rivera found himself increasingly in the paradoxical position of being a national icon (albeit a controversial one) for the more conservative post-Cárdenas Mexican state. Similarly, and hardly less paradoxically, Rivera was also an international Cold War symbol for the Communist Movement, which alternately held him at arm’s

length and then embraced him. In short, Rivera became more famous and less 'ultra-leftist' or independent."¹⁶

THE SIQUEIROS-RIVERA POLEMIC, 1934-1935

In the May 29, 1934, issue of the *New Masses*, Siqueiros published an article titled "The Counter-revolutionary Road of Rivera." This text began a polemic that lasted until after the assassination of Leon Trotsky on August 20, 1940. In his article Siqueiros attacked Rivera's art as "Indigenist, folkloric, archeological (Picasso in Aztecland). In Mexico he was the Mexican chauvinist in indigenism, and when he arrived in the United States all of a sudden he gave importance to the continental aspect of his indigenism."¹⁷ Siqueiros technically defined Rivera's art as retarded, incapable of working outside of traditional fresco, and lacking the technically inventive capacity needed for revolutionary art. The article represented Rivera's politics as everything detestable to an authentic communist: Rivera was a bohemian who spent the years of the Mexican Revolution in his Parisian atelier; an opportunist who painted murals for the Calles regime and capitalists in the United States; and, finally, the painter of the Trotsky-Lovestone coalition.¹⁸ The following year, on August 27, 1935, Rivera spoke on the revolutionary role of the arts at the North American Congress for the Foundation of the New Education, which was held at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. The following day Siqueiros addressed the congress in a talk titled "Art," in which he repeated his critiques of Rivera from the *New Masses* article. Rivera, who was in the audience, demanded time to respond, and the session degenerated into a shouting match between the artists and their supporters.¹⁹ Because the administration at the Palace of Fine Arts had canceled that evening's opera, the artists and their partisans were free to regather in the theater to continue their dispute.

According to the former Siqueiros archivist and art critic Raquel Tibol, the polemic continued into the early days of September, when the two *grandes* met at the baker's trade union hall and signed an agreement with nine points,²⁰ including a call for self-criticism among the artists who participated in the mural movement, and an assertion of the need for a revolutionary politics that rejected romanticism and naïveté in favor of the mural as a strategic political space.²¹

In December 1935, Rivera published his response to Siqueiros in a pamphlet titled "Defense and Attack against the Stalinists." It was republished in Argentina as an article in February 1936, in the magazine *Claridad*.²² With his usual humor, Rivera attacked Siqueiros and his allies as dogmatic Stalinists who were the enemies of both plurality in the arts and permanent revolution in politics. He specifically called Siqueiros an opportunist, trying to gain merit with the PCM after his expulsion in 1930, and an artist who had not yet produced a consistent body of work in the mural format. Rivera defended his own right to sell his work to capitalist patrons, because doing so extended the circulation of his art in a non-socialist world.²³

In the dispute, a Stalinist and a Trotskyite collided head-on. Siqueiros favored the Party line dictated from Moscow, synthesized with his version of a formally and technically innovative muralism; Rivera embraced Trotsky and the autonomy of modern art, and was comfortable with the presence of a contradictory nationalism in his murals. The substance of the polemic faded after World War II when, in 1954, Rivera was re-admitted to the PCM.

The Marxist novelist José Revueltas offered an interesting footnote to the clash in 1967 when he published his essay "The Mexican School of Painting and the Novel of the Revolution" in the magazine *Espejo*.²⁴ In the essay, Revueltas took to task both Siqueiros and Rivera, blaming them for the self-alienation, lack of authenticity, and mythification of the mural movement. Revueltas believed that Siqueiros' and Rivera's political and artistic differences dissolved because their murals functioned as ideological fetishes and deformed concepts of the "National Myth of Mexico," where ultimately they served the bourgeois and bureaucratic politics of the Mexican State.²⁵

SIQUEIROS

In 1921, while in Europe, Siqueiros wrote and published "Tres Llamamientos de Orientación Actual a los Pintores y Escultores de la Nueva Generación Americana" in the magazine *Vida Americana* in Barcelona. In this piece, he stated:

Let us abandon literary motifs. Let us devote ourselves to pure art! Let us reject theories anchored in the relativity of "national art." We must become universal! Our own racial and regional physiognomy will always show through in our work.

Our Free Schools are open air academies (as dangerous as the official academies in which at least we learn about the classic masters); in them we have commercially oriented teachers and a type of criticism that stifles the individuality of aspiring artists. Let us close our ears to the critical dictates of our poets; they produce beautiful literary articles which are completely divorced from the real value of our work.²⁶

Already in this first piece of theoretical writing, Siqueiros attacked a naïve and picturesque notion of the national, as exemplified by the open-air schools and nativist subjects. He also declared himself an "internationalist" under the call of the "universal," and an avant-gardist who favored experimental art over literary subjects.

Siqueiros' first mural project at *San Ildefonso* was left unfinished in 1924; what remains are formally interesting fragments and subjects (the burial of a worker, an Indian Christ). In the United States he completed significant murals in Los Angeles (*Workers' Meeting* [destroyed], *Tropical America*, and *Portrait of Mexico Today*, all completed in 1932).

Siqueiros' artistic production from the late 1940s until his death, however, suffered from a bloated monumentalism and a mechanical repetition of techniques that had

been innovative in the mid 1930s and early 1940s.²⁷ It can be argued that his most avant-garde work ended with the collaborative Mexican Electricians' Union mural of 1940.²⁸ From 1922 through 1940 he executed five mural projects; most of his production consisted of easel paintings and prints.

In 1957 Siqueiros began *From the Porfiriato to the Revolution* at Chapultepec Castle. This work, disrupted by the artist's imprisonment from 1960 to 1964, is arguably his final statement on revolution and Marxism. The mural occupies what was initially a small room; Siqueiros increased the paintable area by installing a single wall in the enclosure, which he painted on both sides. The mural, which measures 419 square meters, depicts five themes: the martyrs of the Cananea strike, Porfirio Díaz and his regime, women who dance to delight the dictator, an uprising of "the people," and the image of Díaz as a fossilized figure. Of these, the central panel—*General Uprising of the Mexican People Against the Porfirian Regime* (figure 2.6)—best crystallizes Siqueiros' ideology and style. Painted on two walls, it shows a multitude of workers and peasants rising up to confront the soldiers of the regime. At the head of the revolt is a man holding the Mexican flag, he struggles with a soldier who is attempting to snatch it. Behind him a mother holds a child, and behind her, lines of figures march. Siqueiros combines portraits of anonymous men and women of all ages with those of recognizable historical figures, thus moving back and forth from the general to the specific. The figures in the foreground have fully modeled heads and hands, but into middle ground and background, hats, shawls, and shoulders repeat so that the masses look like automatons marching in unison to the rhythm of the revolt. Four workers carrying a slain revolutionary on their shoulders serve as the axis of the composition. Another man behind this group moves forward holding a red flag; farther back, identifiable figures push toward the revolution. These figures cross time periods, geography, and politics: Karl Marx and the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, and the liberal José Martí are all compressed into the same history. On the left panel four soldiers and a woman march toward the viewer; behind them Carranza, Zapata, Obregón, and Calles seem to join arms and push forward. The overall color scheme is strident, even harsh, with bold yellows and an overabundance of reds flowing from panel to panel. The drawing, which achieves some structural power in the foreground heads, deteriorates into a schematic repetition of shapes. The entire mural explodes in dizzying perpetual movement. The "will of the people" is depicted as a frenetic wave, in which action seems devoid of thought. The revolution, this mural argues, is emerging, but never arrives. Siqueiros' Marxism in this panel is muddled and confusing, closer to the ideas of a machista man of action than of an artist involved in class struggle.²⁹ The colors and extreme movement of the composition in the relatively small space assault the viewer visually and emotionally. Siqueiros' style here parodies that of his earlier work. Where once his work embodied an "American" classicism indebted to Olmec and Toltec forms, made tense and dynamic by movement acquired from both futurism and film,³⁰ now it has become mannered, with some exaggerated forms and others



FIGURE 2.6

David Alfaro Siqueiros. *From the Porfiriato to the Revolution*, central panel, Palacio de Chapultepec, Mexico City (1957–66). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA. Photograph: Robin Greeley



FIGURE 2.6

David Alfaro Siqueiros. *From the Porfiriato to the Revolution*, central panel, Palacio de Chapultepec, Mexico City (1957–66). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico City and INBA. Photograph: Robin Greeley

repeated mechanically in the composition. This visual realization of Siqueiros' ideology represents a knee jerk situational politics. Leonard Folgarait attributes it to "Siqueiros' inability ever to develop for himself a systematic Marxist theory. . . . His shifts between Leninism and Stalinism, between pro-China and pro-Soviet sympathies bewildered his fellow communists."³¹

CONCLUSION

Orozco, from an initial identification with anarcho-syndicalism, shifted to a belief in anarchist individualism whose critical reading of social conflict, his *via negativa*, was grounded in his disillusionment with the failed Mexican Revolution. His style, from its early block-like neoclassicism to his late tenebrous expressionism, elucidates this vision. If political agency is possible, it exists in painting itself. Rivera's ultra-leftist Marxist period was also that of his most innovative mural work, from the late 1920s to the end of the 1930s. The transcultural modernity of this work and its synthesis of cubist composition, classical linear clarity, and bright palette presents a life-affirming vision of inevitable revolution. From 1941 until his death, Rivera's pilgrimage back into the fold of the PCM is evident in the anecdotal and sentimental decadence of his painting. In Siqueiros' work we find a disconnect between bold formal experimentation through the 1930s and a politics dependent on a Leninist-Stalinist content provided by the PCM. His

best pictorial achievements occur despite his crude and simplistic version of Marxism, a version of politics that would infect his art, which deteriorated to the point of grotesque self-parody during the last three and a half decades of his life.

Nevertheless, beyond the mythology of *los tres grandes*, beyond the co-opting of their imagery by the post-Revolutionary Mexican state, the visual legacy of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros remains one of the great adventures of modernism—a fragmented, paradoxical modernism charged with both utopian belief and disillusionment, where monumental, figural visual vocabularies at their best reflected and critiqued the historical experience of Mexico.

NOTES

1. Manifesto of the *Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*, in Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1828–1980* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), Appendix 7.2, pp. 323–24.

2. *Ibid.*

3. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el coronelazo* (México: Grijalbo, 1977), pp. 472–73. This and all translations from the Spanish are by the author.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

5. Gerardo Murillo (1875–1964), Dr. Atl—painter, theorist, and vulcanologist—is credited for being the first to promote the idea of a modern, revolutionary mural painting in Mexico. His own work consists of landscapes. Politically, Dr. Atl evolved from anarcho-syndicalism to fascism in the 1930s.

6. The traditional communal religiosity of the Indian followers of both Zapata and Pancho Villa was perceived as backward and superstitious by the secular urban-based radical groups such as the anarchists and Marxists. See Jean Meyer, *Historia de los cristianos en América Latina. Siglos XIX y XX*, 2nd ed. (México, D.F.: Editorial Vuelta, 1991).

7. Luis Cardoza y Aragón, letter to the author, October 6, 1991.

8. John M. Hart, *Anarchism & the Mexican Working Class, 1860–1931*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), pp. 173–74.

9. US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, José Clemente Orozco file, No. 403427, p. 46.

10. Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811) is regarded as the leader of the Mexican Independence movement (1810–11). Successful at first in his revolt (with an impromptu army of Indians and mestizos) against the Spanish authorities, he was captured in Coahuila and sent to Chihuahua, where he was excommunicated, judged, and executed by firing squad.

11. Although it is not clear when Orozco completed this cycle, 1939 is usually the assigned year. This was the year of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and the dismemberment of Poland by both the Nazis and Soviets. Orozco is either reflecting this reality or, if painted earlier, prophesying it.

12. Orozco's patron was Everardo Topete, governor of Jalisco (1935–39). Topete was an ally of Mexican President Cárdenas, who shared in the president's "practical populism." During Cárdenas' struggle with former president Plutarco Elías Calles in 1935–36, Topete

was among the majority of governors who supported Cárdenas. According to Orozco's assistant Jorge Martínez, there is no concrete or anecdotal evidence that Topete had any problems with the artist's mural program. Letter from Jorge Martínez to the author, July 9, 1996.

13. Bertram Wolfe was Jay Lovestone's ideological aide from 1928 to 1941. Lovestone represented the "Right Opposition" to Stalinism within the international Left.

14. Cardoza y Aragón.

15. This epic breadth has a literary equivalent in Pablo Neruda's *Canto general* (1950), which was in fact influenced by both Rivera's murals (sections I through VII) and Siqueiros' (sections VIII through XV). Both muralists illustrated a deluxe edition of the poem in 1950. The best discussion of this inter-relationship of the visual and the literary is to be found in the introduction by Enrico Mario Santi in the Catedra critical edition of *Canto general* (Madrid, 1990).

16. David Craven, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997), pp. 151-52.

17. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "El camino contrarrevolucionario de Rivera," in *Palabras de Siqueiros*, Raquel Tibol, ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 115.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-22.

19. Maricela González Cruz Manjarrez, *La polémica Siqueiros-Rivera. Planteamientos estético-políticos 1934-35* (México, D.F.: Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño, 1996), pp. 25-26. This book, published on the centenary of Siqueiros' birth, is the most complete presentation and analysis of the polemic between the two artists. See also Esther Acevedo's chapter in this volume.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 28. The incident of August 28 was reported in the newspapers *Excelsior* and *El Universal* on August 30, 1935. Raquel Tibol, interview by the author, June 22, 1995.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 161, Appendix, *Acuerdos resultantes de la polémica, firmados por Siqueiros y Rivera*. The five-page typed document was in the personal archive of Roberto Guarda Berdecio, an assistant of Siqueiros.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

23. Diego Rivera, "Defensa y ataque contra los stalinistas," in *Documentación sobre el arte mexicano*, Raquel Tibol, ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), pp. 73-74.

24. José Revueltas, "Escuela Mexicana de Pintura y novela de la revolución," in *Cuestionamientos e intenciones*, Vol. 18 of *Revueltas' Obras Completas* (México, D.F.: Era, 1978), pp. 241-74.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 260-61.

26. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Tres llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación americana" in *Palabras de Siqueiros*, Raquel Tibol, ed. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), p. 20.

27. See Leonard Folgarait's *So Far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), as well as Luis Cardoza y Aragón's essay "Polyforum" republished in *Antología* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1987). Cardoza y Aragón's essay originally appeared in the Mexican press shortly after the Polyforum was inaugurated in December 1971. Both of these authors analyze the artist's late style and the contradictions of patronage of his last mural:

28. See Jennifer A. Jolly's chapter in this volume.

29. Mexican mural painting reflects a strong machista sensibility throughout, particularly in the work of Siqueiros. See Robin Adèle Greeley's chapter in this volume dealing with the artists associated with the *Contemporáneos* group as oppositional to muralism.

30. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "El clasicismo dinámico de David Alfaro Siqueiros. Paradojas de un modelo excéntrico de vanguardia," in *Otras rutas hacia Siqueiros*, Olivier Debrouse, ed. (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes & CURARE, Espacio Crítico para las Artes, 1996), pp. 130–32.

31. Folgarait, p. 41.